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MEDIA INSENSITIVITY TO PEOPLE OF COLOR: A COMPARISON AND CONTRAST OF
HOW AFRICAN AMERICANS ARE PORTRAYED IN MAINSTREAM MEDIA TO WHITE
AMERICANS

A thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Meek School of Journalism
The University of Mississippi

by

TYLER J. CARTER

August 2015

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ABSTRACT

July 13, 2013, I sat in my great-grandmother's house with my eyes glued to CNN waiting to see George Zimmerman charged in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. After the verdict of not guilty was read, I remember tuning into social media and seeing people who looked like me tweet about how disappointed they were in the "system." Leading up to the Zimmerman trial, I paid attention to how mainstream media intentionally tried to defame Trayvon Martin's character. Headlines read "Trayvon Martin was a weed smoker" and "Martin was suspended from school." Fast-forward to August 5, 2014, a teen by the name of Michael Brown was gunned down and left in the street for four and a half hours while his blood flowed down the street in the blistering summer heat. Again, headlines from mainstream media outlets continued to defame Brown's character. Michael Brown was portrayed as no "Gentle Giant" by *Fox News* and John Eligon of the *New York Times* wrote an article that portrayed Brown last weeks "Grappling with Problems and Promise." I began to notice that mainstream media portrayed African American victims in a negative light while White Americans were not shown in the same light. James Holmes, the gunman in the 2012 movie theater shooting was portrayed by the *Associated Press* as a "Brilliant" science student. The narrative seems to soften when White Americans commit an act, while African Americans are usually vilified by media. This topic is important to me because I want to show people that mainstream media either intentionally or unconsciously vilifies African American victims while not holding White Americans to the same standards.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to young black and brown boys and men who have died by the hands of police brutality and whose character remain under attack by mainstream media even in their passing. Trayvon Martin, John Crawford III, Michael Brown, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Ezell Ford, Shereka Marsh and countless others.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On the afternoon of August 9, 2014, a young black man was walking home from a store in Ferguson, Missouri with his friend when he was approached by a police officer in his vehicle. The officer told the man to get out of the street to which the young black man responded with some words and a tussle ensued. After the tussle, the man was shot and killed by the police officer and his body was left in the street for four hours on a hot summer day for all to see. This young black male's name was Michael Brown and he was only 18-years-old.

Another black man, John Crawford III was killed on August 5, 2014, by police officers in a Beavercreek, Ohio, Wal-Mart. While it was a toy gun, the headline read, "Ohio man was carrying variable pump air rifle—not a toy—when cops killed him: attorney general."¹ Trayvon Martin would be another example. On the night of February 26, 2012, Martin was walking to a convenience store and seen inside the store buying candy and a drink. Martin attempted to walk back home from the store when he was approached by a man named George Zimmerman. As Zimmerman began to question Martin about why was he in that neighborhood, Martin is heard saying "leave me alone." He then tried to defend himself from Zimmerman, and a fight ensued. Zimmerman pulled a firearm and began to fire at Martin, killing him. On March 26, 2012, a

¹ Michael Walsh, New York Daily News, "Ohio man was carrying variable pump air rifle when cops killed him: attorney general" <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/crime/police-kill-man-air-rifle-walmart-ohio-article-1.1895479>

headline from *NBC News* via the *Miami Herald* was published stating Martin had been “suspended from school.”²

After news of Brown’s death broke, media-watchers carefully followed the narratives that news outlets began crafting about the teenager and the incident that claimed his life. Wary of the controversy surrounding the media’s depiction of Trayvon Martin, the Florida teen killed in a high-profile case that led to the acquittal of neighborhood Zimmerman, people on Twitter wondered, “If they gunned me down, which picture would they use?” Using the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, users posted side-by-side photos, demonstrating the power that news outlets wield in portraying victims based on images they select.³

The common thread that ties together these stories is the way the media chose to report them. These incidents suggest that media portray African Americans in a negative light, especially in regards to crime. This is by no means standard media protocol, but it happens frequently, deliberately or not. News reports often produce headline claims from police or other officials that appear unsympathetic or dismissive of black victims. Other times, the headlines seem to suggest that black victims are to blame for their own deaths, engaging in what some allege is a form of character assassination.

When contrasted with media portrayal of white suspects and accused murderers, the differences are more striking. News outlets often choose to run headlines that exhibit an air of disbelief at an alleged white killer’s supposed actions. Sometimes they appear to go out of their way to boost the suspect’s character, carrying quotes from relatives or acquaintances that often

² NBC News, “Trayvon Martin was suspended from school three times,” http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2012/03/26/10872124-trayvon-martin-was-suspended-three-times-from-school

³ Nick Wing, “When The Media Treats White Suspects And Killers Better Than Black Victims,” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/14/media-black-victims_n_5673291.html?cps=gravity

paint even alleged murderers in a positive light.⁴ Elliot Rodger, a white male, killed six people and wounded thirteen others on his college campus at UC-Santa Barbara because he was viewed as socially awkward and wanted to have relations with women, but he felt they overlooked him. Rodger wrote a 137-page manifesto detailing his life and the things that troubled him, such as sex and how women did not treat him the way they treated other men. On May 25, 2014, the headline posted by the *Whittier (CA) Daily News* stated, “Santa Barbara shooting: Suspect was ‘soft-spoken, polite, a gentleman’, ex-principal says”⁵ (Figure 1).

The Keene Pumpkin Festival is another example. It is one of the biggest events in Keene, New Hampshire that is home to Keene State College. The town’s annual Keene Pumpkin Festival is one of its biggest events, bringing millions of dollars to local and state businesses and upward of 70,000 attendees, according to some estimates. Attendees bring tens of thousands of pumpkins for the festivities. Compared to the Ferguson riots, the Pumpkin Festival was the same thing, but was not reported in that way. During the Pumpkin Festival, students took to the streets with pumpkins and alcohol in a drunken frenzy. Video also shows students in the middle of the street having a bottle war, meaning they are throwing bottles at one another that could have caused bodily harm. The footage also shows police officers standing around watching white students throwing bottles at one another. A picture taken later that night shows students standing on top of a car that was turned over with its windows busted yelling out obscenities. One student reported being hit in the face with a liquor bottle. Bonfires burned into the early hours of Sunday morning on city streets that were littered with broken beer and liquor bottles, video from *CNN*

⁴ Ibid 2

⁵ Brenda Gazzar, *Whittier Daily News*, “Santa Barbara shooting: Suspect was ‘soft-spoken, polite, a gentleman’, ex-principal says.” <http://www.whittierdailynews.com/general-news/20140525/santa-barbara-shooting-suspect-was-soft-spoken-polite-a-gentleman-ex-principal-says>

affiliate WMUR showed.⁶ CNN's headline tried to rationalize how the Pumpkin Festival and Ferguson differed with the headline, "Why Pumpkin Fest riots are not like Ferguson."⁷

In the publication, *Media Bias Finding It, and Fixing It*, by Wm. David Sloan and Jenn Burleson Mackay, Tamara K. Baldwin and Henry M. Sessoms wrote a chapter titled *Race and Ethnicity*. Within the chapter, there is a quote from Salim Muwakkil, a journalist based in Chicago. He is a senior editor at *In These Times* and an op-ed columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*. Muwakkil writes on African American issues, Middle East politics, and US foreign policy. Muwakkil states, "Race bias is still a fact in America, and the media too often facilitate it. We are still haunted by notions of racial hierarchy because the United States has yet to confront the complex legacy of slavery. Progressive activists must remind themselves that a struggle for media democracy demands they continually challenge the conventional wisdom of white supremacy."⁸

The chapter cites three reasons as to why people feel there is bias in news media:

Viewpoint 1: People of races and ethnicities other than white are often missing from the media. Clint C. Wilson II, Felix Gutierrez, and Lena M. Chao in their book, *Racism, Sexism, and the Media*, argue that them being left out indicates the place in society that was accorded to members of non-white groups by whites, and "lack of coverage of peoples of color in mainstream news media had the effect of asserting their lack of status, a powerful psychological message delivered to Whites and non-Whites alike."⁹

⁶ Ed Payne, CNN, "New Hampshire Pumpkin Festival crowd sets fires, throws bottles"
<http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/19/us/new-hampshire-pumpkin-festival-riot/index.html>

⁷ Emanuella Grinberg, CNN, "Why Pumpkin Fest riots are not like Ferguson."
<http://www.cnn.com/2014/10/21/living/keene-pumpkinfest-riot-ferguson/>

⁸ Salim Muwakkil, "Race and Ethnicity," in *Media Bias Finding It, Fixing It*, pg. 105-116

⁹ Tamara K. Baldwin and Henry M. Sessoms, "Race and Ethnicity," in *Media Bias Finding It, Fixing It* pg. 106

*Viewpoint 2: Stereotypical images and languages remain a part of media coverage of people from non-white races and ethnicities.*¹⁰ According to Wilson, Gutierrez, and Chao, this type of language and images that portray minorities in stereotypical terms can still be found in news coverage today.¹¹ An example is the original photo news outlets used to portray Michael Brown. In the photo, he was holding up three fingers that media outlets portrayed to be “gang signs.” After backlash over the photo, they chose a “gentler” image (Figure 2). *NBC News*, one of the publishers of the photo with Michael Brown holding up three fingers which some perceived to be gang signs, defended use of the picture, saying, “It was his profile picture.”¹² The next day, August 11, 2014, *NBC News* tweeted out a different photo of Michael Brown in a place where kids were playing.

Another more recent example is a photo of Shereka Marsh, a 15-year-old girl who was gunned down by two teenagers she knew at a house party in London. Media chose to use a photo of her sporting a necklace that read “trust no bitch” on it instead of her photo in her school uniform (Figure 3). Wilson and his co-authors also describe a “stereotypical news selection process” (akin to the gatekeeping function described in mass media research) used in determining what types of stories involving people of color ultimately make it into media. The selection process, they argue, seeks to neutralize “White apprehension with regard to non-whites while accommodating the presence of people of color. Information about people of color that aligns with the attitudes of whites about them is seen frequently in news is regurgitated so often that it becomes a theme of sorts.”¹³

¹⁰ Ibid pg. 107

¹¹ Ibid 9

¹² Tanzina Vega, *The New York Times*, “Shooting Spurs Hashtag Effort on Stereotypes” http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/13/us/if-they-gunned-me-down-protest-on-twitter.html?_r=0

¹³ Ibid 9

According to Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki in, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, people of color when portrayed in the news media, often appear, in a small range of roles or as exhibiting certain characteristics. Their content analysis of videotapes of network evening news programs from 1990-91 and 1997 showed “the outlines of the way media help construct the prototypical African American person, that is, the traits characterizing the most representative member of the category. He or she is either an entertainer, sports figure, or object of discrimination” (page 107). Entman and Rojecki’s research revealed what they termed a “dearth of African Americans in stories that have as their central theme either blacks as positive contributors to American society or as people whose racial identity is incidental.”¹⁴ Their research further showed that by tying appearances of African Americans so frequently to narratives of crime and victimization, the news constructs African Americans as a distinct source of disruption.¹⁵ While analyzing television news in Chicago, Entman and Rojecki argued that the “news business can unintentionally produce subtle images that may stimulate negative emotions.”¹⁶ Among the things they noted was coverage that included more mugshots for African Americans than for others and more shots of African Americans in handcuffs than others under arrest.¹⁷

Hurricane Katrina was an event that gave Americans an insight into media bias pertaining to the circumstances people faced. The news media have an especially important role in being able to shape perceptions of political and social events.¹⁸ Television news media in particular tend to emphasize poverty in the African American community. Additionally, the race of

¹⁴ Ibid 9

¹⁵ Tamara K. Baldwin and Henry M. Sessoms, “Race and Ethnicity,” in *Media Bias Finding It, Fixing It* pg. 108

¹⁶ Ibid 15

¹⁷ Ibid 15

¹⁸ Chong & Druckman, 2007; Iyengar, 1990, 1991; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987

individuals appearing on television influences public perceptions of that group.¹⁹ If media framing of blacks can shape perceptions of blacks, it seems likely that framing an event or issue in terms of race will make it more likely that the event is understood in terms of race.²⁰ For an event such as Katrina, the portrayal of African Americans as the main victims should invoke affection toward African Americans. As group members, African Americans have greater positive affection toward African Americans; the framing of Katrina as a disaster largely affecting blacks would invoke more negative feelings about government response among blacks, relative to other groups.²¹

Stereotypes portrayed by the media during Hurricane Katrina showed the world a negative portrayal of African Americans. At least one analysis clearly demonstrated that newspaper coverage of the aftermath doubled its use of the terms race and African American over the weekend following Katrina's landfall.²² In addition, the images of Black storm victims were sometimes more negative than those shown of white Americans. In one well-publicized example, the *Associated Press* wire service distributed two stories on August 30, 2005. In one, a white couple is shown wading through floodwater and the caption reads "Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store." In the other image, a young black man is 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." The conclusion is that white victims of Katrina found food while black victims stole food²³ (Figure 4).

¹⁹ Ibid 15

²⁰ Nelson et al., 2007

²¹ Gilens, 1998

²² Rosenstiel, Tom. Project for Excellence in Journalism 2005 www.journalism.org

²³ Rosenstiel, Tom. Media Framing and Racial Attitudes in the Aftermath of Katrina, Kinney 2005. www.journalism.org

CHAPTER 2

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY/METHODOLOGY

This research will explore the conscious and unconscious patterns in media reporting that privilege racialized perspectives and contribute to the prevalence of mainstream media bias. Research may show media bias exists because there is a lack of African American journalists in newsrooms today or because journalists are practicing reckless journalism and are not double checking when it comes to sources. In regard to the media, numerous clips were gathered to show the difference between African Americans headlines and white American headlines. Newspaper clippings, online sources, personal interviews, as well as books were used for research. Research indicates minorities have lower levels of news consumption because they feel mainstream media are one-sided. This research seeks to further investigate these claims.

This topic is significant because African Americans along with other minority communities have long been tired of media portrayals of their communities. Many African Americans feel the media defame their character and the general public's opinion of them is based on media's skewed perception of minority communities. Christopher P. Campbell, in his book *Race, Myth, and the News*, said that despite efforts to change things, America's racial myths still endure. He attributed some of the responsibility to the media. He argued the very nature of the news media and society "may not allow [the media] to function in a manner that

will contribute to more accurate portrayals of life outside the mainstream. That would require newsroom processes and social processes to be systematically questioned and altered.”²⁴

Throughout the history of this country, racism has been and is still an issue, one that African Americans feel they deal with on a larger scale, especially within mainstream media. Many seek common ground to combat media bias. Jeff Pearlman, a sports journalist and *New York Times* best-selling author of *The Bad Guys Won*, *Love Me, Hate Me*, *Boys Will Be Boys*, *The Rocket That Fell to Earth*, and *Sweetness and Showtime*, tweeted on October 27, 2014, “I think *Fox News* sucks. I think *MSNBC* sucks. I want unbiased news—whether it hurts my feelings or not. Why is that so hard to find?”

This research was designed to uncover media bias and potential factors that lead to the victimization of African Americans in mainstream media. This thesis project 1.) Studied tweets and news coverage of Ferguson, Missouri and the Michael Brown case, 2.) Researched various news outlets and their bias portrayals of African Americans versus their portrayal of white Americans in a similar light, 3.) Used qualitative data from an interview with the man who started the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag on what compelled him to start this social media movement, 4.) Uncovered statistics that show a lack of trust by African Americans as well as other minority communities in the media, 5.) Determined factors that potentially cause a lack of unbiased reporting in the newsroom.

²⁴ Tamara K. Baldwin and Henry M. Sessoms, “Race and Ethnicity,” in *Media Bias Finding It, Fixing It* pg. 109

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

Forty-seven years ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a commission chaired by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner. The Kerner Commission Report concluded that the trigger for the riots throughout the country in the 1960s invariably derived from confrontations between the local police and members of local African American communities. It also concluded that the residents held an often justified perception of the largely white police as an occupying force which was in the community to serve and protect the interests of the privileged white communities rather than to serve and protect the legitimate interests of the local minority residents. In addition, the police and that the police inherently harbored racist attitudes toward residents of minority communities that they were also charged to serve.²⁵ Other studies done as part of the Kerner Commission Report of 1968 found that newsrooms were predominantly a “white” world and called for aggressive actions on the part of news organizations to hire African Americans and to begin to pay attention to and report news about the black community.²⁶

²⁵ James Meyerson, “What Is the Kerner Commission and Why It Should Be Revisited in Light of Ferguson.” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-meyerson/what-is-the-kerner-commis_b_5686572.html

²⁶ Ibid 24

In the decades following the report, newsrooms and news organizations added African Americans and other minority group members to their staffs. However, critics argued that, despite the efforts, little improvement in reporting of minorities has occurred.²⁷

The majority of the coverage of Ferguson showed people looting stores, and the narrative that was painted was “thugs” looting their communities. In talking with Kenya Vaughn of the *St. Louis American* newspaper in St. Louis, Missouri, she highlighted the difference in the way mainstream media covered Ferguson and how their publication told the story of Ferguson.

“*The St. Louis American* was very necessary because we presented a counter narrative to mainstream media. Most of the coverage you saw from mainstream media was inundated about rioting, looting, and criminals without saying what it really was, which was peaceful protesting, from peaceful protesters who decided they were not going to allow the death of Michael Brown to go without any public outrage or attention.”

The difference between social media and news coverage was that the peaceful protesters tweeted out positive images as well as negative images on issues such as police intimidation that news outlets were not showing. Those who were on the ground in Ferguson gave a different portrayal of what was actually happening, and they changed and controlled the narrative through social networks.

Arianna Huffington, former owner of the *Huffington Post*, wrote an article titled, “Ferguson: The Untold Story” and within it, she detailed the mistakes of the media in Ferguson.

If the media’s job is to give viewers and readers an accurate and full idea of what’s really going on, we have to acknowledge that there is a long way to go. Of course, Ferguson is not an isolated case. But it is a chance for those of us in the media to expand our understanding of our role in covering the news. We know there is racial division in Ferguson. The police officer who shot Michael Brown on Aug. 9 is part of a force that’s 94-percent white in a town that’s 67 percent black. The anger, resentment and concerns of the protesters are real. So is the

²⁷ Ibid 24

disturbing trend of the militarization of our police force, and the way that minority communities bear the brunt of this. But endlessly rerunning protests getting out of hand, looting, tear-gassing and arrests is not giving viewers a full picture of what is happening in the community at large. Yes, all these things have happened, but what else is happening in the community? For much of cable news, nothing else. And that's simply not true.²⁸

Not only did the *Huffington Post* report on the riots and the looting, but it also reported on the good things that were being done that other media outlets did not show. These included rival gangs protecting stores from being looted, and cleaning up and giving support to those affected by the looting (Figure 5). There were people donating to local food pantries and offering rides and shelter to reporters, and there were religious leaders from all faiths bolstering a sense of community.²⁹ In addition, the Wisconsin Hope Lab helped secure college scholarships for the three siblings of Michael Brown. Since the first day of school for Ferguson children was delayed, along with the lunches many of them depend on, Raleigh, North Carolina, teacher Julianna Mendelsohn, in collaboration with the local food bank in St. Louis, helped raise money to fill in the food gap.³⁰ Many of these stories went unpublished or broadcast in mainstream media.

Media have a responsibility to fact-check before releasing a story. Whether it is social or broadcast news, fact checking and using reliable sources are guidelines for journalists. The choice of words can also factor into media bias. On the day Michael Brown was gunned down, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* posted a tweet with the headline, "Fatal shooting by police prompts mob reaction." Antonio French, a city alderman in St. Louis, Missouri's 21st ward, retweeted the tweet with the comment: "Mob?" You could also use the word, "community."³¹ *Fox2Now* in St. Louis tweeted the headline, "Man shot, killed in Ferguson apartment complex." Yet there are

²⁸ Arianna Huffington, *Ferguson: The Untold Story*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/ferguson-the-untold-story_b_5697928.html

²⁹ Ibid 28

³⁰ Ibid 28

³¹ Antonio French, www.twitter.com/AntonioFrench

pictures that show that Michael Brown was not slain in an apartment complex, but in the street where his body lay for four in a half hours. After the criticism received for its first headline, on August 9, 2014, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* posted, “Headline has been edited: Fatal shooting by Ferguson police draws angry crowd. We’re still trying to confirm information.” The desire to break the story first may have caused the mistake, but with the lack of trust in media, the message can be misconstrued.

“Truth” is the holy grail of journalism. In the late 1990s, two dozen of the nation’s top reporters, calling themselves the Committee of Concerned Journalists, held a series of public forums to address what its members saw as declining news standards. Over a period of two years, the committee met with three thousand reporters and citizens to exchange ideas about the purpose of journalism.³² The resulting “Statement of Shared Principles” identified “truth” as journalism’s standard: “Journalistic truth” is a process that begins with the professional discipline of assembling and verifying facts. Then journalists try to convey a fair and reliable account of their meaning, valid for now, subject to further investigation. Journalists should be as transparent as possible about sources and methods so audiences can make their own assessment of the information. Even in a world of expanding voices, accuracy is the foundation upon which everything else is built context, interpretation, comment, criticism, analysis and debate. The truth, over time, emerges from this forum.³³

Before journalists pressed the “tweet” button on Twitter or other social media outlets, they should have known the facts, but in this case they did not. The response by protesters in Ferguson showed the pent up emotion from Oscar Grant to Trayvon Martin to Eric Garner

³² Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), 2-4

³³ “A Statement of Shared Principles,” Committee of Concerned Journalists, Washington, D.C. <http://www.tjionline.org/ccj>

incidents. Poor journalism can breed cynicism and a sense of hopelessness. The divisions and inequities exposed in Ferguson are real and formidable. But so is the spirit of those in Ferguson who have risen to this challenge with compassion, empathy and trust.³⁴

Media bias is not only taking place in the United States but also in media outlets around the world. An example is coverage of east-London teen Shereka Marsh, who was shown in a picture wearing a necklace that read “trust no bitch” on it. The *Huffington Post* United Kingdom headline read, “The Horrific Shooting of a 15-Year-Old Girl Exposes the Reality of Girls, Guns and Gangs” (Figure 6). This headline insinuated that Marsh was a part of a gang, but research showed she was not. The *Post* found a tweet in which she said, “I don’t understand the concept of life.” What the *Post* failed to say was the 15-year-old African American girl was an honor student. She had a clear understanding of what she wanted to do with her life and how she was going to achieve all of her goals, according to her friend Aminat Suleman.

³⁴ Ibid 27

CHAPTER 4

PORTRAYAL OF AFRICAN AMERICANS v. WHITE AMERICANS BY NEWS OUTLETS

Research suggests that the headlines of white suspects are seen in less of a negative light than the ones that describe African Americans. Dalton Hayes, 18, and Cheyenne Phillips, 13, are a white couple who went across the country committing crimes and stealing from various people. *NBC News* tweeted out the headline, “Teen sweethearts believed to be on Bonnie-and-Clyde-style crime spree across the South.” The language used can be considered. The headline could have been stated as, “Teens on crime spree.”³⁵ Headlines can insinuate sympathy or compassion and not just reporting. Another example is the case of Amy Bishop, a white woman. Bishop shot six of her colleagues, and three of them died. The *New Yorker* wrote a story about her and the headline read, “A Loaded Gun: A Mass Shooter’s Tragic Past.” The caption under the photo with Bishop with her parents read, “Amy Bishop alongside her parents, Judy and Sam, in 1987. Judy calls Amy a ‘brilliant girl’ who ‘just snapped.’”³⁶ Again, the headline insinuates the parents want people to have sympathy for the shooter.

To further construct the Bishop narrative, Patrick Radden Keefe of the *New Yorker* wrote, “Amy Bishop’s case was notable in that she did not fit the profile of a mass shooter: women very

³⁵ *NBC News*, “Teen sweethearts believed to be on Bonnie-and-Clyde-style crime spree across the South,” <http://nbcnews.to/1IPLK0q>

³⁶ Patrick Radden Keefe, *The New Yorker*, “A Loaded Gun: A mass shooter’s tragic past” <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/02/11/a-loaded-gun>

rarely commit such killings. Bishop had been a high achiever since childhood. An accomplished violinist in her youth, she had received a Ph.D. from Harvard, and had completed postdoctoral work at the Harvard School of Public Health. Her marriage appeared to be stable. She had no criminal record and no history of substance abuse.”³⁷

A *Washington Post* story on the Ferguson case carried the headline: “Ferguson police say Michael Brown was a robbery suspect, identify Darren Wilson as officer who shot him.”³⁸ Wilson was on record saying that he did not know that Brown was a suspect and that was not the reason for their encounter. The *New York Times* ran articles on Darren Wilson and Michael Brown. The headline for Michael Brown read, “Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling With Problems and Promise.”³⁹ Within the story, the *Times* led with the quote, “Michael Brown, 18, due to be buried on Monday, was no angel, with public records and interviews with friends and family revealing both problems and promise in his young life.”⁴⁰ The headline for the story on Darren Wilson read, “Darren Wilson Was Low-Profile Officer With Unsettled Early Days.”⁴¹

Within the narrative for Wilson, media such as the *New York Times* delved into his past and tried to uncover what would have made him do such a thing, but the difference between Wilson’s story and Brown’s story was that they only found people with good things to say about Wilson. Most family members and colleagues had no comment about Wilson and the type of

³⁷ Ibid 36

³⁸ Berman, Mark and Lowery, Wesley, *The Washington Post*, “Ferguson police say Michael Brown was a robbery suspect, identify Darren Wilson as officer who shot him.”

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2014/08/15/ferguson-police-releasing-name-of-officer-who-shot-michael-brown/>

³⁹ John Eligon, *The New York Times*, “Michael Brown Spent Last Weeks Grappling with Problems and Promise.” http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/us/michael-brown-spent-last-weeks-grappling-with-lifes-mysteries.html?_r=0

⁴⁰ Ibid 39

⁴¹ Davey, Monica and Robles, Frances, *The New York Times*, “Darren Wilson Was Low-Profile Officer With Early Unsettled Days,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/us/darren-wilsons-unremarkable-past-offers-few-clues-into-ferguson-shooting.html>

person he was, but those who would speak painted a portrait of a well-mannered, relatively soft-spoken, even bland person who seemed, if anything, to seek out a low profile. Some suggested him killing Michael Brown was a reaction to a turbulent youth in which his mother was repeatedly divorced, convicted of financial crimes and died of natural causes before he finished high school in 2004.⁴²

Wilson was described as a good but nondescript kid by his high school ice hockey coach. A former next door neighbor of Wilson's recalled seeing him outside grilling and said he never caused trouble. The narrative includes a neighbor, Sandra Lee Finney, who was friends with Wilson's mother until she found Wilson's mother carried out financial crimes against her. According to Finney, Wilson had a troubled childhood, and his family awkwardly stayed in the neighborhood even after Wilson's mother was arrested and charged with forgery.⁴³

On an early morning edition of *Fox & Friends*, Juliet Huddy, a television news reporter for the *Fox News* channel insinuated a different outcome could have come about from protestors if they saw the tape of Brown in the convenience store first. "They went out there, they were furious about it. Had that tape been out there, had the crowd realized that this man might have been robbing a store, there might have been something else criminal going on there, you know, to lend credence to the fact that maybe in some way, we don't know this, but maybe this officer was justified, maybe this was a bad guy, maybe he wasn't the 'gentle giant.' I'm not saying that's what it was."⁴⁴

⁴² Ibid 41

⁴³ Ibid 41

⁴⁴ Stephen D. Foster Jr., "Fox Says Police Are Justified In Killing Unarmed Teens If They Have Alleged Footage Of Them Doing Something Wrong (VIDEO)" <http://www.addictinginfo.org/2014/08/17/fox-says-police-are-justified-in-killing-unarmed-teens-if-they-have-alleged-footage-of-them-doing-something-wrong-video/>

Freddie Gray and the Baltimore uprising is another example in which the media chose to portray the happenings surrounding the death of an unarmed man as a farce. Gray died on April 19th, a week after he was arrested by the Baltimore Police Department. It was discovered that Gray's spine was 80 percent severed after he was taken on what was called a "rough ride." Thousands of people took to the streets every day to demonstrate against the fate that befell Freddie Gray and countless other people who have been killed by police in America. But on Saturday, April 25th, a small minority of Baltimore residents decided to re-enact the happenings in Ferguson and the media began to start their narrative. Ignoring the fact that the majority of the protests were peaceful, the *Baltimore Sun* Sunday morning headline read, "Peace, then violence." The image on the front of the newspaper showed two black males bashing a police vehicle's window with a cone and the other with his foot. Despite numerous peaceful images from the protests, they decided to show that particular image (Figure 7).

The vast majority of people who turned out to protest Freddie Gray's death didn't engage in violence, smash windows or hurl beer bottles at people. Out of the more than 2,000 people who marched to City Hall that afternoon, *Al-Jazeera America* reports that about 100 were responsible for the chaos.⁴⁵ *CNN* noted that there was an "overwhelming peaceful majority" and that members of protests put themselves between the "small group" of angry demonstrators and police lines, leading Police Commissioner Anthony Batts to thank the peacemakers in the crowd. Despite the fact that there were peaceful protests in Baltimore every day since Gray died on April 19th, some people seem determined to frame the narrative around the actions of an angry minority.⁴⁶ While the *Baltimore Sun* chose that particular photo to sum up the uprising in Baltimore, none of the positive images made mainstream news outlets. Images such as protesters

⁴⁵ Tom McKay, "One Tweet Shows the Hypocrisy of the Media's Reaction to Riots in Baltimore" <http://mic.com/articles/116524/outrage-over-baltimore-riots-completely-misses-the-point>

⁴⁶ *Ibid* 45

protecting police cruisers from angry protesters or images such as rival gangs standing in solidarity to peacefully protest. None.

Disproportionate focus on the violent actions of a few hurt, pained and disenfranchised people unfairly ignores the much larger peaceful movement protesting Gray's death. It paints an entire minority community as intrinsically violent and unreasonable when, in fact, they are the ones under siege by a police department that has paid out millions of dollars to the plaintiffs of excessive force lawsuits. Officers in Baltimore have been accused of vicious misconduct on a regular basis.⁴⁷

Recently, on June 17, 2015, a gunman walked into Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina. Emanuel AME was the first African Methodist Episcopal church in the South, founded in 1818 by a group of men including Morris Brown, a prominent pastor, and Denmark Vesey, who would go on to lead a large, yet failed, slave revolt in Charleston. Roof walked into the church and sat for at least an hour one of the members said and then proceeded to kill the members within the church. Roof's manifesto was found on the website, thelastrhodesian.com, where he planned to go into Charleston to kill people because it had the highest African American population. Roof was captured and given bail of \$1 million dollars. As media reported on the mass killing, different narratives were constructed. One young man on Twitter brought the media's narrative to the forefront as he paired two pictures side by side displaying the way the media portrayed Dylann Roof and an African American young man named Jim Jones. (Figure 8).

The problem is not including important information, but the difference in framing. White mass shooters are continually given the benefit of the doubt, while the same privilege is not afforded to African American criminal suspects or in this case, an African American victim who

⁴⁷ Ibid 45

died protecting his mother in Jones.⁴⁸ Roof openly wore racist symbols and reportedly openly informed his victims he was killing them because they were black, “raping his women and taking over the country.” There will no doubt continue to be a lot of commentary focusing on whether Roof was mentally ill and thus unable to control his actions.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, mainstream media continues to send the message to African Americans that when bad things happen in their communities or to individual black people, it is partially their own fault, regardless of the circumstances. It is a troubling trend, but the media intent is clear: Roof killed nine people in cold blood, and he’s a loner who got caught up in the evils of the World Wide Web. Jones sacrificed his own life to save his mother’s, and he has a “troubled past.”⁵⁰ Since Roof’s terrorist attack on Emanuel AME, five African American churches in Southern states have been victims of arson with little, to minimal media coverage.

Media outlets often do not extend these same courtesies to African Americans. Shaun King, activist and contributor to *Daily Kos*, asked, “The ‘thuggification’ of young black men victims of white violence: Is thug the new n---r?” He asks whether white criminals have ever been referred to as a ‘thug’ by the media. King further goes on to give examples of white serial killers who have committed heinous acts of crime, yet were given a level of respect by the media.⁵¹

When James Holmes shot and killed 13 people in an Aurora, Colorado, movie theater in 2012, no headline characterized him as a thug. Instead, one headline read, “Theater Shooting

⁴⁸ Tom McKay, One Tweet Captures the Media’s Racist Double Standard on Black and White Crime, <http://mic.com/articles/121141/dylann-roof-charleston-massacre-media-racist-double-standard>

⁴⁹ Ibid 48

⁵⁰ Ibid 48

⁵¹ Shaun King, Daily Kos, The thuggification of young black victims of white violence: Is thug the new n---r? <http://www.dailykos.com/story/2014/10/21/1338217/-The-thuggification-of-young-black-victims-of-white-violence-Is-thug-the-new-nigger#>

Suspect Was Brilliant Science Student.”⁵² Donor after donor to Darren Wilson’s online fundraiser, which raised more \$360,000, explicitly stated they were glad he did society a favor. When real evidence failed, fake pictures of Michael Brown were floated out to misrepresent him.⁵³ Many photos are out there that depict Michael Brown as a ‘thug’ or ‘gangbanger.’ These photos were shared on the website, thepoliticalinsider.com, but none of the photos on the site show what Michael Brown is smoking and there are no gang signs in any of the photos.

Oscar Grant, who was shot and killed by police while handcuffed in Oakland, California, in 2009 actually had a criminal past that he fought hard to overcome.⁵⁴ He was a diligent father and worked hard to hold down a local job after his incarceration. His being shot, while handcuffed and sitting on the ground, had absolutely nothing to do with his previous incarceration. Elliott and Blood believe it was an effort to devalue his life and to dissuade supporters from feeling confident about championing his cause.⁵⁵

According to King, the ‘thuggification’ of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Oscar Grant, and other young black victims of gun violence very much feels like a modern attempt to lessen their value in the world suggests and create an exclusive racial connotation limited to African Americans. “Thug” is the new “nigger.”⁵⁶

Recent unrest in several communities of color around the country has resulted in a plethora of news media reporting, particularly regarding boys and men of color. Much of this reporting, according to a new poll of U.S. adults who work with children, is racially biased, reinforcing negative narratives about people of color. The poll, conducted by the University of

⁵² Elliott, Dan and Blood R. Michael, Yahoo News, Theater Shooting Suspect Was Brilliant Science Student <http://news.yahoo.com/colorado-suspect-brilliant-science-student-230349806.html>

⁵³ Ibid 51

⁵⁴ Ibid 51

⁵⁵ Ibid 51

⁵⁶ Ibid 51

Michigan National Voices Project in collaboration with the National Collaborative for Health Equity in Washington, D.C., asked over 2,000 adults across the U.S. who work and/or volunteer on behalf of children and young adults for their perspectives about media portrayals of boys and young men from different racial/ethnic backgrounds.⁵⁷

Over half feel there is negative bias in media toward African American boys and young men; 47 percent perceive negative bias toward Arab American boys and young men. Overall, 44 percent perceive negative media bias Hispanic/Latino boys and young men. In comparison, 13 percent of respondents think there is a negative media bias against White boys and young men, while 33 percent noted a positive bias in media portrayals of Whites.⁵⁸ Numbers are high for African American youth and this concerns David Louie, Diversity Committee chair for the Radio Television Digital News Association and a reporter at KGO-TV in San Francisco. “As journalists, we should always be mindful of potential bias and how our coverage is being perceived. Bias-free reporting should be central to everything we do.”⁵⁹

Dr. Cynthia Frisby, Associate Professor of Strategic Communication at the University of Missouri thinks media profiling of African American boys goes as far back to slavery and continues today.

“Doing research on media coverage, when you trace back, African American young boys are often time perceived as guilty before their innocent so there is no perceived innocence when it comes to black boys. What I think Ferguson does for us is elucidate the stereotype that we are guilty before we are even presumed innocent. Going back to slavery, when it came to lynching, we were automatically presumed to be guilty and it is the same today.”

⁵⁷ Richard Prince Journal-isms, Media “Negative” on Black, Arab, Latino Boys, <http://mije.org/richardprince/media-dog-black-arab-latino-boys#asne>

⁵⁸ Ibid 57

⁵⁹ Ibid 57

The gatekeepers of media perpetuate the stereotypes of young black males which makes media bias constant according to Frisby.

“When we look at the people who are in charge of the stories that are out there, according to Poynter and the Pew Research Center, they are mostly white men from ages ago who make decisions based on their selected perceptions and biases. With this behavior, we still see the same type of stories and same type of disparities in media, especially when it comes to minorities. As long as we continue to have that happening, we will still see continued biases and disparities.”

When people on social networks such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr saw how Michael Brown’s character was being portrayed on that street where his blood flowed, a powerful hashtag, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown was created that rocked the core of society. As of 2015, the hashtag has nearly 30,000 posts on Instagram.

CHAPTER 5

CITIZEN JOURNALISM: THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA HASHTAGS; #IFTHEYGUNNEDMEDOWN

Attorney C.J. Lawrence is a native of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Graduating in 2003 from Tougaloo College and in 2007 from the Thurgood Marshall School of Law at Texas Southern University, the principle roles that these institutions and their namesakes have played in the perpetual struggle for human rights have fostered within him a true spirit of activism. Fighting local issues throughout Mississippi and traveling from Jena, Louisiana, to Sanford, Florida, to, most recently, Ferguson, Missouri, Lawrence has utilized his abilities as a speaker, writer, and social media strategist to help shed light on atrocities, injustice, and the need for reform in local and state executive, legislative, and judicial matters.

In August of 2014, Lawrence sparked a global phenomenon with the creation of the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, where he utilized the juxtaposition of two photos of himself to ask the question: “How Would the Media Portray Me?” Which photo would they use if ‘they,’ in reference to police officers, gunned him down? With this now the number one trending topic in just one day, Lawrence’s critique of the role media play in their portrayal of young African American victims like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown created an introspective conversation across media outlets such as: *Time Magazine*, *the New York Times*, *CNN*, *The Griot*, *Huffington*

Post, *CBS Evening News*, *BBC*, *NPR*, and many others. Lawrence has since served as a guest correspondent on *CNN*, *CBC*, and *BBC* to speak on matters ranging from race and the judicial system to social media and media portrayal of African American youth.

Lawrence said he was not looking for fame or notoriety with the hashtag, but to pose a critical question to make society take a second look at media portrayals of African Americans versus white Americans.

Lawrence initially set out to indict the media for their role in how African Americans are portrayed. Lawrence said he was inspired by the fact that even during George Zimmerman's trial, the image the defense painted was one of Trayvon Martin being a menace. Lawrence also said the media did the same with tales such as "he smoked marijuana once" that helped them create the "big scary black man" narrative. "The hoodie became "symbolic" with Martin's murder. With Michael Brown there was much dialogue and outrage taking place on twitter and I too was outraged," Lawrence said.⁶⁰

According to Soraya Nadia McDonald, columnist for the *Washington Post*, Twitter is split between two sectors: Black Twitter and White Twitter. Black twitter is part cultural force, cudgel, entertainment and refuge. It is its own society within Twitter, replete with inside jokes, slang and rules, centered on the interests of young blacks online. Almost a quarter of all black Internet users are on Twitter.⁶¹ Lawrence saw tweets from white Americans or White Twitter that showed no sympathy to Michael Brown and some even mocked the hashtag. Lawrence was hoping that he, along with those who participated in the hashtag could make the media more socially aware of the role they play in the narrative with their criticism. The hashtag

⁶⁰ C.J. Lawrence's Explanation on why he started the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag

⁶¹ Soraya Nadia McDonald, "Black Twitter: A virtual community ready to hashtag out a response to cultural issues" http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/black-twitter-a-virtual-community-ready-to-hashtag-out-a-response-to-cultural-issues/2014/01/20/41ddacf6-7ec5-11e3-9556-4a4bf7bc8d84_story.html

#IfTheyGunnedMeDown was spawned when he saw the two images of Michael Brown media used and wondered how they would portray him and what story would be told to plant the seed that he just might have been a “bad person” or someone capable of being the “bad guy.” “The true purpose of placing the two pictures together juxtaposed was to show that whether our appearance, class, nor academic achievement should be the determining factors for whether we live or die. It is impossible to capture the essence of a human being with one snapshot or one statement and so often that is what happens in media,” according to Lawrence.⁶²

With hashtags such as #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, social activism give those on Black Twitter voices that they otherwise feel they do not have in traditional media. Black Twitter was credited for bringing the death of Michael Brown to the forefront. Chris Hayes, host of MSNBC's “All in with Chris Hayes,” who is white, credits Black Twitter with bringing his attention to the story of Michael Brown’s death.

“If you didn’t have Black Twitter blowing up the story on social media, it is debatable that it would have gotten this kind of momentum,” according to Hayes.⁶³ On August 9, 2014, the day Michael Brown was shot and killed by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, residents who’d seen his dead body lie in the street for hours began to demand answers and an arrest. Hayes looked to Twitter, specifically Black Twitter to inform his personal understanding of the story as well as the insights that would guide what he told MSNBC viewers.⁶⁴

Hayes started following the accounts of St. Louis alderman Antonio French and members of the community who were, as he put it, “chronicling the crazy police response the first few

⁶² Ibid 60

⁶³ Jenée Desmond-Harris, “Twitter forced the world to pay attention to Ferguson. It won’t last.” <http://www.vox.com/2015/1/14/7539649/ferguson-protests-twitter>

⁶⁴ Ibid 63

nights.”⁶⁵ DeRay McKesson was one of those chroniclers. “What’s interesting about Twitter is that it has allowed us to tell the story as it happened and to own the medium and the message. So, when we got tear gassed, no longer did [reporters] have to wait for one official account or platform, or a press conference to validate people’s experiences.”⁶⁶

McKesson and Johnetta “Netta” Elzie were on the ground in Ferguson along with other protestors seeking justice for Michael Brown and also African American bodies in general. While the news showed one point of view, McKesson and Elzie utilized social media platforms to show what media outlets were not showing. According to McKesson, “If it were not for Twitter and Instagram, the majority would have tried to convince you that we did not exist.”⁶⁷

Citizen journalism was the way media obtained some of their information about Ferguson. Citizen journalism gives those in their communities the ability to call out and express themselves based on the things they see in their communities as well as things they see are important to them, their demographic, and their everyday way of living. McKesson and Elzie used specifically Storify, Vine, Twitter, and Instagram to spread their version of what was going on in Ferguson. Research compiled from McKesson’s social media accounts included video that was not shown on media outlets such as *CNN* or *Fox*. One video shows a Ferguson police officer throwing a young woman to the ground who was six months pregnant and she is clearly heard stating that on video. While McKesson and Elzie have made it clear that they are not leaders of the Ferguson movement, they are looked to as such. Elzie took a semester off at Southeast Missouri State where she is studying communications so she could dedicate her time to the movement and help dissolve any misconceptions the media made about what is going on in Ferguson. While they are fighting for justice for African Americans and for the right narrative to

⁶⁵ Ibid 63

⁶⁶ Ibid 63

⁶⁷ Ibid 63

be shown, they are also citizen journalists. The benefit of citizen journalism is the covering of stories that may be overlooked by traditional news but which needs to be seen by the community or society. Citizen journalists provide a voice for those who otherwise feel they do not have a voice.

This creates an interesting dynamic: media organizations increasingly rely on social media to both deliver content to their audiences and to deliver audiences to their content. The most obvious way to write a story that will be shared widely on social media is to choose a topic that already interest social media users. And social media users are disproportionately black.⁶⁸ African Americans use Twitter at higher rates than other ethnic groups. According to a 2013 study by the Pew Research Center, more than a quarter of all black Internet users are on Twitter. The same study found that 30 percent of Internet users on Twitter were between the ages of 18 and 29.⁶⁹ The result of this cycle is that journalists suddenly regard Black Twitter as a credible and important story generator and audience for those stories once they're written.⁷⁰

After being contacted by numerous media outlets and serving as a correspondent for *CNN*, *CBS*, and *BBC*, Lawrence is now looking for these outlets along with publications *Time Magazine*, the *New York Times*, *The Grio*, *Huffington Post* to take responsibility for their roles in how they portray African Americans.

One thing that Lawrence, McKesson, and Elzie have in common is that bringing notoriety to mainstream media was not their goal or concern. Lawrence started the hashtag to pose that question to the online Twitter community, not media outlets directly per se, but it happened to reach mainstream media. McKesson is not worried about gaining a mainstream

⁶⁸ Ibid 63

⁶⁹ Ibid 63

⁷⁰ Ibid 63

audience, but in his words, “The goal isn’t how can we get the best media, it is how can we stop getting killed. We’re not trying to get fame, we’re trying to get to free.”⁷¹

⁷¹ Ibid 63

CHAPTER 6

MINORITY DISTRUST FOR MAINSTREAM MEDIA

In 2013, the late Dori Maynard, daughter of Robert C. Maynard, the former owner of the *Oakland Tribune*, penned an opinion column for the *Tribune* in the wake of the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin. Maynard wrote that media looking for explanations of America's ongoing racial struggle should look at themselves. "It's time for us to look at what our distorted coverage of communities of color is doing to the country. It's time for us to look at whether we're meeting our ethical obligation to give our audience factual and credible information necessary to make rational decisions in its private life and about public policies."⁷²

A new study shows a large majority of African American and Latino news consumers do not fully trust the mainstream media to portray their communities accurately, a statistic that could be troubling for the news industry as the minority population of the United States grows. Three-fourths of African American news consumers and two-thirds of Latinos have doubts about what mainstream media report about their communities, according to a survey released by the

⁷² Associated Press, "Dori Maynard, Journalist And Champion Of Diversity In News Coverage, Dead At 56" http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/25/dori-maynard-dead_n_6749384.html?utm_hp_ref=tw

Media Insight Project. And while most say it has become easier to get news generally in the last five years, few feel the same way about news regarding their own community.⁷³

African Americans and Latinos currently make up a third of the U.S. population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. By 2043, the number of minorities is expected to eclipse the number of non-Latino whites, with the total minority population reaching 57 percent by 2060.⁷⁴ People of color who are “seeking out news about their communities, they can’t find it. And what they see, they don’t think is accurate,” according to Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute, which teamed with The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research on the project.⁷⁵

When asked whether they thought news about their communities was accurate, 75 percent of blacks said only “moderately” or “slightly/not at all.” When Latinos were asked the same question, 66 percent replied “moderately” or “slightly/not at all.”⁷⁶

This may explain the historical popularity of the minority press.

Samuel Cornish, abolitionist, editor and pastor, later became a journalist and founded the *Freedom’s Journal* along with fellow African American John Russwurm in 1827. Their reason for doing so was to give African Americans the voice they felt they did not have. After living in a world dominated by a press that did not represent them, they took it upon themselves to create a voice. Their exact words for doing so were, “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long have the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things

⁷³ Jesse J. Holland, “African Americans, Latinos Really Don’t Trust The Media To Tell Their Stories Well.” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/09/16/blacks-hispanic-media-trust-united-states_n_5831228.html

⁷⁴ Ibid 73

⁷⁵ Ibid 73

⁷⁶ Ibid 73

that concern us dearly.”⁷⁷ Their intention was to publish news without white bias against African Americans.

Twenty-three percent of African American consumers named a local television station as providing the most news about their communities, 15 percent named the black press, and 9 percent named newspapers, according to the American Press Institute. Forty-one percent of Latinos view Latino-specific news sources as the most frequent providers of information about their communities, 10 percent named 24-hour news stations, while seven percent named a local news station.⁷⁸

While African Americans are not looking to the black press for their news as much as they did in the 1800s-1900s, African Americans want objective news that represents them fairly. Revamping the black press could be a possible solution to getting objective portrayals of the African American and other minority communities. Inclusiveness in newsrooms around the country is also a plausible solution to give more fair and balanced views of minority communities as well.

⁷⁷ BlackPast.org, “Cornish, Samuel Eli (1795-1858)” <http://www.blackpast.org/aah/cornish-samuel-eli-1795-1858>

⁷⁸ Ibid 73

CHAPTER 7

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO LACK OF ETHICS IN NEWSROOMS

Robert C. Maynard said in May of 1993 that “This country cannot be the country we want it to be if its story is told by only one group of citizens. Our goal is to give all Americans front door access to the truth.”⁷⁹ Diversity in newsrooms around the country has long been a problem around the country and while there are more African Americans in newsrooms today, there still are not enough to show significant progress. According to the American Society of News Editors census conducted in 2014, newsrooms around the country do not reflect the population of African Americans within their communities. In 2014, diversity in newsrooms are up, but not by a substantial amount. In 2014, there were only 4900 minorities working in newsrooms across this country. That number broken down into a percentage yields 13.34 percent rate of minorities working in newsrooms around this country. Specifically, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* newsroom is 7.1 percent black, while U.S. Census figures put the city of St. Louis at 49.29 percent black and St. Louis County at 23.7 percent black.⁸⁰

The commemoration of 50 years of the march in Selma, Alabama, was held on March 6-8, 2015, and on that Sunday, *Fox News* held a panel-discussion with only one black male compared to four white Americans. Lack of diversity such as this is reflected in newsrooms

⁷⁹ Robert C. Maynard: Life and Legacy, <http://mije.org/robertmaynard>

⁸⁰ ASNE, American Society of News Editors 2014 Census

around the country. In 2015, the Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity at the University of Oklahoma was forced off campus because members were seen on video chanting racist slogans about how there will never be a “nigger” in SAE. MSNBC’s crew on *Morning Joe*, which is an all-white panel, then proceeded to pass the blame from the students onto hip-hop music. “The kids that are buying hip hop or gangster rap, it’s a white audience, and they hear this over and over again,” Joe Scarborough said. “So do they hear this at home? Well, chances are good, no, they heard a lot of this from guys like this who are now acting shocked.”⁸¹ If there were a black panelist present, he/she could have dispelled assumptions of black cultural culpability by offering a more complete portrait of the historical uplift and community engagement fostered through the hip-hop movement, which is often conflated with rap, a small, yet media-driven focus of the overall hip-hop movement.

Diversity in the newsroom is an apparent problem according to Frisby.

“What we need is people of the majority who are compassionate about doing the stories about African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. Instead, what you find is that because of the lack of diversity, the stories are not being told accurately or fairly. The problem is that when we make it into the newsroom, we are either assigned the black-on-black stories or stories without major leads. Because of the several different types of biases in the newsroom, African Americans and other minorities do not stay because of them.”

In an article titled, “I’m a Black Journalist. I’m Quitting Because I’m Tired of Newsroom Racism,” journalist Rebecca Carroll said she got her first journalism job at the age of 28 as a television producer. Carroll wanted to produce a segment on a black actor whose work she had long followed. She figured being the only black producer there that actor would feel more

⁸¹ Evan McMurry, “Morning Joe, Bill Kristol Blame Racist SAE Video on Rap Music” <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/morning-joe-bill-kristol-blame-racist-sae-video-on-rap-music/>

comfortable seeing someone who looked like her, but her white coworker objected. He was not in favor of Carroll asking for a segment when she had only been employed there briefly. The white male staffer said to her in front of their coworkers, “Just because you’re black doesn’t mean you get to produce all the black guests.”⁸²

The way the white staffer spoke to her in front of their fellow staff rubbed Carroll the wrong way. To her, the white staffer was making clear that he was not afraid to mention her race aloud, lest she thought it was her personal ticket to produce segments on black actors simply because she was black. His assumption seemed to be that she would use her race as a pass to get good assignments. His strategy, in turn, was to use it as a weapon.⁸³ And for that reason she resigned from her job. Carroll said she walked away from media because of various issues African Americans face in newsrooms.

It’s a strange and incredibly demoralizing time to be a black person in American media. The words ‘racist’ and ‘racism’ have cynically become clickbait, all while various newsrooms are claiming that they want to hire more writers and reporters and editors of color, but don’t. What it feels like you are hearing is: We’re not really trying to diversify our newsrooms, because we don’t actually have to. Among the challenges that make racism so difficult to fix, and so odiously constant, is that white people often don’t even recognize when they’re saying or doing something that cuts their black colleagues to the bone. Or worse, they do recognize when they’re being racially insensitive, but then demonstrate some semblance of regret and move on unscathed. If we can’t say anything about this kind of behavior or don’t, then who will? What’s more, if we do speak up, particularly if we are among the chosen few who are granted a voice in mainstream media, at what cost?⁸⁴

The names of veterans like Lynette Holloway and E. R. Shipp, formerly of *The New York Times*, Teresa Wiltz, Natalie Hopkinson, and Michael Cottman, all of *The Washington Post*, Joel Dreyfuss, formerly of *Fortune* and *PC Magazine*, and Amy DuBois Barnett of *Harper’s Bazaar*

⁸² Rebecca Carroll, “I’m a Black Journalist. I’m Quitting Because I’m Tired of Newsroom Racism.” <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119912/black-female-journalist-quits-media-decries-newsroom-racism>

⁸³ Ibid 82

⁸⁴ Ibid 82

and *Teen People*, are turning up in places like *Ebony*, *Jet*, and *Essence*; at *BlackAmericaWeb.com*, a division of *Reach Media*, Inc.; and at *The Root*, the online site spearheaded by Harvard's Henry Louis Gates Jr. and published by *The Washington Post Company*.⁸⁵ Some of these moves were prompted by layoffs and buyouts; others by disillusionment with mainstream journalism or a desire to delve more deeply into African American issues. Whatever the reasons, with increasing frequency, African American journalists are reversing the once common trajectory from the black press to the mainstream.⁸⁶

With firsthand accounts such as these, it is not hard to see that having diversity in the newsroom is important. Not only to dispel notions about African Americans, but in instances to inform white American coworkers about things that come off as racist or insensitive to people of color. Carroll recalled experiences where her voice only mattered in certain spaces. "My ideas were 'thoughtful' and 'compassionate' until I argued, say, that having white journalists write the main features on a new black news venture sent the wrong message to the black online community. My editors disagreed."⁸⁷

If there are not enough voices in the newsrooms that represent various ethnic backgrounds, we get headlines and news that are not reflective of inclusiveness. On March 11, 2015, two Ferguson police officers were shot while peaceful protests were going on in light of the Ferguson police chief resigning. While no one knows what led to the shooting, *Fox & Friends* began to paint an unsavory picture of Attorney General Eric Holder. After the Department of Justice released its report on practices of racism in Ferguson, Holder said he was prepared to dismantle the police department in the Missouri city if reforms were not

⁸⁵ Pamela Newkirk, "The Not-So-Great Migration: From the black press to the mainstream—and back again" http://www.cjr.org/feature/the_not-so-great_migration.php?page=all

⁸⁶ Ibid 85

⁸⁷ Ibid 82

implemented. Holder reported how policing practices in Ferguson needed to change, but *Fox* took it to the next level. On March 12, *Fox* released a video clip juxtaposing Holder's remarks with the initial response of St. Louis County Police Chief Jon Belmar to the shooting of two Ferguson police officers. *Fox News* tweeted, "New #Ferguson violence comes just one week after AG Holder vowed to dismantle the city's PD. Is this what he meant?"⁸⁸

The idea that Holder's remarks, in addition to the DOJ's rebuke of police and public officials in Ferguson, somehow directly incited violence on March 11th does more damage than simply displacing accountability from whoever actually shot the two officers. It places unwarranted criticism on Holder and DOJ officials for putting a necessary spotlight on systemic racism and using their institutional powers to push for lasting reforms in Ferguson.⁸⁹

A column written by a Zac Cheney-Rice of *Identities.Mic* on the Oklahoma fraternity SAE made this point about newsroom diversity: "This country is quick to identify racists and punish them, but there are systems in this country in place that needs to be repaired."⁹⁰ The walls of Ferguson are tumbling down and it is now time for the walls of mainstream media to crumble and allow more journalists of color into newsrooms to combat media bias and false perceptions of African American people in mainstream media."

⁸⁸ Derrick Clifton, "The Huge Problem With How the Media Is Talking About the Ferguson Police Shooting" <http://mic.com/articles/112626/here-s-what-s-wrong-with-the-way-the-media-is-talking-about-the-ferguson-police-shooting>

⁸⁹ Ibid 88

⁹⁰ Ibid 88

CHAPTER 8

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

The voice of African Americans has gone unheard in mainstream media. Research shows that while inclusiveness is a priority in newsrooms, it is not being met according to results from the 2014 American Society of News Editors survey. Voices were heard through activists utilizing social media as their platform. Through social media, they were and still are able to tell the stories of those in the community of Ferguson and allow people outside of Ferguson to connect with the systemic oppression going on in Ferguson. Activists have taken on the role of being citizen journalists to show what is not being shown on television. According to statistics from Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute, which teamed with The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, African Americans and Latinos do not trust mainstream media to tell their story accurately. Social media have been the way both minority groups obtain their news. Distrust exists from these minority groups because of several factors.

- 1) Newsrooms do not actively have enough diversity to present accurate portrayals of communities of color.
- 2) Unconscious racism in the newsroom, such as the firsthand account experienced by Rebecca Carroll and others continues.

- 3) A difference exists in the media portrayal of white Americans and African Americans along with other minority groups.

The system in which media today operates is flawed, just as many other systems are in this country. How can it be fixed? When looking at Ferguson, there is a community that is hurting and has come together to protest about the mistreatment by the police department and systemic oppression from their city. This brought activists from around the country to participate as citizen journalists to give people coverage that they were not receiving from mainstream media. Ferguson has been a microcosm of what has been going on in this country for a long time. The Kerner Report showed that news was predominantly white. Looking at media coverage today, can the argument be made that coverage and portrayals of minority communities have improved?

Elliot Rodger, a white male who killed six people at UC-Santa Barbara was described as “soft-spoken” and a “gentleman” in headlines, Darren Wilson, a white male, was labeled a “low-profile officer with unsettled early days.” Kerri Ann Heffernan, a white female, was labeled an “outstanding Blue Hills student” even though she robbed two banks in three days. Jared Michael Padgett, a white male, took an assault rifle, a handgun and nine ammunition magazines to his high school and killed a fellow freshman, injured a teacher and took his own life. The headline read, “Oregon school shooting suspect fascinated with guns but was a devoted Mormon, his friends say” (Figure 8). Trayvon Martin, a black male, was a “weed smoker” according to the *Miami Herald*. Don Surber, a white male journalist for the *Charleston Daily Mail*, called Michael Brown an “animal” that police in Ferguson, Missouri, had to put down.

Mainstream newsrooms were nearly all white back in 1968, when the National Commission on Civil Disorders famously warned that America was “moving toward two

societies, one black, one white, separate and unequal.”⁹¹ The news media, it continued, reflected the biases, paternalism, and indifference of white Americans and treated blacks “as if they don’t read the newspaper, marry, die, and attend PTA meetings.”⁹² At the time, African Americans held less than one percent of newsroom jobs. In 1978, ASNE pledged that its newsrooms would achieve racial parity by 2000. With just 13 percent of newsroom jobs held by all minority group members who comprise 36 percent of the population in 2014, the parity goal has since been pushed back to 2025.⁹³ Many African Americans have instead returned to African American media and describe a sense of relief about working for African American media after years in the media mainstream. “It was like coming home,” said Michael Cottman, a senior correspondent at BlackAmericaWeb.com, who in 1978 began his career at the *Atlanta Daily World*, the city’s oldest continuously published black newspaper. In between he worked for *The Miami Herald*, *New York Newsday*, and *The Washington Post*.⁹⁴

Jack White, formerly of *The Washington Post*, said diversity in mainstream today still matters. Otherwise, “We go right back to where we started after the Kerner Commission.”⁹⁵

Research and results show that media bias is real and is as prevalent as ever. Revamping the black press is a possibility, but the black press has its challenges, such as limited resources, funding, and the use of outdated equipment. Social media have given way to citizen journalists. They can show things that media will not or choose not to show, but they do not fall under the same code of ethics placed onto journalists. Mainstream media needs diversity to give accurate portrayals of minority communities. Fingers cannot be pointed at people, rather, they should be pointed at a flawed system this country has yet to fix.

⁹¹ Ibid 85

⁹² Ibid 85

⁹³ Ibid 80

⁹⁴ Ibid 85

⁹⁵ Ibid 85

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LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: MEDIA BIAS EXAMPLES

Figure 1: *Whittier Daily News* report on Elliot Rodger after he killed six and wounded thirteen others.



Figure 2: The photo on the left is the original photo that ran by media outlets to portray Michael Brown as a thug and with his fingers up in a way that was perceived as ‘gang signs.’ After outcry from the public, media outlets changed the original photo to the photo on the right.



Figure 3: 15-year-old Shereka Marsh, London teen who was gunned down at a party. The photo on the left is the photo the media decided to use of her instead of her in her school uniform on the right.

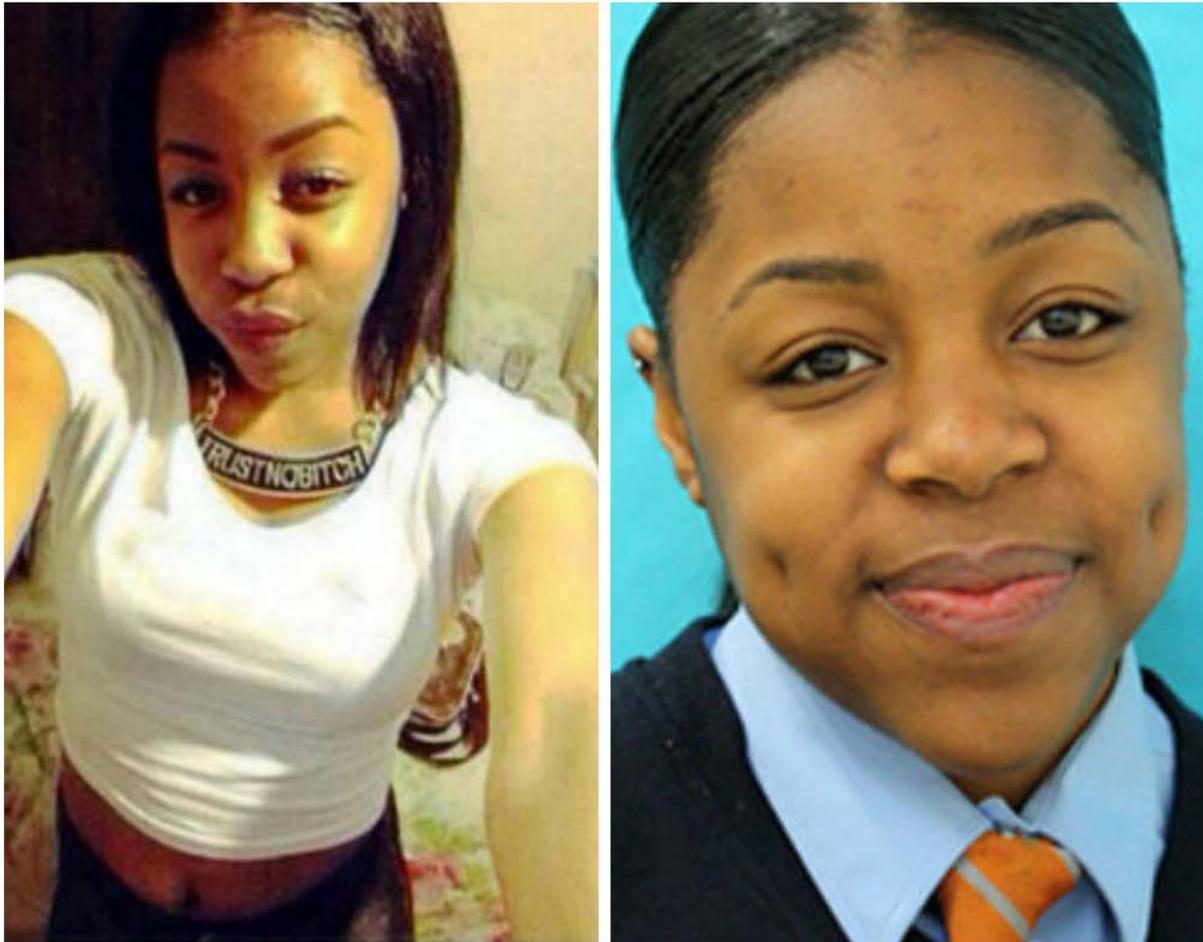


Figure 4: Media portrayal of a white couple and a black man wading through water after Hurricane Katrina.

<p>White People "FIND"</p> 	<p>Black People "LOOT"</p> 
<p>Two residents waded through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store after Hurricane Katrina came through the area in New Orleans, Louisiana.</p> <p>(AFP/Getty Images/Chris Graythen)</p>	<p>A young man walks through chest deep flo after looting a grocery store in New Orleans Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2005. Flood waters continue to rise in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina extensive damage when it  Associated Press</p> <p>These stories and pictures both appear on YAHOO! NEWS August 30, 2005</p> <p>http://news.yahoo.com/photo/050830/480/1adm1 http://news.yahoo.com/photo/050830/photos_ts_afp/050830071</p>

Figure 5: Rival gang members protect a Ferguson convenience store from being looted.



Figure 6: *Huffington Post* report on the death of Shereka Marsh.

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The Horrific Shooting of a 15-Year-Old Girl Exposes the Reality of Girls, Guns and Gangs

Posted: 24/03/2014 12:43 GMT | Updated: 23/05/2014 10:58 BST

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On the afternoon of Saturday 22 March, a beautiful 15-year-old girl was shot dead in a house in Hackey. Three male teenagers were arrested nearby for the killing of Shereka Marsh. At almost exactly the same time, The Centre for Social Justice was finalising a press release for its long-awaited report, *Tackling Exploitation of Girls by Gangs*; a paper that

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Figure 7: The *Baltimore Sun* portrayal of a day of mostly peaceful protests.

THE BALTIMORE SUN
 baltimoresun.com SUNDAY April 26, 2015

THE PROTEST
 Approximately 1,200 demonstrators march peacefully from the west side to City Hall

THE VIOLENCE
 As the Orioles game begins, smashing of windows, vandalism and looting break out

Peace, then violence

In 45 minutes, Freddie Gray was fatally injured

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Figure 8: A comparison of the photo of killer Jared Michael Padgett and news coverage of his killings:



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Oregon school shooting suspect fascinated with guns but was a devoted Mormon, his friends say

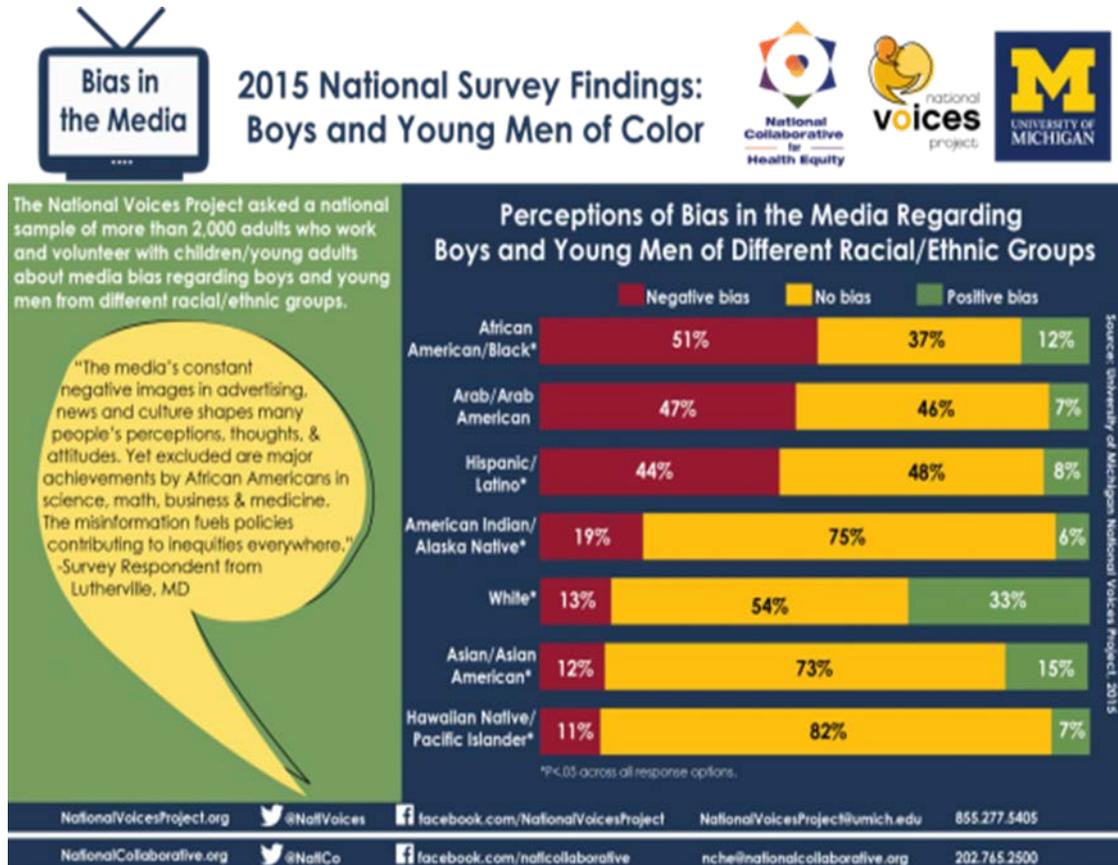
Published June 12, 2014 · Associated Press [f](#) 4 [t](#) 7 [✉](#) [🖨](#)

TROUTDALE, Ore. — Jared Michael Padgett was a straight-arrow kid who had a fascination with guns, planned a career in the military and was deeply devoted to his Mormon faith, those who knew him say.

Figure 9: Twitter user shows how media portrays Charleston shooter Dylan Roof versus how they treat Jim Jones, a young black man who was killed after shielding his mother from a barrage of gunfire.



Figure 10: Statistics from the 2015 National Survey Findings: Boys and Young Men of Color show that over half of African American boys and men are subject to media bias.



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