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# From local tragedy to national news: Twitter, anti-immigrant discourse, and the weaponization of public grief online

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**ABSTRACT**

As news transmission has moved to social media platforms, user comments and framing of current events represent a wider ranging field of opinion than in the past, abetted by a lack of traditional gatekeeping. This article employs discursive and content analyses to examine Twitter posts related to U.S. news of the 2018 murder of a 20-year-old White woman, Mollie Tibbetts, by an undocumented Latino immigrant, illustrating how the news narrative of her death was usurped by Donald Trump and the right-wing Twittersphere and redeployed in the service of anti-immigrant narratives that the Tibbets family did not support. Given the unique mechanisms of social media which both provide and coerce space for public expressions of personal and political mourning, the grieving Tibbets family was thus forced to publicly combat the politicization of this tragedy – a phenomenon increasingly present in our media landscapes. We argue that social media not only allow the weaponization of tragic news but also commit an additional kind of violence against grieving families by interrupting their grief and forcing them to respond to news narratives.

> "If we are interested in arresting cycles of violence to produce
>
> less violent outcomes, it is no doubt important to ask
>
> what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war."
>
> – Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, 2004, pg. xii

## Introduction

On July 18, 2018, University of Iowa student Mollie Tibbetts was murdered near her home in Brooklyn, Iowa, while out jogging. In late August, police arrested 24-year-old Christhian Bahena Rivera for her murder, identifying him as an undocumented immigrant. Mollie's death was soon taken up as a harrowing case-in-point by supporters of President Donald Trump, with an implicit (and sometimes explicit) nation-state-building argument which consistently deployed the subtext, 'This is what happens when we let *those people* into *our* country.'

As if the murder of their child were not enough, Mollie Tibbetts's family were faced with another form of violence: the interruption of their private grieving because of the political appropriation of the news of Mollie's murder to justify racist ideologies that they did not support. Using this tragedy to reinforce Trump's controversial zero-tolerance immigration policy, the Trump administration and its supporters conflated the familial and community grief of a life lost with the fearmongering, deep-rooted American narrative of the omnipresent threat of violence upon White women by Black and

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Brown men (Apel, 2004; Smångs, 2020; Ware, 2015).[1] This political deployment of Mollie's story not only compelled the grieving Tibbetts family to publicly decry this political weaponization of her death but also utilized the story of Mollie in ways that, according to her friends and family, she herself would not have approved of. As Breck Goodman, a friend of Mollie's, stated: "I also know what Mollie stood for . . . and she would not approve. So, I don't want her death to be used as propaganda. I don't want her death to be used for more prejudice and for more discrimination, and I don't think she would want that, either'" (Murphy & Hanna, 2018).

This article examines the potentialities of online grief by analyzing Twitter[2] posts related to news of the Tibbetts murder and the ways that grief can be politically deployed. In considering the national aftermath of local tragedies such as Tibbetts' murder, this study employed both content analyses of Twitter posts related to her disappearance and death, and critical discourse analyses of these messages to explore the mediated politicization of tragedy. We first outline literature on how social media have changed the landscape of both news information and sentiment sharing. We then offer an overview of the conditions in which the politicization of Mollie's death occurred – revealing how the nationalist and racist ideology of the Trump administration created conditions in which an isolated murder in a small farm town turned into a national anti-immigrant outcry. We note that the instantaneous and vast reach of social media leaves mourning families in a uniquely vulnerable state when the death of loved ones becomes politicized.

## Literature review

### The public's engagement with news in the social media age

After a sudden death, engagement with the media can offer bereaved families an opportunity to express their grief and publicly commemorate the deceased. In the case of a preventable tragedy or unjust death, the media can also provide an outlet for families to campaign for justice and bring about changes in laws or policies. However, there can be downsides to media coverage, such as unwanted intrusion from journalists, insensitive headlines, and inaccurate reporting, that can further traumatize a grieving family. Prior research on public mourning online has focused predominantly on the affordances of different social media platforms and the ways grievers utilize these platforms to express their feelings about the lives of the deceased (Cesare & Branstad, 2018; Gibbs et al., 2015; Wagner, 2018; Walter, 2014). However, as we will argue, social media discussions of tragic news related to untimely deaths also rob grieving families of the right to private grief and expose them to potential political attacks on non-curated platforms.

News of Mollie Tibbetts' murder was covered by hundreds of large and small news outlets across the United States, including all major cable and network TV news stations, conservative and liberal radio stations ranging from right-wing commentator Glenn Beck to NPR; mainstream, small town and alt-right online news sources ranging from the *New York Times* to the *Des Moines Register* to Brietbart; and popular U.S. magazines such as *Time*, *People*, and *Rolling Stone*. Quickly, the story became a trending topic on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms – platforms which contributed to the rapid geographical explosion of news about Mollie's murder and the resulting politicization of her death.

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[1]Although there are differing lenses through which we could view the anti-immigrant sentiment discussed in this paper, such as fears of crime or general border chaos, there is much preexisting work that indicates the long-standing historical ties between anti-immigrant sentiment, discrimination against real and perceived citizenship status, and racism (Cacho, 2012; Canizales & Vallejo, 2021; Heuman & González, 2018; Silva, 2015). Further, there is empirical evidence that both racism and anti-immigrant sentiment were markers of a Trump vote in 2016 (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Schaffner et al., 2018; Shook et al., 2020), and Mollie's friends and family also framed the unraveling politicization of her story as one that was sullied by racism (as will be evident through this study). Thus, we are positioning this study as one which focuses on racism and White nationalism as predominant frames for this discourse.

[2]Now known as X, Twitter was the name of the social media platform at the time of this research. Both X and Twitter are similarly formatted social networking sites, allowing users to share short-form posts among private or public audiences.

In the past, the framework of traditional media mandated a certain structured relationship between political elites and news organizations, a construction that has been complicated by the rise of social media. Letters to the editor were the main platform for community intervention into newsworthy stories and provided a curated attempt at a democratic public sphere (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007). Of course, letters to the editor were often not truly reflective of public opinion, since they comprised an overrepresentation of middle-aged, well-educated White people (Reader et al., 2004). However, the curation of these letters by editors was an attempt to provide balance and prevent the publication of extremist, crude, or harmful comments concerning sensitive issues, particularly if they affected a private family. For example, curatorial criteria of contemporary online letters to the editor include categories such as a letter's 'argument quality, thoughtfulness, fairness, coherence and readability' (Diakopoulos, 2015). However, as social media became an open public forum untethered to the gatekeeping of the traditional letter-to-the-editor format, uncurated public commentary on the news of the day became the norm, affecting both the content and tone of comments (Santana, 2013).

As news has moved online, user comments on news websites represent a wider field of expression and opinion that is aided, among other things, by the anonymity and lack of gatekeeping that the Internet provides (Clark & Marchi, 2017; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012). These same affordances have created space for more extreme challenges to long-standing institutions that were not normally expressed in traditional print media's letters to the editor, particularly in response to moments of sociopolitical tumult (McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012). Even less structured than news media websites, social media allow users to engage with a news topic through any entry point, which often results in expanding, transforming, or even reframing a news story (Braun & Gillespie, 2011; Goode, 2009). This reframing or repurposing of news has been referred to as 'curatorial news use' (Park & Kaye, 2018). It was this curatorial news use which allowed online audiences to reframe Mollie's story within the preexisting political rhetorics of immigration and nationalism in the summer of 2018, leading to the politicization, on a national scale, of the Tibbetts family's tragedy.

### Donald Trump, White nationalism, and the murder of Mollie Tibbetts

With the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, rhetoric surrounding immigration in the United States began rapidly changing from that of Trump's presidential predecessors (Heuman & González, 2018). While there has always been vitriol directed against the 'Other' in this country, the candor with which people could publicly express anti-immigrant xenophobia had shifted: until Trump's election, the societal move toward 'colorblindness' (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) as the accepted form of racism meant that people had learned – consciously or unconsciously – to self-police their public opinions on race. However, Donald Trump's supporters found new freedom to express overt bigotry in a style which replicated that of the president himself, and there is evidence to suggest that racism and anti-immigrant sentiment were 'important determinants' of a Trump vote (Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018; Schaffner et al., 2018; Shook et al., 2020).

'Make America Great Again,' the rallying call of Trump's election marketing, was firmly based in anti-immigrant sentiment that harkened back to a pre-civil rights past where unquestioned White supremacy was the norm, evidenced by another favorite Trump slogan: 'Build the Wall!' (to keep 'Brown' immigrants out).[3] Trump campaign rallies erupted in cheers at any suggestion of limiting or expelling 'illegals' and increasing militarization of the United States–Mexico border. Trump's 'zero tolerance' immigration policies came with his decision – not an 'existing legal framework,' as the Trump Administration claimed – to prosecute and separate Latin American families at the border, incarcerating children separately from their parents (Yen & Woodward, 2019). This infamous decision brought United States–Mexico immigration rhetoric to a boiling point in the summer of 2018.

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[3]While Latin Americans comprise the majority of undocumented people crossing the US-Mexican border, thousands of Indians, Haitians, and other 'Brown' people cross the border annually without legal papers. See, for example: https://www.wola.org/2022/11/migration-country-by-country-at-the-u-s-mexico-border/

The discovery of 'children in cages' shocked the nation into critical conversations about unauthorized immigration, and alarming photos and recordings from border detention camps were regularly released in social media and traditional news media outlets. Disapproval of Trump's family separation policy was rampant on both sides of the partisan aisle (Baker, 2018; Perrigo, 2018). In the midst of this crisis, thousands of miles away from the United States' southern border, a suspect in Mollie Tibbetts' murder was named on August 21: undocumented Latino immigrant Christhian Bahena Rivera.

The loss of Mollie spoke directly to one of the most embedded of racist narratives in the cultural fabric of the U.S. – White protectionism, specifically, the centuries-old trope of the 'threat' that Black and Brown men pose to White women (Apel, 2004; Smångs, 2020; Ware, 2015). This narrative has been exacerbated by consistent media framing of people of color as 'Other,' at best, and 'dangerous,' at worst (Creighton et al., 2014; Dixon, 2008; Entman & Rojecki, 2000). Moreover, when questions of the soul and values of the nation are at stake, as was the case in the summer of 2018, women are often cast as symbols of the nation (McClintock, 1993; Pettman, 1996; Zacharias, 2001). Thus, when a White woman was murdered by a non-White, non-citizen male – the 'Other' or 'enemy' of the nation – nativistic nationalism began operating on axes of both race and gender in the discursive space of social media, which was, we argue, fueled by the anti-immigrant political climate of the country.

A particularly vehement variety of xenophobic, nativistic nationalism has gained more visibility in the United States since the start of the initial Trump presidential run (Heuman & González, 2018; Hooghe & Dassonneville, 2018), with a concurrent rise in hate crimes against immigrants, non-Christians, people of color and other minorities (Giani & Méon, 2021; Warren-Gordon & Rhineberger, 2021). As Canizales and Vallejo (2021) have observed, 'White nationalist racism became the defining feature of the Trump presidency,' increasing experiences of racism for Latinos and making 'the relegitimization of overt White nationalism one of its lasting legacies' (p. 1).

In August 2015, before winning the election, Donald Trump framed this White nationalism as a 'war,' tweeting, 'Now that I started my war on illegal immigration and securing the border, most other candidates are finally speaking up' (Trump, 2015). This war-based rhetoric, a centerpiece of his campaign strategy, was one of the many ways that Trump naturalized the separation of 'Us,' [White] Americans, and 'Them,' [Black and Brown immigrants] (Heuman & González, 2018). Naturalization of difference, one in which the non-White enemy is to be separated, feared, and defeated, is one of the many functions of racist practices of authoritarian visuality. Defined by cultural theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011), authoritarian visuality is a worldview in which the powerful have historically wielded their influence by being able to name, naturalize, and aestheticize their views. Thus, Mirzoeff contends, visuality is not war by other means, it *is* war.

This war is currently fueling U.S. nationalism; it is the underlying war which has repeatedly justified the unlawful murder of unarmed Black and Brown people by Whites in this country; it is the war which is naturalized as patriotic upon the death of a White American at the hands of the Other; and it is the war that was revealed in The White House's public relations efforts following Mollie Tibbetts's murder. This moment in time – the summer of 2018 – produced particularly fertile ground for the politicization of the murder of a seemingly 'all-American' (White, middle class, college-going, conventionally attractive) young woman. And in a media climate which allowed her story to be easily seen and shared as evidentiary support for xenophobic immigration policies, it was.

## Methods

This study examined social media posts and news coverage related to Mollie Tibbetts' murder published between July 19 and August 22, 2018. This date range encompassed the story's transformation from a local to a national issue: on July 19, a friend of Mollie's tweeted to ask for any information on her whereabouts, and by August 22, the official White House Twitter account posted about her murderer. To trace this process, we laid out a timeline of the Twitter coverage of Mollie's story – how it gained national attention, when it morphed into a nationalist narrative, and how (and when) the Tibbetts family reacted. Integrating discourse analysis with a contextual, time-based analysis produced a detailed snapshot of the

**Table 1.** Timeline of events, or 'critical discourse moments.'

| Twitter User | Date | Event |
|---|---|---|
| @[anonymized] | 7/19/2018 | first tweet concerning Mollie Tibbetts' disappearance |
| @OANN | 7/23/2018 | first news network to tweet about Mollie Tibbets' disappearance |
| @NBCNews | 7/25/2018 | first major news network to tweet about Mollie Tibbets' disappearance |
| @VP | 8/17/2018 | first political figure to tweet about Mollie Tibbets' disappearance |
| @MattFinnFNC | 8/21/2018 | first tweet indicating Mollie's death |
| @FOXNews | 8/21/2018 | first tweet by news network reporting Mollie's death |
| @NickMiroff | 8/21/2018 | first tweet indicating Rivera's citizenship status |
| @FOXNews | 8/21/2018 | first news network indicating Rivera's citizenship status |
| @WhiteHouse | 8/22/2018 | first White House tweet concerning the Mollie Tibbetts disappearance and murder |

unfolding of Mollie's story online. Given constraints of time and funding, it was not possible to analyze the thousands of tweets generated nationally in the wake of Mollie's murder. Thus, we produced the timeline through a focus on what Anabela Carvalho (2008) terms 'critical discourse moments' – the moments which mark a change or a new event in a contextualized sequence of discourse (and 'real-life') events. 'Moments' in this case indicate 'firsts,' such as the first mention of Mollie's disappearance, the first local news outlet to tweet about the story, the first national news story on the topic, etc.

After identifying the critical discourse moments in this unfolding story, we conducted a close examination of the first 50 tweets[4] after each identified 'discourse moment' – unless a new 'moment' occurred before 50 tweets appeared. This process resulted in a total of 161 tweets that were closely analyzed. For a full breakdown of the identified critical discourse moments, please see Table 1.

After collecting these tweets, we conducted a thematic content analysis of them through a grounded approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). We found the following emergent themes to be the most impactful conduits for understanding the transformation of Mollie's story online:

- Political ideology promoted
- Nationalist rhetoric utilized
- Mention of Rivera's undocumented status
- Emotional tone conveyed in tweet
- Centrality (or lack thereof) of Mollie herself (rather than the centrality of politics)
- Entity tweeting (personal account, news/pundit account, 'neutral' corporation account, or government/politician account) and their Twitter 'verification' status

We discussed and addressed any disagreement in application of these codes as they arose. The prevalence of each of these themes can be found in Table 2.

To supplement this content analysis, we conducted a detailed textual analysis of selected posts concerning reactions to Mollie's death in order to illustrate how various discourses manifested, along with how they bore upon traditional understandings of grief – particularly a mourning family's customary right to privacy while grieving.[5] These posts were selected as exemplars of the ideological extremes that existed within the discourse surrounding Mollie's murder. The paper concludes with a reflection on the violence and potential of modern public grief on social media, alongside ruminations on what 'might be made of grief besides a cry for war' – as Judith Butler would have us consider (2004, p. xii).

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[4]As a qualitative study, this research did not aim for generalizability. However, a sample size of the first 50 tweets per critical discourse moment provided ample examples of the kinds of comments generated more widely in processes of narrative co-optation and response, and we believed we would reach thematic saturation with that sample size (Low, 2019). Thus, we could keep the project manageable while still ensuring that we were capturing the most prominent themes.

[5]With ongoing concerns regarding just how public 'public' social media are intended to be, we leaned toward personal protection regarding the accounts of nonpublic figures. That said, identifying information of Mollie's family was not anonymized, since the family made explicitly public statements regarding the loss of Mollie.

**Tables 2.** Characteristics of Tweets analyzed before and after revelation of Rivera's undocumented status.

Table 2.1. Political Ideology

| Political Ideology | Before Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status | After Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status |
|---|---|---|
| Left | 0 (0%) | 1 (0.02%) |
| Right | 0 (0%) | 24 (47.06%) |
| n/a | 109 (100%) | 27 (52.94%)[a] |

**Table 2.2**. Nationalist Rhetoric

| Nationalist Rhetoric | Before Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status | After Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 0 (0%) | 25 (49.02%) |
| No | 109 (100%) | 26 (50.98%) |

**Table 2.3**. Mention of Rivera's Undocumented Status

| Mention | Before Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status | After Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 0 (0%) | 43 (84.31%) |
| No | 0 (0%) | 8 (15.69%) |
| n/a | 109 (100%) | 0 (0%) |

**Table 2.4**. Emotional Overtone[a]

| Emotional Overtone | Before Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status | After Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status |
|---|---|---|
| Accusatory | 2 (1.83%) | 7 (13.73%) |
| Angry | 6 (5.5%) | 22 (43.14%) |
| Exasperated | 1 (0.92%) | 18 (35.29%) |
| Informational | 40 (36.70%) | 26 (50.98%) |
| Supportive | 23 (21.1%) | 2 (1.83%) |
| Sad | 24 (22.02%) | 4 (7.84%) |

**Table 2.5**. Centrality of Mollie/Tibbets Family

| Central | Before Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status | After Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 109 (100%) | 2 (3.92%) |
| No | 0 (0%) | 49 (96.08%) |

**Table 2.6**. Twitter User Identity

| Identity | Before Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status | After Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status |
|---|---|---|
| Personal | 43 (39.45%) | 23 (45.1%) |
| Corporate | 7 (6.42%) | 1 (2%) |
| News/Pundit/ Journalist | 53 (48.62%) | 27 (52.94%) |
| Government/Political | 2 (1.83%) | 0 (0%) |

**Table 2.7**. Twitter Users' 'Verified' Account Status

| Verified | Before Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status | After Revelation of Rivera's Citizenship Status |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 71 (65.14%) | 33 (64.71%) |
| No | 38 (34.86%) | 18 (35.29%) |

[a]These are all news networks.
[b]Top six most-occurring; more than one can occur per tweet.

## Twitter and the story of Mollie

Following Mollie's disappearance on July 18, 2018, there was local panic. The first tweet on the subject appeared from a friend of Mollie's on July 19 asking if any friends or family had heard from Mollie.[6] This panic remained relatively local for only a few days. There were the expected missing-person tweets – 'please share and help find Mollie' – but these differed quite starkly from what would soon become of her story.

[6]Data collection was done on December 20, 2018, searching 'Mollie Tibbetts' in Twitter's advanced search tool.

Beginning on July 22, four days after Mollie disappeared, missing persons networks and smaller news outlets, such as the far-right, pro Trump cable channel OANN and the sports, entertainment and crime-focused digital news site, heavy.com, began spreading the news via Twitter, with more mainstream coverage beginning in the days that followed. Disparate news outlets associated with diverse ideologies at first appeared to cover this story similarly, as the disappearance unfolded as a typical missing person case. For the most part, they covered the basic facts of the case such as the date and location Mollie was last seen, Mollie's physical description, family interviews, and reward money announcements. Beginning in mid-August, local and national political leaders began making Twitter statements regarding her disappearance, with Vice President Mike Pence tweeting prayers of strength and good will to her family on August 17.

On August 21, police arrested Christhian Bahena Rivera for the murder of Mollie Tibbetts, citing as their evidence surveillance footage of Rivera driving behind Mollie while she was jogging. After leading police to her body, Rivera was arrested for her murder. As an undocumented immigrant, Rivera's status and crime – not Mollie's death – quickly became the new focus of an increasingly national news story.

Beginning on August 21, Twitter exploded with the news that an undocumented Brown man had murdered a US-born White woman. Nick Miroff, a *Washington Post* journalist covering immigration enforcement, posted the first tweet indicating Rivera's 'illegal' status, and from there on, Mollie herself was almost entirely erased in what became a racialized Twitter tirade on immigration. Before Rivera's immigration status was revealed, 100% of tweets in our sample focused directly on Mollie and/or the Tibbetts family. After his immigration status was revealed, 96% of tweets decentered Mollie, and 48% of those used the grief of her story to spread anti-immigrant vitriol, declaring that something had to be done to keep 'illegal invaders' and 'savages' out of the US, as one Twitter user advocated. This 48% who tweeted anti-immigrant comments included ordinary citizens and news workers alike, but the remaining 52% of tweets *also* decentered Mollie by focusing more on her murderer than on her life.

As the news story of Mollie's death spread across Twitter, an outpouring of people began weighing in on 'her' story. After news reports first emerged declaring that Mollie was dead, the tweets analyzed generated an average of 49.72 comments per post, 358.84 retweets per post, and 1,057.71 likes per post. After Rivera's immigration status was revealed to the public, however, those numbers skyrocketed: as seen in Table 3, on average, there were 254.73 comments per post (a more than 500% increase), 1075.96 retweets per post (a nearly 300% increase), and 2,040.04 likes per post (a nearly 200% increase).

These massive increases not only suggest the immense pressure that the Tibbetts family must have felt to respond to this forced visibility by making a public statement but also reveal that the public grief and outrage performed online in reaction to this specific discursive event – the revelation of details about Mollie's murderer (rather than about the actual loss of her life) – were largely undertaken in the pursuit of politics rather than out of sympathy for Mollie's family. This confluence of grief and politicization is not necessarily a surprise (Rantasila et al., 2018); however, the evolution of a local tragedy into a national one *because* of its politicization is a process worth unpacking. Via social media, Americans from across the country – who had never met Mollie Tibbetts, who would never have known about her open-minded, accepting personality and love for all people, as reported by her

**Table 3.** Rate of interaction: Average comments, retweets, and likes after key events.

| Date | Event | Comments | Retweets | Likes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7/19/2018 | First tweet concerning Mollie Tibbetts' disappearance | 14.89 | 445.89 | 653 |
| 7/23/2018 | First news network to tweet about Mollie Tibbets' disappearance | 15 | 368.71 | 867.14 |
| 7/25/2018 | First major news network to tweet about Mollie Tibbets' disappearance | 15.87 | 286.32 | 334.45 |
| 8/17/2018 | First political figure to tweet about Mollie Tibbets' disappearance | 50 | 243.25 | 850 |
| 8/21/2018 | First tweet indicating Mollie's death | 41.57 | 126.86 | 162.14 |
| 8/21/2018 | First tweet by news network reporting Mollie's death | 49.72 | 358.84 | 1057.71 |
| 8/21/2018 | First tweet indicating Rivera's citizenship status | 701.33 | 1336.67 | 2423.67 |
| 8/21/2018 | First news network indicating Rivera's citizenship status | 263.31 | 1080.97 | 2047.42 |

Figure 1. Emily's Tweet; Jess's Reply.



Figure 2. Kina's Tweet.

family – were afforded the opportunity to take up her story in a political call to arms which was ultimately validated and escalated by the White House's involvement in this small-town tragedy, as will be discussed.

## Discursive approaches to Mollie's murder

In analyzing tweeted reactions from the 'average' person – people who were not immediately recognizable as journalists, politicians, or other pundits, as per their Twitter biographies – we found that the emotion of outrage far outweighed that of grief, and this outrage was overtly political, as the sample of tweets in Figures 1, 2 and 3 illustrate:

Both liberal and conservative outrage is marked in this group of tweets, which often generated immediate replies from strangers[7] (as is clear in the screen shot of Emily's tweet in Figure 1). Emily positions herself as supportive of President Trump, calling him 'our' president (as opposed to adherents of the popular #NotMyPresident campaign following Trump's election in 2016), and she takes a positive stance on his punitive immigration views by indicating that Mollie's death *by an illegal immigrant*—rather

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[7]We speculate that these people were strangers, since they did not identify themselves as family or friends of Mollie and their tweets lacked the intimate details and heartfelt sorrow of tweets posted by those who were close to her.

**Figure 3.** Carrie's Tweet.

than her death, itself – makes Emily 'sick to [her] stomach.' Replying to Emily, Jess (Figure 1) explicitly introduces race into the conversation, asking 'What should we do about the WHITE people responsible for all the mass shootings,' attempting to make obvious the latent racist rhetoric of Emily's condemnation of 'illegal immigrants' – a rhetoric which, according to Lisa Marie Cacho (2012), works to render people *naturally* immoral and rightless by utilizing the 'neutral' language of the law to cover racist tracks.

After sending condolences to the Tibbetts family, Kina (Figure 2) picks up Jess's attention to race, pointing out that 'legal' White men kill women every day, and no one calls to 'rid the country of them.' Asserting that 'legal' status – which she points out presupposes Whiteness – has nothing to do with criminal behavior, Jess takes an anti-xenophobic stance, directing her outrage not at the murder itself, but at the conservative response to it. Finally, in a post that visually reinforces the centuries-old image of the White woman (standing in for the Nation) endangered by the dark-skinned man (threat to the Nation), Carrie (Figure 3) wonders how many more 'illegals' will need to murder 'our kids' before Congress builds the wall. Conjuring up an implied White, united, national community through her reference to 'our kids' and posting photos of a smiling White Mollie next to the indifferent-looking Brown man who took her life, Carrie constructs a rhetorical message which indicates that 'our' families are *all* under attack unless 'illegals' are detained by 'that dang wall.' The outrage in these tweets – both liberal and conservative – is tangible, but Mollie herself, who is supposedly the source of this outrage, is almost entirely absent.

Though more subtle, tweets of official news outlets unveiling her murder were similarly polarized in terms of highlighting the immigration status of the assailant. In its initial headline, Fox News prominently broadcasted that an 'illegal immigrant' had murdered Mollie, while CNN's more muted headline simply stated that a 'man' killed Mollie, mentioning his undocumented status later in the article. Ryan Saavedra, reporter at the Daily Wire, a self-described 'news website for a new generation of conservatives,'[8] tweeted his outrage (2018) at CNN's headline, as seen in Figure 4:

Spurning the legitimacy of the term 'undocumented immigrant,' which liberals prefer over 'illegal alien' (which immigration rights advocates consider a derogatory term masking racial hostility),[9] Saavedra (Figure 4) claims that liberals 'buried' Rivera's 'illegal' status. This tweet echoed the conservative political argument which followed the unveiling of Rivera as Mollie's murderer: the notion that Democrats allegedly wanted to sweep his immigration status under the rug because it did not fit their pro-immigration agenda.

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[8]https://www.dailywire.com
[9]For more on this nomenclature debate, see the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project's website: https://www.nwirp.org/illegal-vs-undocumented-a-nwirp-board-members-perspective/

**Figure 4.** Ryan Saavedra's Tweet (2018).

The news of Mollie's death, and more specifically, the immigration status of her murderer, spread through Twitter like wildfire and, within minutes, people all over the United States were angrily tweeting their opinions on immigration, race, politics, and 'the Wall.' This online media space-one of immediate access to news, commentary, and Twitter fights – allows everyone to air their opinion (no matter its legitimacy or divisiveness) with a click of a button. Through these affordances, the Trump administration and its supporters attempted to create a public narrative which indicated who 'We' – that is to say, (largely) White, native-born, U.S. citizens – are as a nation, conjuring up war-like images of a nation-state under attack from a Brown enemy.

### The White House, Mollie, and White nationalism

Social media have made it easier than ever before to influence public opinion. It is why Russia's meddling in the 2016 U.S. elections was such a threat (Blake, 2020; Shane & Mazetti, 2018) and why citizens are now demanding greater accountability from Facebook/Meta and Twitter (now X) and the deactivation of bot accounts (Paulino & Gomes, 2021; Timberg & Dwoskin, 2018). This technology is now used as a public relations outlet for the U.S. government (Coombs & Holladay, 2007; Snead, 2013). At the time of this controversy, social media reached an estimated three-quarters of the U.S. adult population (Smith & Anderson, 2018), and President Trump routinely tweeted statements that reached millions of people instantly. These tweets were often shared across a variety of platforms, including mainstream news, magazines, TV talk shows and late-night comedy programs, thereby reaching even larger audiences, including populations without Twitter accounts (Boczkowski & Papacharissi, 2018).

Following Mollie's murder, then, it was easier than ever for the White House to create the 'official narrative' of how the nation should respond, in much the same way that a corporate public relations manager would. That narrative consisted of amplifying the anti-immigration rhetoric upon which Trump had built his presidency. The White House not only *responded* to this particular tragedy – there are similar tragedies every day that The White House does not respond to – but *used* it as a public relations opportunity veiled under a mournful guise.

On August 22, 2018, the day after the news of Rivera's arrest broke, the official White House Twitter account tweeted the message seen in Figure 5, providing a platform from which Trump began discussing his intensified efforts to 'Build the Wall:'

**Figure 5.** The White House's Tweet (2018).

There are few surprises in this tweet (Figure 5), as 'illegal alien' had long been a favored phrase in Trump's rhetorical toolbox, but there is one interesting, and arguably extremely deliberate, word choice: 'separated.'

In spring 2018, coverage of migrant family separation and child detainment by the U.S. Border Patrol at the United States–Mexico border had begun appearing in mainstream media until the situation of thousands of migrants on the border became an all-out crisis by the summer. With popular, sympathetic hashtags on Twitter including #familyseparation and #endfamilyseparation, 'family separation' became the definitive term used to describe and denounce Trump's immigration policies. Thus, when the Trump White House tweeted that the Tibbetts family had been 'permanently separated,' it indexed a variety of political messages simultaneously. First was the implication that the separation of 'illegal' families at the border would prevent the separation of 'our' American families. Second was the insinuation that separation at the border was only temporary and for the greater good, whereas the Tibbetts family members (and potentially future U.S. families like them) were *permanently* separated through Mollie's death. Third was the chastising 'I told you so' tone, implying a confirmation of Trump's anti-immigrant feelings and policies: He had warned us during his campaign that 'they' were 'bad hombres' (ABC News, 2016), and his predictions had come to pass, he implied. The indexical links made between the safety of American families and the 'necessity' of cracking down on immigration were established through using the term 'separated.' Addressing an 'imagined community' of the nation (Anderson, 1991), the Trump administration pulled at the emotional heartstrings of Americans by imagining 'Us' as a united community of White, U.S.-born families, any of whom, he implied, could become victims of such brutal attacks by an 'illegal' Brown person.[10]

Similarly, politicized sentiments by federal politicians have continued on social media and in real-world policymaking since then. For example, following the murder of Laken Riley in 2024 – another young White woman tragically murdered while out on a run (Deliso, 2024) – several policymakers have tied these tragedies together in online discourse. On Twitter's contemporary platform, X, Representative Dan Crenshaw (R-TX-2) posted 'Kamala's dereliction has led to the murders at the hands of illegal migrants, including Laken Riley • Mollie Tibbetts • Kate Steinle • Jocelyn Nungaray • Rachel Morin. These girls and women, and many others, should be alive today.' [11] (Crenshaw, 2024) Former Rep. Bob Good (R-VA-5) posted 'Mollie Tibbetts, Laken Riley, and many others would still be with us today if it wasn't for Biden's utter refusal to stop criminals at our southern border.'[12] (Good, 2024) Rep. Mike Collins (R-GA-10) claimed that the press 'intentionally misleads its readers' by not focusing on the citizenship status of these murderers because 'most reporters are left wingers who agree with the policy of open borders.' He backs up this claim, saying '[Laken Riley's murderer] is not an "Athens resident" [as the press states]—that is

a dishonest misnomer. He is a Venezuelan criminal who should never have been in the United States' (Collins, 2024).

These discourses, however, do not exist exclusively on social media, and have gained increasing momentum in the policy realm. As of January 7, 2025, the U.S. House of Representatives voted (with some bipartisan support) to pass a bill which would, among other things, call for the federal detainment of unauthorized immigrants charged with minor crimes – a bill named after Laken Riley, whose undocumented murderer had been arrested for shoplifting at a Walmart several months before her murder (Demirjian, 2025).[13] Representative Tom Emmer (R-MN-6) described the bill as 'more than just a piece of legislation; it's a return to common-sense American values . . . And under President Trump's leadership, there will be a lot more where that came from' (Demirjian, 2025). The politicized, socially mediated journey of discourse on Mollie's death – and the anti-immigrant sentiment that shaped her story into a piece of evidence in anti-immigrant policy stances, arguably through its embeddedness in racialized and gendered cultural mythologies – is one that clearly lives with us still. And if Rep. Emmer is correct, this discursive logic will likely continue as we enter into President Trump's second term.

## Social media's hand in compelling public grief

White nationalism ran through the heart of conservative narratives surrounding Mollie Tibbetts' murder, but according to Mollie's family, this was not a narrative that she would have approved of. As these political wars raged on Twitter, the Tibbetts family was not only suffering a traumatic loss but were also put in a difficult, highly visible position: they could either (a) steer clear of the political hubbub, at the risk of allowing their silence to indicate tacit assent to the racist narrative being built around Mollie's death, or (b) they could disrupt their private mourning to enter the public sphere and communicate a counternarrative.

This conflation of the public and private spheres of life is a well-documented effect of new media (Ford, 2011), and it presents serious questions when we consider the psychological importance of grief. The 'five stages of grief' (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2014), which in a pre-digital age were experienced locally within communities and families (when the deceased was not a public figure), are moving into the digital sphere as many people choose to discuss grief through tweets, Facebook posts, and YouTube videos (Moore, 2022; Morehouse & Crandall, 2014; Moyer & Enck, 2020; Rossetto et al., 2014). As Gibson (2007) has noted, 'The modern experience of "sequestered death" has passed. Death images and events are now thoroughly mediated by the visual and communication technologies used and accessed by a vast number of citizens across the globe' (p. 415). Although these types of mediated grieving practices can be healthy and supportive when social media users choose to engage in them (Gibbs et al., 2015; Lingel, 2013), there is now the possibility of mourners being *compelled* (when they would otherwise not choose to do so) into visible, public grief, as were the Tibbetts family.

This results because social media platforms enable the participation of disparate audiences in public mourning. 'As a result, clashes around entitlement, or the right to share expressions of grief in public, are common, giving rise to polarized public attitudes to the appropriacy – or more often the inappropriacy – of their associated rhetorics and registers' (Giaxoglou, 2020, p. 271). Giaxoglou has coined the term 'hyper-mourning' to refer to the hyper-connection features of social media, particularly the digital affordances of 'persistence, visibility, spreadability and searchability,' in relation to practices of mourning and memorialization. She notes that hyper-mourning affords large audiences the 'scale-up affect,' often at an unprecedented scale (2020, p. 278), 'connecting networked audiences around identities, affect, and moral values dis/alignments' (p. 264). Hyper mourning can increase mourners' risks of exposure and vulnerability, while also mobilizing feelings in ways that 'create value

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[13]As of January 15, 2025, this bill is undergoing the amendment process in the U.S. Senate (see https://www.latimes.com/politics/story/2025-01-14/the-senate-is-considering-the-laken-riley-act-heres-what-it-would-do).

**Figure 6.** Sam's Tweet (Palma, 2018).



**Figure 7.** Sandi's Post (Palma, 2018).

out of mourning and memorialization or move people into politically charged action' (Giaxoglou, 2020, p. 278).

Faced with the prospect of allowing Mollie's death to be used as 'political propaganda,' as her cousin Sam stated, the Tibbetts family broke their private grief cycle to publicly set the record straight. Though her parents remained largely disconnected and asked, specifically, for space to grieve privately, her father stated at Mollie's funeral that the local Latino community was compassionate

and had 'the same values as Iowans' (Palma, 2018), which appeared to be an attempt to take a non-racist position in the face of the racist politics surrounding his daughter's death. Mollie's aunt and cousin, however, made more direct interjections into the public narrative.

Her cousin Sam (Figure 6) took to Twitter to angrily respond to a tweet by the conservative political commentator Candace Owens, a pro-Trump Black author known for her '#BLEXIT' campaign (encouraging Black people to exit the democratic party). Sam wrote that 'we' – he and the rest of the Tibbetts family – were not so 'fucking small-minded' as to allow one bad person to make them support xenophobia and immigration policies of family separation:

Seemingly speaking on behalf of the entire family, Sam aimed to reclaim his cousin's life and narrative from this conservative agenda. Similarly, Mollie's aunt, Sandi, posted a statement on her Facebook account in which she unequivocally rejected the use of Mollie's death to support racist beliefs and policies (Figure 7). Instead, she aimed to refocus the public discussion from narratives against non-White immigrants to a larger discussion about how patriarchal norms of male entitlement lead men of all races to commit widescale levels of violence:

Again, seeming to speak on behalf of the entire family, Sandi (Figure 7) stated in the post that 'we' are reclaiming 'our' Mollie, from those who are 'usurping' her death for 'racist, false narratives' without having known her. Making her counternarrative partially about race – claiming that Rivera's immigrant status had nothing to do with the crime, and that he could just as easily have been a White man – Sandi's counternarrative, instead, centered around toxic masculinity. Whereas Sam's tweet was overtly angry and emotional, Sandi's was measured and logical: Mollie's murderer could have been *any* man, a claim she supported with statistical evidence, and we Americans needed to begin raising our young men so that 'violence is not a part of their response to this world.' Notably, she ended with a direct rejection of reactionary conservative responses to her niece's death: 'It is not your right to exacerbate this grievous act by hijacking Mollie and all she believed with your racist fearmongering. You do not get to use her murder to inaccurately promote your "permanently separated" hyperbole.'

Mollie Tibbetts's family were coerced into the media spotlight because they felt the need to set the record straight to preserve the legacy of Mollie's progressive values and memory. They did not agree with the xenophobic narrative being woven around her, and they recognized that her memory was in danger of succumbing to much larger nationalistic narratives. The emotional appeals of these statements by Sam and Sandi indicated pain, anger, and frustration with the immensely disorienting experience of needing to defend a recently murdered family member's values. This is a uniquely modern experience and a uniquely modern violence: people who had never met Mollie were able to create and share narratives about her for the entire world to see, and they were able to do so in a way which erased *her* value in favor of her *story's* value.

Despite the emotional violence of this experience, however, there is also another agency of social media: voice (Butler, 2005; Couldry, 2010). Voice as activist power was, in this case, used by the Tibbetts family to break out of the rhetorical bubble that was being built around them without their consent. This phenomenon is increasingly becoming more commonplace following politicized tragedy: we need not look further for evidence of its potency than the media/activist sensation of the 'Parkland Kids" gun reform campaign after the Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School mass shooting in February 2018; or the public re-centering of the #BlackLivesMatter movement after the 2020 murder of George Floyd. Thus, with the affective violence of public grief comes the growing agency of voice – a delicate but powerful balance. Utilizing compelled visibility to fight authoritarian visuality – we contend that *this* is the potential of public grief online.

### Conclusion

When Mollie Tibbetts went missing on July 18, 2018, her family could not have predicted the trajectory that her story would take. It was a local news story, like hundreds of similar local stories about disappeared persons. The family called for unity to find their daughter, then later for unity in

collectively and productively mourning her death. Before the days of social media, the story might or might not have become a national news story and it might even have been politicized by pundits in certain circles. But it would not have been possible for such rapid, widespread, and vitriolic hijacking of the story, turning a private family tragedy into a national cry for anti-immigrant 'war' – and this example is not a unique phenomenon with limited reach.

In 2024, President-elect Donald Trump and his running mate, J.D. Vance, again weaponized the death of a young person at the hands of an immigrant, this time with the tragedy of 11-year-old Aiden Clark of Ohio, who was killed in a bus accident which was skewed into a violent 'murder' to further an anti-immigrant agenda (Saslow, 2024). In public remarks, Aiden's father stated, 'I wish that my son . . . was killed by a 60-year-old White man . . . I bet you never thought anyone would say something so blunt. But if that guy killed my 11-year-old son, the incessant group of hate-spewing people would leave us alone.' He went on to say, 'They make it seem as though our wonderful Aiden appreciates your hate. That we should follow their hate . . . Look what you've done to us. We have to get up here and beg them to stop. Using Aiden as a political tool is, to say the least, reprehensible for any political purpose' (qtd. in Bendery, 2024).

Exemplifying the nationwide circulation of this story, *The New York Times* wrote about this family's trauma, providing details of their experiences after they tried to halt the political weaponization of their greatest loss. These experiences included 'icy stares from neighbors, cruel Facebook messages, the public doxxing of their phone number, letters about being "immigrant-loving race traitors" and a recent death threat relayed by the F.B.I' (Saslow, 2024). Though Mollie Tibbetts' story is the focal point of this study, the pattern of weaponization lives on in contemporary ways: local grief is co-opted into national, political narratives of anti-immigrant xenophobia again and again. Forcing mourning families into the spotlight to reclaim the dignity and values of their lost children is certainly 'reprehensible,' as Aiden's father stated, and is perpetuated and normalized through modern media.

If we are to consider 'what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war' (Butler, 2004, p. xii) perhaps these reactions – the call for positive change through educating our young men, made by Mollie's Aunt Sandi; or Mollie's father's recognition of the Latino community as 'friends and neighbors' – are precisely it. Perhaps this reconfiguration of the uses of social media to recover stories, to 'reclaim our Mollie,' is just such a solution. Perhaps the nationalistic 'cry for war' which was perversely made of this grief, the war of authoritative visuality which is not 'war by other means,' but is war *itself*, can be defeated – or at least weakened – by countervisual practices such as those of the Tibbetts family that restored Mollie's legacy through decrying the contrived 'natural' order of Latino immigrant-as-Other. As this case illustrates, the circulation of tragic news stories via social media has piled an additional violence onto mourning families through coerced, visible performances of public grief. But, on a more hopeful note, it has also provided an outlet, in the words of Butler, to potentially '[arrest] cycles of violence to produce less violent outcomes' in new iterations of what 'might be made of grief besides a cry for war.'

## Disclosure statement

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