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Processes of Racialization through Media Depictions of Transracial Violence

MEGAN ALLEN

Abstract

In this research project, I explore the process of racialization in media coverage of White-on-Black violent events (both crimes and incidents not recognized by the legal system as crimes) using a critical race theory framework. The past three years have seen a series of killings of and assaults on African American people that have become newsworthy, as they have been seen, often controversially, as unjustified. The controversy has largely broken down on racial and political lines, with minority Americans and the left seeing these incidents as evidence and example of ongoing racial inequality, with whites and the right, in particular right-wing whites, denying that race is a relevant category. By using critical race theory's understanding of race and racism as active social processes, I trace the assumptions, politics, and social consequences of media coverage across conservative, centrist, and left media outlets. For the purposes of this research, 298 news articles from varying sources were collected and examined.

Introduction

Communicative technology has forever changed the way the public receives the news. Media outlets are continuously producing and sharing knowledge through platforms that are accessible to nearly every citizen of the United States. Individuals now have a wide range of options as to which platform they choose to receive their news

from. Along this spectrum of politically and socially diverse media outlets emerges differentiating narratives of individual subjects.

The importance of scrutinizing knowledge production is the first step in grasping the inseparable relationship between knowledge and power. Those who hold power hold influence over knowledge, which in turn holds the power to influence human behavior. Acknowledging this leverage over human inquiry requires that we view formal (education, media, the criminal justice system) and informal institutions issuing knowledge through a critical lens. Critical Race Theory is one such lens through which intersections of power, framing, and perceptions can be examined. Critical Race Theory views racism as a fundamental presence engrained in nearly every social and formal institution in the United States, whether we chose to believe it or not (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Recent years have seen the media following incidences of police-on-civilian violence, specifically ones where the target of police attention is an African American male. Incidences such as these, and the presentation of these incidences to the public, have fueled racial tensions and given rise to social unrest.

One of the more significant incidents explored by the media and the public was the shooting and killing of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, MO by former police officer Darren Wilson. In the wake of his death not only was there extensive coverage of the incident, the parties involved, and the communities affected, but also of the subsequent protests, riots, and calls for change. The reactions to the death of Michael Brown and the perceptions of how well justice was administered has polarized the public and has seemingly pinned minorities and authority figures against each other along political lines.

This paper seeks to examine the range of narratives on racialized incidences of violence by various media outlets by using Critical Race Theory as a framework. There will first be an overview of Critical Race Theory, the use of framing as a mechanism to justify racism, and how both may be used to assess race in the media. There will then be an examination of how the media operates, how it depicts race, and possible motivations behind particular framing

techniques. Finally there will be an analysis of how one might use Critical Race Theory to trace assumptions of racism and politics from media coverage of transracial incidences of violence, such as the killing of Michael Brown.

Literature Review

Critical Race Theory and Framing

Critical Race Theory is a framework, a movement, and an academic discipline that maintains that society is at all levels divided along racial lines (Delgado, 2012). Critical Race Theory is considered to have begun with the works of Law school professor Derrick Bell in the 1970s. Bell sought to examine the intersections between power, race, and the law. Since Bell, Critical Race Theory has been used to examine similar intersections of race and power in history, education, the media, and in other political, social, and economic realms (Delgado, 2012).

Critical Race Theory was born from a need to further explain and acknowledge inherent racism in society. Even today, over 150 years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, racial minorities continue to remain disadvantaged compared to whites in nearly every area of social life. According to a study by social scientist Dr. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, “[blacks] are more likely to be poor than whites, earn about 40% less than whites, and have about an eighth of the net worth of whites” (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Additionally, studies have shown that people of color are more likely to receive an inferior education compared to whites and will have less access to the housing market. Within the realm of the criminal justice system, people of color are consistently overrepresented at all levels including arrests, convictions, incarcerations, and executions (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). These alarming disparities, among many others, beg for an explanation. While some still deny racism exists in our post civil rights society, critical race theorists contend that racism not only still exists, but is a permanent fixture in the structure of our government and society (Delgado, 2012).

As a broad field of study, numerous scholars have identified varying approaches to applying critical race theory. In one of his

books, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Richard Delgado loosely outlines six tenets of Critical Race Theory. The first is ordinariness, which essentially states that racism is difficult to cure or address (Delgado, 2012). This means that colorblind or “formal” conceptions of equality can remedy only the most blatant forms of racism. The second tenet he refers to as material determinism. This element establishes that, because large segments of the population are white or privileged, there is little incentive on their part to eradicate systematic racism purely out of self-interest (Delgado, 2012). The third tenet Delgado refers to as social construction, which holds that race and racism are products of social thought and relations. Race is not a result of biological or genetic coding, but rather social categories created out of manipulation and convenience (Delgado, 2012).

The fourth tenet outlined is differential racialization, which argues that a dominant society racializes minority groups at different times in response to shifting needs (Delgado, 2012). This would explain both slavery as resource for free labor and more recently the stereotype and abuse of Mexican labor for agricultural advances. A fifth tenet refers to intersectionality and anti-essentialism as a way of explaining that no person has a single unitary identity. Instead, Delgado makes the argument that because individuals possess multiple backgrounds and characteristics, everyone has overlapping identities and loyalties (Delgado, 2012). For example, an African American may share their heritage with other African Americans, but that individual may also be Jewish, homosexual, or possess any number of combinations of identities. The final tenet outlined describes a unique voice of color. Though it slightly contradicts the previously mentioned tenet, this ideal asserts that experience with racism and oppression means a right to “legal storytelling.” In this way, Delgado argues that minority status brings with it a competence unparalleled by whites to race and racism (Delgado, 2012).

A crucial component to understanding racism as an active force in formal and informal institutions is to recognize the use of framing. We have established that through the lens of Critical Race Theory, institutions such as schools, the criminal justice system,

and the media contribute to systematic racism by maintaining and supporting racial inequality. We also know that through positions of power, knowledge is easily created. Framing therefore is the vehicle through which knowledge may be transformed into a deliberate message. Not only does the framing of a particular situation allow the viewer to interpret or misinterpret reality, it also drives the formation of opinions and beliefs.

In regards to systematic racism and understanding any dominant racial ideology, social scientist Dr. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva developed four central frames largely used by United States society to perpetuate racial inequality while denying it all together. The four frames of this “color-blind racism” are abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Through the use of these frames, Bonilla-Silva makes the argument that central elements of liberalism have been rearticulated in post-civil rights America to rationalize racially unfair situations (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

The frame of abstract liberalism involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (equal opportunity) and economic liberalism (choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). The use of abstract liberalism allows the dominant race to avoid tackling real race-related issues, like the underrepresentation of minorities in high-paying occupations, by standing behind phrases and practices such as “equal opportunity.” Rather than acknowledge historically and culturally significant reasons why minorities receive less pay and achieve lower net worth than whites, whites stand behind abstract liberal ideals. It is beneficial to explain these disparities in a way that allows them to avoid blame. By making claims that minority shortcomings result from a lack of effort or drive on their own behalf, whites avoid self-blame and the responsibility of identifying or rectifying the structural racism.

Naturalization is a frame that operates off the assumption that racial phenomena can be explained by suggesting they are natural occurrences (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). An example of this would be regarding the formation of racially homogenous neighborhoods as “natural” or based purely out of preference. In reality the segregation

of neighborhoods has significantly more to do with structural racism within the housing and real estate markets than it does with any “normal gravitation.” This method of rationalizing what appears to be natural occurrences is one way of masking the underlying racism.

Cultural Racism relies on heavily on culturally based arguments to explain the socioeconomic standing of minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). This frame utilizes stereotypes and assumptions of races to justify disproportionate social standing while protecting white superiority. This frame may seem to be the most blatant method of maintaining racial inequality, however, it can easily be presented in passive, seemingly harmless way. For example, making the argument that “black people are always late” allows others to rely on this as an explanation for why they don’t receive job opportunities at the same rate as whites. Not only does this reinforce negative perceptions of African Americans in society, but also prevents further examination of racism.

Minimization of racism, the final frame discussed by Bonilla-Silva, suggests that discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities’ life chances. This frame, more so than any other, seeks to disregard racism as an existing issue in society. This frame allows the public at large to feed into the delusion that since blatant discrimination no longer exists, that racism too does not exist. Through this frame, whites and members of a higher socioeconomic status flip the use of excuses around on the minorities (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Minimization is used primarily when a minority experiences a form of attack or rejection based on their race and chooses to speak out about it. Rather than accept the fact that discrimination transpires, whites will minimize the damages and claim that the minority is “using race as an excuse” to achieve some ulterior motive. Through this frame, the infamous “race card” is perceived to be played, and whites are more easily able to disregard the claims of racism.

The powerful explanations used by whites not only allow them to justify and ignore racism, but also maintain whiteness as a privilege. The ties that can be drawn between critical race theory and framing are best understood when examined through an

institutionalized system which uses its powers to covertly support color-blind racism. As one of the most influential producers of knowledge and news, the media is fit for such an examination.

The Media and Influence

As previously mentioned, the increasing availability of technology has made accessing news as simple as turning on one's television. Prior to the broadcasting of news, the only sources of crime news were in print. By broadcasting news, media outlets are able to communicate with the masses on a more personal level. For many households, watching the news, specifically crime news, has become part of a daily routine (Bing III, 2010). As crime has become an intrinsic part of modern media coverage (one study found that crime can account for up to 50% of news coverage), it is important first to examine why there is such a focus on crime from media outlets before the content can be assessed (Schildkraut, 2012). One study conducted in 2010 aimed to analyze the media's distortion of homicides in Baltimore.

Researchers Jaclyn Schildkraut and Amy Donley identified three main reasons why the media would place such special attention on crime. First, the majority of the public's general understanding of crime comes from the media, making it continually important for the media to produce more cases of crime. In fact, it has been reported that mass media accounts for 95% of the general public's source for information on crime (Schildkraut, 2012). This is supported by the widely held misconception that crime is interracial, due to the overwhelming focus by the media of "black on white" or "white on black" crime. The overall prevalence of crime depicted by the media has less to do with actual statistics and more to do with what makes for a good story. Violent crimes tend to take up more than 40% of crime stories despite the fact that they are the least common (Schildkraut, 2012). In this way the media holds the power to create the public's knowledge or understanding of crime.

Secondly, the media has the power to use crime reporting as a tool for swaying public opinion, since it is so closely relied upon. Not only does public interest propel the selection of news stories, but

it also possesses the power to influence policy decisions (Schildkraut, 2012). For example, if ABC news produces a story on a child who became a victim of sexual assault by a stranger, the public's reaction will be both predictable and uninformed. Not only has the news station succeeded in capturing the attention of the public with a rare incident of a sex crime, but they will have framed it in a way that will lead the public to demand a swift response from the criminal justice system so these "prevalent" crimes can be prevented in the future. The demand will most likely be met by local legislators writing up a bill that does little in the way of responding to the central issues of sex crimes. Instead the bill will focus on creating harsher penalties for unlikely offenders and, due to the lack of attention paid to empirical data on sex crimes, will be unsuccessful in actually preventing crime (Wright, 2014).

Finally, the media is able to create an unbalanced understanding of crime by presenting "a world of crime and justice that is not found in reality" (Schildkraut, 2012 p.176). Past research has found that victims' race and gender statuses shape crime news story decision-making (Gruenewald, 2013). As previously mentioned, mass media accounts of crime drive misconceptions about the prevalence and nature of crime as it occurs within communities across the United States. Allowing victims' and offenders' characteristics to drive newsworthiness not only makes the selection process arbitrary, but it also supports racial stereotypes and racial tensions in the United States.

Scholars have identified numerous motivations for the media to selectively portray African Americans as offenders more often than as victims. In fact, one study by Gruenewald et al found that racial-ethnic minorities are more likely to appear as crime suspects than victims, and that black crime participants are more likely to be linked to violence and danger in television nightly news compared to whites (Gruenewald, 2013). There is a general lack of information about successful African Americans whose contributions to society are great (Bing III, 2010). The distorted image of African Americans taints the view of black culture and fuels misinformation and racial tensions. This negative frame of African Americans falls in line with Bonilla-

Silva's argument that whites have developed powerful explanations, which have ultimately become justifications for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). Whites easily rationalize African Americans' perceived lack of successes as a product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, or their "cultural limitations" (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Consequences of Disproportionate Representation

Having control over framing situations gives the media the power to put any given situation in perspective for the general public by sticking to only one narrative of the events. Some scholars speculate that this is to maintain discriminatory mindsets and practices to keep white social and economic privilege intact. This argument also asserts that these narratives support racist stereotypes, and construct scenarios where white fear and anti-black violence are justified. "Mass media representations of black and white criminals and black and white victims gave new life to forms of institutionalized racism and reinvigorated an array of racist narrative practices that had lain dormant for a decade" (Stabile, 2006). Other scholars argue that it is an effort to support a racialized caste system in the United States that not only equates racial minorities with poverty, but also discriminates against them as a result (Alexander, 2011).

Racial tensions in the criminal justice system are largely denied by law enforcement, but the clear overrepresentation of African Americans throughout the criminal justice system argues otherwise. Despite representing only 13% of the total population of the United States, in 2010 African Americans made up 37% of jail populations. In 2009, African Americans represented 30% of those on probation, and 37% of those on parole. Finally, in 2010 blacks represented over 53% of all citywide arrests, where whites represented only 44% (Gabbidon, 2013).

These statistics and racial tensions create a general distrust between African American citizens and police officers. According to the NAACP statistics, 1 in 6 African American men have been incarcerated as of 2001. If current trends continue, 1 in 3 African

American males born today can expect to spend time in prison during his lifetime (NAACP, 2015). Between 2002 and 2011, overall confidence and satisfaction with the police across the country was gauged and recorded based on demographic information. On a scale on 0-100% (100 being completely confident and satisfied) whites reported a range of 60-70% confident, while blacks reported a range of 22-49%. As part of the same survey, individuals who claimed an annual income of \$20,000 or less reported confidence between 43-60%, while those making \$75,000 or more ranged between 65-72% (Gabbidon, 2013 p. 117-118). This disparity in perceived reliability of law enforcement is indicative of differential treatment within any given community based on race or socioeconomic status.

Assessing Race in the Media Using Critical Race Theory

Framing is an important aspect of news coverage because it transforms information into knowledge. Frames are a negotiated product of the competing interests and biases of journalists, government officials, and other political actors (Cook, 1998). Through the lens of critical race theory, it is possible to identify some of those interests and biases as systemic racism. Analyzing the content of news media requires careful and close examination.

A prominent example of explicit racism in the media came from the coverage of the tragic devastation that resulted from Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The framing of the white survivors differed greatly from that of their black counterparts. Much of the coverage focused on the damage caused by the storm and ways survivors sought relief. During this time both white and black survivors were looting destroyed stores in search for medical supplies and food. Media coverage displayed clear discrimination by showing more white victims in a positive light by coupling their images with captions such as "Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store." In the other images, African Americans are shown in nearly the exact same situation but the caption reads "A young man walks through chest deep flood water after looting a grocery store in New Orleans" (Haider-Markel, 2007 p. 590). Critical Race Theory allows us to identify this frame

as cultural racism. We label the behavior of seeking and taking life-saving supplies as looting because we identify African Americans as thieves and rely on this false stereotype as a means of explaining their behavior, while separating them from whites engaging in the same activities.

Another study examined CNN broadcasts and found that the network broadcast video clips of looting exclusively of African Americans. The news reporting on the crime and violence was later found to be erroneous and exaggerated, although it was easily accepted by viewers (Voorhees, 2007). From a critical race theory perspective, this reflects the use of cultural understandings of race to interpret events (Warren, 2012). Assumptions that link violence and lawlessness to African Americans were reinforced by the repeating images.

The criminalization of the African American evacuees was not the only notable racial undertone found in media coverage of the hurricane. Another study examined media coverage and found that news coverage often engaged in blaming the victims, criticizing the African American residents' failure to evacuate prior to the storm (Warren, 2012). This argument neutralizes other reasons for why the residents were unable to evacuate—lack of resources being a significant reason for why many were unable to evacuate—and instead clings to the notion that they were unable to evacuate due to their “lacking of rationality” or their “inability to act in their own best interest” (Warren, 2012). Here we see Bonilla-Silva's Naturalization frame taking effect, where whites avoid responsibility for racial phenomena by suggesting that the victims were to blame for their “natural” response (Bonilla-Silva, 2014).

Several studies were also conducted in the wake of Katrina, which examined how police and military specifically responded to both the incident and to the media coverage. There were heightened levels of both police and military presence in New Orleans after the storm. One study found that the Department of Defense and other governmental agencies relied heavily on media coverage to inform them of conditions in order to determine proper responses to incidences (Fjord, 2007). The same study found there was a focus

on maintaining social order over humanitarian aid. Implications of the coverage included reduced empathy for evacuees and reinforced prejudices and negative stereotyping of African Americans (Warren, 2012). Much like DeCuir outlined in the 5 tenets of her critical race framework, permanence of racism is preserved through supporting prejudices and stereotypes (DeCuir, 2004).

Method

To illustrate the impact of framing by the media, I chose to compare and analyze coverage of a single incident of transracial violence. The shooting and killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO in August of 2014, dominated media outlets for months. Due to the overwhelming coverage and varying opinions that arose from the death of Michael Brown, I chose to examine not only coverage of the incident, but also of the subsequent protests. I began by creating a database of articles and other forms of media coverage totaling 298 pieces from 9 different media outlets. The media content examined was found entirely using online sources, all of which are available to the public.

I began by collecting articles, videos, and images from national media outlets including NBC, ABC, CNN, and FOX news. I chose to begin with national media outlets because the coverage of the events were well documented and reflected information that the public was likely to have viewed. The number of documents I archived from these four national news providers totaled 91. Of these media sites ABC yielded the fewest number of articles covering the incident, totaling only 6, half of which were interviews with former Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. NBC, CNN, and FOX alternatively had extensive article and footage coverage ranging from the date of the incident, August 9, 2014, up until the articles were collected over the course of the summer of 2015.

From national media outlets I moved to more local news sources including the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, San Francisco Chronicle, and Atlanta Journal Constitution. These five newspapers provided a significant portion of the total

number of articles collected, 207. Similar to the national media outlets examined, most of the newspapers maintained a timeline of events and coverage of Fergusson ranging from the date of the incident in the summer of 2014 until the time of collection in 2015.

It was important to include both national and local news sources to increase the scope of coverage that was created in the wake of the incident. It was also crucial to the findings of this research that the scope included sources from conservative, centrist, and leftist media outlets. From each of the sources listed above the same method of collection was used. Each site was searched using the same key words and phrases such as “Michael Brown,” “Darren Wilson,” and Fergusson, MO.”

I was also interested in seeing which pieces of the incident reached the most amount of people. To do this, I ran a search on the popular video sharing website, YouTube. I selected the phrase “Michael Brown Fergusson Missouri” to use as a search tool, which yielded just under 10,000 videos. I then sorted the results based on the view count and recorded the video information of the top 20 most viewed videos in my article database. The dates of the videos ranged from August 2014 to July 2015. The view count ranged from 247,180 to 2,952,506 individual views.

It was my goal that by collecting these articles and examining them through a Critical Race lens that I would be able to trace assumptions between the politics and social consequences of media framing. I was particularly interested in what the primary focus of the articles produced by individual sources would reflect. Therefore I went back into my article database and categorized each piece based on the focus of the narrative. Each piece was then labeled with key words and phrases used by the article and used to describe the tone of the article. Words and phrases recorded included murdered, killed, Brown, Wilson, left, neutral, right, protest, riot, protestors, rioters, looters, destruction, peaceful, force, police, national guard, Obama, funeral, community, pepper spray, guns, violence, and justice department. These labels allowed me to have a clearer overview of not only the content of each article but also an insight into which themes dominated each media outlet.

An important distinction to make is the notable difference between rioters and protestors. In the wake of the death of Michael Brown, protestors were identified as those who demonstrated their first amendment rights to freedom of speech and the right to assemble publicly. The rioters alternatively were those responsible for the destruction of property, violence against police and the public, and looting. It is also worth mentioning that many of the rioters who arrived in the wake of Michael Brown’s death came from out of town and had little to do with the protestors’ movement or calls for justice.

Findings

National Media Sources

Of the national media outlets examined there was a clear divide in the overall tone of the articles that coincided with the political background of each outlet. As previously mentioned, ABC News yielded the fewest number of articles and videos (6). For the most part this content leaned toward the left by focusing on issues of civil rights, and the impending consequences of the fatal confrontation. Another notable focal point of their content was how the officer involved, Darren Wilson, seemed unharmed by the incident, identifying the minimal damage done to his body and his complete lack of involvement with the public in the wake of the incident.

The content produced by NBC was possibly the most liberal of all the national sources reviewed. While some of the content remained neutral by objectively reporting on key timeline events such as the autopsy report, the federal investigation, and other civil investigations, much of the content focused primarily on the community and the peaceful protests. Out of 22 articles pulled from NBC’s website, 15 (68%) focused on or mentioned the community and the protests. The overall tone and framing of the protests was supportive. Rather than focus on violence or destruction of property, the site reported on Michael Brown’s funeral, his family, his community, and their cry for justice.

Of the 4 national media sources examined, CNN appeared to be the most neutral in tone and verbiage used. The majority of the

articles were objectively focused on all ongoing investigations, the Justice Department, arrests made, the autopsy report, the grand jury, witness testimony, etc. The use of the word “protest” or “protestor” was used in 10 of the 36 articles collected (28%). The use of the words “riot”, “rioters” or “violence” was found in 12 articles (33%). CNN’s site seemed to produce a balanced view of Ferguson by poking holes in any and all evidence brought to the public’s attention.

FOX News, a right wing conservative media source, focused its coverage around violence, destruction of property, the surveillance tape of Michael Brown stealing cigars from a convenience store prior to the incident, and surprisingly President Obama. Out of the 4 national media outlets I examined, FOX was the only site to show the surveillance footage of Michael Brown stealing from the convenience store prior to his death. From 28 articles and videos collected, Michael Brown was referred to as a thief, a thug, a gangster, and was accused of being a violent person. There was additional discussion from some of these articles about the rap music he listened to, his marijuana use, his history of drinking alcohol under aged, and his supposed status as a “robbery suspect” at the time of his death. One article stated that he stole a \$50 box of cigars, while further research revealed that he grabbed a handful of lose Swisher Sweets, a brand of cigarillos that typically cost \$1 or less a piece.

Another commonly used frame found in many FOX articles was the strong and prevalent opinion that the shooting was justified, and that the aggression toward police in that community was unfounded. In 12 separate articles (43%) FOX correspondents made statements supporting the police’s decisions around the incident. In many of these 12 articles there were authoritative statements made around a lack of evidence and the unlikelihood that Officer Darren Wilson would be indicted well before that decision was passed down. Other oppositional statements to the civil rights activists included content that argued, “hands up don’t shoot” as being a false narrative or a hoax. A final significant finding pulled from the FOX news content was the overwhelming attention paid to President Obama. Many of the articles scrutinized Obama’s response to the incident,

accusing him of picking and choosing which incidences of violence to care about. Additionally, Obama was accused of turning his back of law enforcement, ignoring murders perpetrated by immigrants, jumping on political opportunities in Ferguson, and supporting “phony stories,” false narratives and witness testimonies.

Regional Media Sources

Unlike the national media outlets, the local media sources examined were for the most part objective and unbiased, especially from the New York Times, Washington Post, San Francisco Chronicle, and Atlanta Journal Constitution. Overall, the tone of the coverage was sympathetic toward the community of Ferguson. Much of the coverage focused on Michael Brown’s funeral, the schools, the witnesses, and the community’s involvement with both the protestors and the rioters. Many of the local media sources made a clear distinction between “protestors” and “rioters” which allowed the public to separate the destruction caused by the rioters and looters from the demonstrations and calls for justice by the protestors.

The Wall Street Journal’s coverage of Ferguson stood apart from the other local newspapers as it focused almost entirely on the businesses affected by the destruction. From their website, I recovered only 14 articles which referenced either Michael Brown or Ferguson, MO. In these 14 articles there was no mention of protestors or demonstrators, only of violent rioters, looters, and opportunists. The topics covered included possible legislation reform in local court fines and fees, damages done to the city, and new police policies and practices in the wake of the incident.

YouTube

The most watched videos on YouTube yielded a fairly split list of results. While some of the videos were posted by official media outlets (one by CNN, one by FOX, others by smaller media organizations) many of the videos were produced by unaffiliated individuals. Out of the 20 videos, 9 of them were strictly opinionated pieces about the evidence and the investigation. While the content seemed to split evenly along polarized lines, the footage was extreme.

The most viewed videos contained footage of Michael Brown's body lying in the street, footage of the police responding to the scene of the incident recording residences' reactions, the surveillance video, and raw footage of looters destroying cars, business, and interactions with police. Two of the videos showed police standing by while rioters destroyed property. The surveillance tape was shown in 5 of the 20 videos. Surprisingly, there was more footage of witness accounts and reactions than there was of any protesting or rioting.

One of the most disturbing findings of the video content analysis was how popular some of the opinion pieces were. It became evident to me while viewing that some of the facts being presented to the viewers by the many "political crusaders" online were untrue, exaggerated, or had changed since the posting of the video. Even still, comments were being left in support of the inaccurate information. While official news reporting outlets are required to uphold a certain level of standards in the information they produce, there are no such requirements on the information shared between individuals online, regardless of how many millions it may reach.

Discussion

Due to time and access limitations, only web media was collected and reviewed. This method of searching and locating articles proved to be advantageous, allowing collected data to be neatly categorized as links in an electronic spreadsheet based on key search phrases. Using these key phrases made it easy to quickly identify certain framing techniques being used across articles and across media outlets. The importance of identifying these frames was the first step in understanding how the media was able to manipulate public perceptions to fit into these pre-determined stances.

The death of Michael Brown was perhaps the most prominent crime related event occurring in 2014, and the coverage dominated all media outlets for months. President Obama spoke out about how tragic Brown's death was, but warned communities to protest peacefully: "There is undoubtedly going to be some form of negative reaction and it will make for good TV, throwing bottles or smashing cars will not solve the underlying mistrust and genuine

problems still facing African Americans" (Swaine, 2014).

The attack on Michael Brown's character was perhaps the most egregious move taken by media outlets. Without giving any time for his family or community to sufficiently grieve their loss, the Ferguson police department released footage of Brown stealing cigars from a convenience store to local and national media. Rather than focus on his age, his ambitions, and his ties to the community, television and online media began screening the footage and, just as quickly, much of the public wrote him off as another thug who was undeserving of their sympathies. Rather than focus on the way this young man's body was left in the street for hours, the public focused on pictures of him looking like the stereotypical thug they wanted to believe he was, so that his killing could be more easily justifiable.

While print news focused on the investigation and new developments of law enforcement, online and social media sources continued to produce violent images of looters and militarized police forces aggressively pushing back crowds. The events surrounding the crowds and "protestors" soon became the focal point of media attention. The nation watched as the media aided in creating an "us vs. them" scenario between the people and law enforcement.

As previously mentioned, the public is quick to scrutinize victims of violent crime. In order for most people to offer their sympathies or attention to a victim, they must feel that the victim is deserving of it. The portrayal of victims by the media is instrumental in forming those perspectives by the public. Typically, younger white female victims are the most likely to receive media attention as well as public sympathies, while adult African American males are among the least likely (Stabile, 2006).

Conclusion

Central to this paper is the idea that narratives are formed based on how information is presented. The use of language and frames has the power to create an intended perception of an event or belief. Critical Race Theory contends that it is in the best interest of a dominant race to maintain a separation socially and formally from minority groups. Using this tenet of Critical Race Theory, among

others outlined in this paper, I have drawn 3 central conclusions from my media content analysis. The first is that the most powerful media outlets focused on specific language and frames to create polarizing narratives around race, while distracting attention from other extremely complicated questions that arose in the wake of Michael Brown's death.

One of the first observations I made when I came in contact with coverage of the incident was the language used to separate the two parties involved in the shooting; a "black teenager" was fatally shot by a "white police officer." Additionally, the words "protestors" and "rioters" were deliberately used, sometimes interchangeably, to describe the individuals present in Ferguson in the wake of Brown's death. The yearlong coverage that followed revealed strong images of angry African Americans pinned against a militarized and predominantly white police force. Only two questions seemed to matter to media; was the shooting of an unarmed black teenager by a white police officer justified? And, was this incident racially motivated? The answers to these questions seemed to be answered in tandem by the Justice Department's investigation report, which found that the shooting was justified.

Once these questions were answered in a manner that seemed satisfactory to much of the public, the vandalism, destruction of property, and looting of businesses became the next focus of the media's attention. The public watched an exchange of rocks, Molotov cocktails, smoke bombs, and pepper spray being hurled over racial lines. Ferguson became a site of violence and as quickly as activists arrived to demonstrate their frustrations peacefully, a narrative of aggression, violence, and lawlessness was produced.

While this narrative of anger, hate, and violence took hold of the incident, other questions remained largely untouched by news reporters. In my content analysis, I found that many of my own questions remained unanswered or all together untouched. One of the few that I did find in a small number of articles inquired as to the presence of racial tensions in Ferguson and surrounding communities prior to the death of Brown. However, there was no discussion of why residents were so hurt, so angry, so

frustrated. There was no discussion of the effects of strain, social disorganization, or labeling on a community, and how academic disciplines such as crime theory or critical race theory might be used to examine and validate those feelings. Rather than present questions that seek to highlight systematic reasons why the unrest exploded in the way that it did, the media presented the unrest in frames that guided the public's perceptions into one of two narratives. As the opposing narratives received more attention and support, additional factors and explanations were lost.

The second conclusion reached by this study is the media's use of language and frames to perpetuate racial tensions while denying responsibility. This was most evident by those sources who painted a negative image of Brown after he was shot. As previously mentioned, African Americans are more likely to be depicted as offenders than they are as victims in the media (Gruenewald, 2013). While some media outlets released photos of Brown in his graduation cap and gown, others released the surveillance tape of him stealing cigars. By shifting the focus of the investigation onto Brown's criminal history, the rap music he listened to, and associating words such as "thug," "brute," and "violent man" with him, many began to form the narrative that he precipitated his death by failing to carry himself as an outstanding citizen. It should be noted that from the present study this narrative was most prevalent from right-wing media outlets.

Similarly to the defamation of Michael Brown's character as a means of shifting blame, the focus on the looters and rioters amongst the protests in Ferguson allowed the media to pin the violent reactions to the incident entirely on African Americans. The narrowed frame of chaos and destruction from the small set of rioters distracted from real and prevalent issues of oppression, inequality, and disenfranchisement. Had these issues been highlighted, there would have been a greater call for society to take accountability for the social unrest. Instead, any real issues of race were minimized or naturalized by the media, much like Bonilla-Silva outlined in his book, *Racism without Racists*.

The final conclusion that can be drawn from this research

is that there is an overall lack of accountability taken for racism as it exists in America today. As a producer of knowledge and perceptions, the media must take its responsibility for creating accurate, balanced, and unbiased coverage of events seriously. As consumers, we must take on the task of receiving, filtering, and understanding news equally as serious. If we are ever to eradicate racism from our social institutions, we must be readily willing to understand and accept responsibility for the many subtle forms racism takes. We must hold our formal institutions responsible to the highest level of confronting racism. Only when every member of society is ready to accept responsibility for the existence and perpetuation of systematic racism, can we achieve the equality so many have sought for generations. The powers that seek to maintain racial dominance in this country will cease to hold the incredible influence over social processes of racialization only when true equality becomes the goal of our society.

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