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An Open Letter to the Editor: How the Media's Language Perpetuates Bias

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An Open Letter to the Editor: How the Media's Language Perpetuates Bias

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Abstract

The ways the media portray black and white people are present in all facets of life, ranging from the coverage of crime to the perception of beauty. For instance, researchers have looked at the influence of media framing on the public's perception of people of color (Abare, 2018). However, scholars have overlooked how the media portray black and white victims and suspects across the ideological spectrum. I argue that the discrepancies in the language surrounding suspects and victims present throughout conservative and mainstream media allow for the perpetuation of biases and stereotypes in the public mind. In order to understand how journalists frame the stories they tell about black and white victims and suspects, I conducted a textual analysis of news articles that were interpreted through three ideological prisms: conservative, mainstream, and the black press. My research points to ways that society can take steps to put an end to media biases. This is important because it showcases not only the effects biased perceptions can have on the integrity of the information we receive, but also the undeniable effects of language on the everyday lives of black people.

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Introduction

In the last 12 years, starting with the 2008 election campaign, the media, whether it be traditional news or social, have swayed public opinion on not only issues regarding people of color, but also perceptions of people of color. Take, for example, the stark comparison between former President Obama and Donald Trump. While the topic inspires an in-depth conversation on racism, on the surface the discussions surrounding Obama and Trump are consistent with those that are present in everyday media; a questionable black male as opposed to the distinguished and justified white male. During both of Obama's campaigns, his "unruly past" was brought up as well as a discussion of his race; on the other hand, the mainstream news discussion surrounding Trump heavily addressed his business background and a "return to America's roots." Stein & Allcorn, psychohistory scholars, give insight into the problem, but they just scratch the surface when it comes to the impact media portrayals have. The two scholars analyze the difference in the way each man was treated by the media, which unfortunately translates into everyday life for many because of the media's reach.

When one considers the broad demographics of different media outlets, it becomes clear that the media feed into the public's biases and stereotypical beliefs. Information gathered from Political Opinion Strategies, a national political and public affairs research firm; Statista; *The Washington Post*; and *Forbes* stated that on a monthly, and even daily, basis, mainstream news outlets--Fox, MSNBC, and CNN-- and online newspapers--*The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*--reaches upwards of 16 million people ("Audience Research: Demographics"). If we take a look at just Fox News, a conservative-leaning news source, it is easy to conceptualize the impact these reporters have on their viewers. According to a Statista report done in September 2019, Fox News had roughly 2.43 million viewers that month. The majority of those viewers

were working and middle-class white citizens in ages ranging relatively evenly from 18 to mid-60s (Wilson, 2019). A news station with such a strong presence in the lives of a good percentage of the public can lead people to feel sentiments that match the media outlet's. Take, for example, a situation involving Fox News contributor Linda Chavez regarding the 2014 police shooting of Michael Brown. On a segment following the Brown shooting, Chavez stated that referring to Brown as an "unarmed teen," though accurate, painted him in an undeserving innocent light. Chavez argued that, alongside Brown's 6'4 height and near 300-pound weight, the fact that he was caught on camera "strong-arming an employee and robbing a convenience store ... put him on an equal footing with the [officer] that shot him" (Mirkinson, 2014). Chavez might not have realized it, but her words held a weight that could have resonated with the millions of viewers Fox has, prompting them to reorient their position on the issue.

The media's influence is even present with smaller news outlets as well. In the 2008 election, Barack Obama attributed his success and ultimate win to the *Chicago Defender*, a popular black press publication. From Obama's attempted candidacy for Congress in 2000 to an endorsement of his successful bid for a Senate seat in 2004 all the way through to his presidency, the *Defender* publicly backed Obama. Obama mentioned the *Defender*'s role in his "political success" in Barbara Allen's documentary *Paper Trail* (Gallon, 2016, para. 5). This particular example of the media's influence makes it feasible to envision how much of a driving force the media ultimately are in the public's mindsets a feasible task; if this one paper had the power to affect Obama's candidacy to such a strong degree, imagine the power of a major news network or multiple media outlets from which the public retrieves information.

There is a longstanding tendency in this country of associating people of color, black especially, with negativity. Robert Abare, a journalist for Urban Wire, an Urban Institute blog

dedicated to giving voices to victims and bringing forth stories of instances of racism in America, writes, that “Calling the police for #LivingWhileBlack is a consequence of segregation,” and that the “underlying ... issue of racial profiling is the continuing impact of segregation on the American economy and society” (Abare, 2018, para. 5). The judgements that come from living and existing in what seems like a different world for white people and black people are what allow these biases to seep into the language of the media. Abare recognized that “racial profiling [often] stems from (and perpetuates) the perception that black and brown folks are criminal and should be treated as such” (Abare, 2018, para. 4), perceptions often made worse by the way news media outlets portray issues and stories involving black people. Abare and researchers at the Urban Institute recognized that this issue runs so deep that it has created a block in many people’s minds as to how they see and interact with people of different backgrounds, racial backgrounds especially.

Take the case of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teen who was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. This shooting sparked a significant amount of controversy, and the media were quick to fan the flames. In a *New York Times* article, correspondent John Eligon referred to Brown as “no angel” who “lived in a community with rough patches” and happened to have “dabbled in drugs and alcohol” (Dukes & Gaither, 2017, p. 789). Eligon even mentioned Brown’s recent interest in rap with inappropriate lyrics. With the logic Eligon attempted to convey in his article, Brown’s rough community, supposed involvement with alcohol and drugs, and music choices somehow amounted to a young man who deserved the media’s criticism. Because of the way he was depicted, the public then referred to Brown as a “thug” and resorted to victim-blaming him, indemnifying the officer who shot him (Dukes & Gaither, 2017, p. 789). Brown’s case was not the first nor would it be the last one in which the

media played such a significant role. In cases similar to Brown's, mainstream media found ways to paint black victims in a negative light.

One of the first examples of a time when the media publicly vilified a black victim was with Trayvon Martin; that vilification sparked the Black Lives Matter movement and what many consider to be an era of social justice reform. In February of 2012, Martin, an innocent 17-year-old boy, was walking in his father's neighborhood in a Florida suburb when George Zimmerman, a member of the local neighborhood watch, took it upon himself to--in his mind--take justice into his own hands. According to Zimmerman, Martin looked suspicious, so Zimmerman followed him, which led to an altercation where he shot and killed Martin in alleged fear for his life. Initially, it might be difficult to see how this story relates to the ways in which the media frame such stories. However, upon further consideration, one question that follows is why George Zimmerman saw an unarmed black teen and immediately felt threatened. These are the lasting effects of framing; when media take an incident involving a black victim and use specific bits of information and language to simply sell a story, it creates a domino effect on the public's perceptions, an effect that leads to crimes exactly like Zimmerman's, thus creating a vicious cycle of the media feeding into the public's perceptions with their framing of people committing hateful crimes because of those very perceptions and judgements. For example, many news publications focused heavily on the altercation between Martin and Zimmerman, leading people to believe that Zimmerman was justified in shooting Martin in self-defense (Willis & Painter, 2016); however, had journalists mentioned that the altercation came after Martin confronted Zimmerman for following him, in fear for *his* own life, there might have been a different outcome. Before there is a positive change in public opinion, the media need to hold themselves accountable for the framing of such stories.

Literature Review

Whether it is obvious or not, media play a critical role in the perceptions white people hold of minorities. Kristin Dukes, a professor at Simmons College, and Sarah Gaither, a professor at Duke University, analyzed just how much the media can affect perceptions in “Black Racial Stereotypes and Victim Blaming: Implications in Media Coverage and Criminal Proceeding in Cases of Police Violence against Black and Ethnic Minorities.” Unsurprisingly, they found that black people were disproportionately shown in a negative light in the media even when they were the victims of a crime; the media brings up the “criminal” past of black victims while they paint white suspects as troubled and having had an unfortunate upbringing (Dukes & Gaither, 2017, p. 791). Dukes & Gaither cited multiple incidents where the black victim was vilified, including but not limited to the cases of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Alton Sterling; unfortunately, the list does not stop with them. In their research, Dukes & Gaither exposed a pattern that occurs in the media whenever an unarmed black man or boy is killed by a white man, often a police officer: the media seem to find a way to manipulate the public's view of black men to imply that the killings were justified. This pattern is not only harmful to the outcomes of many of these cases, but, considering how influential the media's reach is, the pattern also negatively affects the everyday lives of young black men.

As stated by Erin Willis, an assistant professor in the Department of Advertising, Public Relations, and Media Design at the University of Colorado, and Chad Painter, an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Eastern New Mexico University, Americans tend to get most of their information on important matters from a mix of both different news sites and sources, so when a disproportionate amount of coverage of whites in terms of “business, technology, and science” and black people in relation to depictions “as criminals, victims, or

dependents of society” exists, a dramatic difference in attitudes by the public towards white people and black people often takes place (Willis & Painter, 2016, p. 181). Willis and Painter evaluated how the media led the public to view Trayvon Martin as an insolent delinquent as opposed to a boy targeted by racism (Willis & Painter, 2016), views that were solidified through the media’s language surrounding the Martin-Zimmerman story. These effects are incredibly dangerous for black people, especially black men and boys, because they devoid the public of empathy for what has time and time again been proven as acts of violence motivated by extreme racist mindsets, while also feeding into a cycle of misrepresentation in the media.

The ingrained and biased frames present in the language of journalism give way to stereotypes that are then reinforced for audiences. Porismita Borah, a communications professor at Washington State University, conducted a study analyzing how the facets of media effects theories--agenda setting, framing theory, and priming--affect the public. Agenda setting occurs when the media’s agenda thoroughly impacts the public agenda through the sheer presence and presumed importance of an issue in the mass media. Priming refers to “another theorized media effect that occurs by altering the salience or accessibility of the information used in making a judgment or an evaluation,” taking account of the fact that people “so often rely on a variety of heuristics, especially the accessibility of the information, to make their decision” (Borah, 2016, p. 6). In other words, people trust that the information they consume from the media is sufficient enough to base their opinions on. Through the evaluation of these concepts, Borah was able to clearly lay out just how strongly the media have a presence in the public’s life and mindset. Not present in Borah’s analysis is the reinforcement effect, which accounts for the notion that people want their beliefs to be validated and often look to the media to do so (Dixon, 2008, p. 120). In the process of choosing stories to cover and how to go about covering those stories, the media

sets into motion an agenda that in turn becomes the public agenda, affecting the public's perception of issues.

In order to understand how exactly the media can manipulate the language used in covering stories, an understanding of framing theory must first be established. Framing theory can account for the distinct connections between the media's specific coverage of stories like Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown's and the perceptions people hold of black people, especially young black men. The theory describes both the process in which "the presentation of issues guides public opinion" (Schulman & Sweitzer, 2018, p. 157) and people reorient their thinking influenced by, in this case, the media (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p. 104); a clear example is the portrayal of the altercation between Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. In his research, Travis Dixon, a professor in the Department of Speech Communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana, found that not only are people aware of the biases in their perceptions, but that they would rather choose to hold on to these stereotypes than be confronted with the realities, thus continuing the dangerous cycle of perceptions that framing theory suggests.

Not only does the language surrounding black victims differ drastically from that surrounding white victims, but the former is even worse than the language surrounding white suspects of hateful crimes. Sung-Yeon Park, a professor in the Department of Telecommunications and School of Media & Communication at Bowling Green State University, and her colleagues used framing theory to begin a discussion of the difference in the way reporters frame the language around mass shooters. The focal point of the article was the Columbine shooting and its relation, or lack thereof, to race. The news media "' [never mentioned]... the race of the killers'" and in fact "'[no news media] even made mention of either

the fact that there were 12 other school shootings initiated by young white males,” much different from the media’s “talent” to somehow correlate race in a negative light to all stories involving a black male victim (Park, Holody, & Zhang, 2012, p. 477). In multiple cases analyzed by Park and her colleagues, race was hardly mentioned if it involved a white shooter; however, in every single case involving a black person, be they victim or suspect, race was almost always brought up in a negative context.

Ernest House, a professor at the University of Colorado, suggested the idea that racial framing is an integral reason that racism is so clearly and strongly expressed by Americans. Whether it is with insubordinate young black males, the supposed threatening nature of black men, or the reason people see a black male in a nice neighborhood and are immediately suspicious, the significant effects of racial framing in the media have become ingrained in the everyday lives of black people. House wrote that oftentimes “violence [is] a childhood companion” for black people living in areas where racial tensions are high (House, 2017, p. 167). It is in these areas that the effects of stereotyping are most prominent. In his article, House cited sociologist Joe Feagin’s book, titled *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, from which he quoted that “the racial frame is ‘an overarching white worldview that encompasses a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, ideologies, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, and reactions’” which lead to “many white and nonblack Americans [believing] or [asserting] that African Americans are violent, criminal, unintelligent, [and] lazy” (House, 2017, p. 170). If, as a society, we continue to interpret stories and discussions of people of color written and told by white people as objective truth, then it would seem that this issue of racial framing in the media and its effect on the public mind will continue to go on with no foreseeable end or solution.

Not only are there questionable levels of authenticity in national news networks, but the issue of racial framing and the importance given to specific stories relating to black versus white people is becoming more apparent across social media as well. Why is it that the Black Lives Matter movement was taken in a light by not only many white people, but the general public as well, but the March For Our Lives was immediately widely accepted by most? Why is it that society seems to have no qualms with the widespread circulation of the deaths of black males like Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and Eric Garner, but there are no known incidents where the violent death of a white man being widely shared exists? This is not to say that March For Our Lives did not deserve recognition or that white men deserve to have their deaths recorded and shared; these questions are simply a means to a conversation about the dangers of misrepresenting race. The white racial frame has created a lack of empathy in both the media and the public for the issues plaguing black communities.

It has become clear that it is important to consider framing theory when analyzing the treatment, perceptions, and discussions surrounding black people, especially crimes involving black people. The specific language used to depict black people versus the language that portrays white people is a remnant of the longstanding racism that has affected black people for so long.

In relation to my research, framing theory allows researchers to understand how the media are able to, with their choice in phrasing, shape public views and opinions. Framing theory accounts for the specific language used in media and how it affects the public's perceptions; this has proved to be especially relevant given the nature of my research topic. Although journalism and media are intended to be objective sources of information, anything that involves people is bound to be interlaced with biases; a journalist/reporter's personal opinions shape not only the way they deliver their stories, but how they conduct their research as well.

While there is sufficient research on how the media have affected the portrayal of people of color, there is not enough on what exactly can be done to prevent and eventually put an end to negative portrayals and misrepresentations within media. In this thesis, I will not only look into the origins of these racist perceptions and stereotypes, but also how society can implement measures to rid itself of them. I intend to conduct my research with the goal of collecting evidence supporting my argument that the discrepancies in the language surrounding suspects and victims present throughout conservative and mainstream media allow for the perpetuation of biases and stereotypes in the public mind. In researching, I hope to come to a conclusion that suggests how to end the biases maintained by the media.

Method

To understand how the human aspect makes its way into the media, first, we must take a look at how people become ingrained with biases in the first place, an understanding that can follow a close textual analysis. The method of textual analysis refers to "a data-gathering process for those researchers who want to understand the ways in which members of various cultures and subcultures make sense of who they are, and how they fit into the world in which they live" (McKee, 2003, p. 1). Not only do "people construct their understandings of the world through language," but "ideology is created and reinforced through language" as well (Brennen, 2017, p. 220). Brennen also presented the notion that through language and influence in the media, those in power that benefit from the views and stereotypes fed through the media continue to allow the perpetuation of these biases in order to preserve their status.

In this study, I used textual analysis as a method and framing theory as a lens to understand how the media frame news articles about cases involving black victims and white suspects as well as white victims and black suspects. I looked at articles from mainstream news

media and articles on both the extreme right and left. Once I acquired the articles I saw most fit for my research, I began to contrast the language used by the different media outlets with the topics covered by each outlet as they pertained to either white suspects and black victims or, in the case of extreme right-wing journalists, white victims and black suspects.

During my search process, I alternated between the Nexis Uni, US Newsstream, and US Dailies databases. In these databases, I searched for the following keywords: framing, media perceptions, racial profiling, and media gatekeeping. I also searched for specific articles revolving around black victims such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Alton Sterling, and Eric Garner, and white suspects, including Dylan Roof, Nikolas Cruz, and Ian Long. I also attempted to research well publicized cases involving white victims and black suspects, but came up empty-handed; this prompted me to further analyze the cases the media chooses to focus on and publicize. Not only did I search for these specific topics, but I also searched for articles from CNN, Fox News, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and MSNBC. In addition to the mainstream news outlets, I also included sources from the black media and extreme right-wing news outlets to understand the stories in a larger context. The articles I collected from the black press came from *The Philadelphia Tribune*, *The New York Beacon*, and *The Chicago Defender*. *Breitbart*, *The Daily Wire*, and Fox News were the source of the articles I focused on for my analysis of conservative stories.

Once I gathered and organized the articles for my research by filtering them using phrases such as media effects, framing, racial bias, and also looking for names of specific cases such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Dylann Roof, and Nikolas Cruz, I filed them into groups according to their ideology. My conservative news analysis focused on the white suspect, including suspects treated as victims, so I analyzed articles involving attempts to soften the

stories of white suspects including that of Dylann Roof and Brooke Richardson. I also included an analysis of the lack of stories involving white victims and how the focus on black victims added to the desensitization of black death. In my mainstream news analysis, the focus was on the top stories related to Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Nikolas Cruz, and Dylann Roof. When choosing articles for this section, I limited my analysis to those that framed the stories in ways that were more likely to sway public sentiments. When researching articles from the black press, I analyzed stories that were in direct contrast to those found in the mainstream and conservative news, including the controversy surrounding Michael Brown's positioning when he was shot. I paid careful attention to how drastically the language surrounding black press articles differed from the articles found in the preceding sources, particularly in their ability to focus on the facts as objectively as possible.

In my analysis of the articles I collected during my research, I examined the difference in the way a black victim's past is brought up in a negative light, while white suspects often have their past brought up in attempts to add a sympathetic and forgiving tone to the story. From there, I also provided criticism of the specific words chosen by journalists and reporters in their coverage and how they contrasted with one another. After presenting the specific articles involving the cases I highlighted, I showed how the media's presentation of these stories fed into the stereotypes held by the public.

Data Analysis

Conservative News

The disparities in media language transcend discussions of black victims and white suspects. Many media outlets, conservative ones especially, also have inconsistencies in the language chosen when referring to black suspects and white victims. In other words, while conservative media often negatively paint black suspects, but soften stories of white suspects, the opposite is done for black suspects and white victims. Consider the case of Brooke Richardson, a 22-year-old girl accused of killing her newborn and burying it in her backyard, contrasted with the case of Tanya McDowell, a 33-year-old mother sentenced to prison for five years for enrolling her six-year-old son in a school that was not in their district. In just the headlines of the articles published about these cases, a difference in tone was palpable. In an article published in *Breitbart* written by Dr. Susan Berry, Richardson was described as an “ex-cheerleader”(Berry, 2019) in the headline, while in a Fox News article written by Joshua Miller, Miller described McDowell as a “homeless woman”(Miller, 2015) in the headline. Both Miller and Berry used terminology that, while ultimately true about the two suspects, is completely unrelated to the cases and holds the weight of impacting public opinion. In the case of Richardson, describing her as an “ex-cheerleader” did not necessarily paint her in a positive light, but certainly with an empathetic tone; the term “ex-cheerleader” did not conjure up images of a murderer. On the other side, the term “homeless” was not meant to stir an understanding or sympathetic sentiment for people; indeed, the term was off-putting for many people. Whether intentional or not, the fact is that Miller reduced McDowell’s personhood to just another homeless person, rather than as a struggling single mother who committed a crime but was doing what she thought was best for her child.

A deeper dive into the articles revealed that the differences in language remained consistent throughout. Sticking straight to the facts, Richardson was a mother who murdered her newborn daughter, buried her in her backyard, and proceeded to go about her normal life. Berry turned Richardson's story into one people found pity in. Richardson was described as a "vulnerable [and] immature [girl] exhibiting signs of a dependent personality disorder" (Berry, 2019, para. 14) who was "motivated ... to commit such extreme acts" by her alleged "fear of abandonment by her family and boyfriend" (Berry, 2019, para. 15). This portrayal of Richardson differed drastically from that of McDowell, who committed a lesser crime. Rather than the media outlets attempting to understand her frame of mind as they did with Richardson, they vilified her. State officials picked apart every aspect of not only McDowell's case, but her character as well; the mayor of Norwalk countered the public's sentiments of her being a "poor, picked-upon homeless person" with an emphasis on her criminal history, describing her instead as an "ex-con" who returned to her criminal ways (Miller, 2015, para. 8). Analyzing her story from a purely factual stance, the information made it clear that McDowell did break the law, but should she be regarded in a harsher manner than a mother who murdered her newborn child?

Turning the focus to victims, the trend of vilifying language surrounding black victims remained; however, when it came to white victims, a different trend ensued. Conservative news outlets are notorious for having notes of racism and doubt in their coverage of cases involving black victims (Powell, 2013). During the time of controversy surrounding Michael Brown's death, Fox News released an article highlighting Brown's autopsy that shed doubt on public accounts of the shooting. The article detailed the autopsy report conducted by former New York City Chief Medical Examiner Michael Baden and examinations of Baden's report conducted by St. Louis medical examiner Dr. Michael Graham and forensic pathologist Dr. Judy Melinek.

From the information provided by Baden's report, both Graham and Melinek held that the narrative of an altercation between Brown and Officer Wilson in the car could be supported and that Brown had in fact reached for Wilson's gun ("Autopsy, toxicology," 2014, para. 3); this interpretation, however, would invalidate witness accounts of the shooting that claimed Brown had his hands up while he was shot. The article also focuses on Brown's apparent THC levels, implying that he was not of sound mind during the altercation. Brown's marijuana use coupled with the facts collected from the autopsy report gave the media fuel to continue to slander Brown's character and absolve Officer Wilson from any wrongdoing.

With the trend of conservative coverage of high-profile cases rather consistent in the negative portrayal of black victims and suspects and a forgiving portrayal of white suspects, it would seem sensible to assume that cases involving white victims would be covered in a grieving tone with strong condemnation towards the culprit; however, there would need to exist a high-profile case involving a white victim for that to be true. Trayvon Martin. Michael Brown. Philando Castile. Eric Garner. Alton Sterling: the general public is familiar with all of these cases, and many of their deaths were caught on camera and shared through media. Now, how about Ethan Austin Murray, Luke Patterson, or Justine Ruszczyk ("Fatal Force," 2019)? These names, collected from a *Washington Post* database of police killings, are the names of a handful of white victims who met with similar deaths, but, unlike the cases of black victims, the media refrained from focusing on these stories; while the white victims suffered similar deaths in regards to technicalities and facts, the media portrayal of their deaths lack the racist undertones that are associated with a black victim of a police shooting. Much like the lack of high-profile coverage of black-on-black crime, white victims of police shootings or black suspects do not stir the public like black victims of police shootings and white supremacists. It is no secret that the

media focuses on stories that not only grab the attention of the public, but manage to keep it. As the public brings more awareness to the racist tendencies still prevalent in our society, this is what the media will continue to focus on. However, there is a fine line between focusing on these cases to spread awareness of the current injustices in our system and the sensationalization of stories involving black victims. There is a common practice among news outlets to circulate images and videos of black victims of police brutality and hate crimes. A *New York Times* article highlighted over 30 different cases of black victims that resulted in death or serious injury that were either live-streamed or uploaded to media and made viral ("Black Lives," 2018). When the public can identify cases of unjustified black deaths in the double digits, but cannot recall cases of white victims, it is clear that the media operates on a biased agenda with little to no regard for the ramifications.

Many right-wing and conservative news outlets refuse to acknowledge such instances of racist frames and would rather focus on the lack of coverage for black-on-black crime, often citing Chicago's violence as a perfect example of black death, which the media chooses to ignore. However, these sentiments neglect the real problem, which is not that "black people only get killed by non-blacks and white police officers," but any time there is an instance involving a white person or police officer unjustly killing a black person, there are racist undertones present. Conservatives take statistics such as "53% of known homicide suspects in 2010 were identified as black--although blacks comprise only 13% of the population;" "90% of the time it is a black perpetrator who murders the black victim;" and "for black homicide suspects arrested, 85% of their victims were also black" ("Jesse: Trayvon," 2012, p. 1) and use it to fuel their delegitimization of the clear racial tensions between white people and the police force and black people; in reality, these empirical findings reflect a system that fails black victims.

Mainstream News

The language and imagery used in the media matter. When the media use a mugshot for a black victim, but a school or family picture for a white suspect, the public subconsciously takes note of those differences, adding to the views and stereotypes they might already hold. This same logic holds up for the various phrases and terms used to describe news stories. Time after time, the media, following a mass shooting, will do everything to paint the shooter in a better light than is necessary. After the Parkland shooting in 2017, there was a horde of articles that were released looking into Nikolas Cruz's past. In a 2018 article from *The Evening Standard* written by Ella Wills, it seemed as if Wills would not stop until a sad origin story was created for Cruz. In the article, Wills cited interviews with people who knew Cruz, and the phrases they used to describe him were not the typical language used for a criminal: "troubled past"; "quiet and grieving the loss of a parent"; "just a broken human being". His neighbors seemed to be trying to rationalize his actions: "When you don't have the support system, that affects who you are, and that affects the people around you ... and when your brain is not fully developed you don't know how to deal with these things" (Wills, 2018). Not only is this language very influential and possibly successful in framing the story in an empathetic manner, but it also immortalizes the shooter and makes him out to be a victim, which is in many cases exactly what a shooter hopes for in committing such crimes.

In contrast to the many articles written about Cruz's troubled childhood, the language surrounding the stories of unarmed young black men unlawfully killed take on a more negative, blaming tone. In more than one instance the media sought to dig up records of a young black man who was killed. In the case of Michael Brown, the media attempted to gain access to his

supposed juvenile records, records that even had they existed would serve no relevant purpose concerning the trial. The media seemed to be calling Brown's character into question as a way to justify his killing (Goodale, 2014). Similar actions were taken in the case of Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman's attorneys made every effort to paint Martin in a negative and violent way so that the public would believe Zimmerman's claim of self-defense. The defense even went so far as to dig up text messages exchanged between Martin and his friends and siblings, messages that relayed his skill in fighting: "Babe, why you always fighting... You need to stop fighting, for real... When you gonna teach me how to fight?" (Roig-Franzia, 2013). The texts were brought up as a way to frame Martin as an aggressive threat rather than as an innocent victim. Sympathy seemed to be missing from the coverage of the Marin-Zimmerman case as former police detective Harry Houck stated that Martin "would be alive today... if he didn't... have a street attitude" (Braboy, 2013, para. 3). This statement exists alongside comments made by Fox News journalist Geraldo Rivera, who said that had the members of the jury been armed and in the same position as Zimmerman, "they would have shot and killed Trayvon Martin a lot sooner than George Zimmerman did" (Braboy, 2013, para. 3). Such comments made it clear that the media would rather deny Martin's personhood and "manipulate the general public" simply for the sake of the "better story;" this was yet another attempt to divert attention from "the facts behind the [actual] case" (Braboy, 2013, para. 6). When the media chose to focus on negative backstories, like in the cases of Martin and Brown, they diminished the actual facts of the shootings and the actions that led to the shootings.

Soraya McDonald of *The Washington Post* wrote an article highlighting a social media trend, #CrimingWhileWhite, to bring to light the difference in treatment of white people and black people by the police. Throughout the article McDonald lists examples white social media

users gave of crimes they committed, whether recent or during their childhood, and their light, if any, punishments as a contrast to the treatment many young black men receive; this particular trend was influenced by the death of Eric Garner. The importance of this article was not in its content, but rather in what it was lacking. Many mainstream news outlets often cover stories of protests and incidents of injustice but refrain from accurately covering the very stories that incite these events, if at all. Reporters and journalists tend to keep their eye out for the next “buzz-[worthy]” story to make it through the news cycle without stopping to consider the impact of their coverage (McDonald, 2014, para. 1). McDonald very well could have used this media trend as a hook in the article to then criticize and call out the injustice of Garner’s death and the many others like it but settled for simply covering a trend to sell a story.

News outlets often refrain from what they view as choosing a side in cases of injustice for fear of retaliation and criticism from fellow peers and the general public. However, these discussions are important for the public to have even if they are difficult. With the knowledge that, altogether, media outlets are the main source of information for most citizens, news journalists, reporters, and outlets need to instill a sense of responsibility in themselves to deliver news that addresses difficult conversations and issues outside of the scope of familiarity of the public, while remaining impartial and sticking to factual information.

Many media outlets are aware of and often call out other news outlets for discrepancies in the framing of stories between white people and black people but continue to incorrectly frame such stories themselves. However, a good example of a news source that calls out injustices and remains consistent in its approach is the *Huffington Post*. Journalist Nick Wing took note of the contrast in the way the media treat white suspects and killers and the way the media treat black victims in an article written for the *Huffington Post*. Wing stated that reports are often

“unsympathetic or dismissive of black victims” and resort to victim blaming, while in stark comparison “run headlines that exhibit an air of disbelief at an alleged white killer’s [crime],” citing family members and close friends in an attempt to bring a positive light to the story (Wing, 2017). In my research, I found that the *Huffington Post* repeatedly brought to light stories of injustices and skewed stories of those injustices.

Black Press

Because of their inherent interest in the issue of black representation, black media outlets tend to be not only more comprehensive in their portrayal of such stories, but are also better equipped to remain impartial in the telling of these stories. Take, for example, the controversy regarding Michael Brown's death and the struggle to find out if he, in fact, did have his hands up in surrender when he was shot by Officer Wilson. The Fox News article previously analyzed stated with certainty that the two cited autopsy examinations proved that Brown engaged in a physical altercation outside of Wilson's car and was not surrendering when shot. However, in a *Philadelphia Tribune* article, journalist Jim Salter discussed what Fox News declined to mention: there was a third examination done and examiners were unsure what their findings indicated. Medical examiner Michael Graham stated that while there was indeed what appeared to be firearm discharge “found on tissue from Brown’s injured thumb, ... [it was] impossible to conclude whether the close-range injury meant Brown was trying to grab [Wilson’s] gun” (Salter, 2014, para. 7-8). Although it would have benefited the *Philadelphia Tribune* to confirm that Brown had his hands up in surrender when he was shot, Salter cited forensic pathologist Shawn Parcels, who stated “I don’t know if we’ll ever know” in reference to what exactly Brown was doing in the moments before his death (Salter, 2014, para. 15). Parcels remarked

that Brown could have been doing anything from “charging [Wilson]” to “walking toward [Wilson],” “standing still,” or “he could have been stumbling” (Salter, 2014, para. 15); the information from the medical examination was not conclusive enough to definitively state exactly what Brown was doing when he was shot. Through their own agenda, the *Philadelphia Tribune* could have done what Fox News did and stuck to only specific facts to sell their stories, but they knew that to skew the truth would only have done damage to the perception of the case and to public opinion.

One of the most concerning issues involving media framing is how strong of an impact it has on mass public sentiments. In a *Philadelphia Tribune* article, Matthew Whitaker, the founding director of the Center for the Study of Race and Democracy at Arizona State University, examined the tendency among white Americans to pity and empathize with white suspects. Whitaker covered white people's reaction to the Charleston mass shooting, where Dylan Roof, a 21-year-old white supremacist, opened a semi-automatic gun on a Black church, killing nine people. Rather than look at these stories with a sorrowful eye to the victims, many white people turned their focus to Roof. "He could be my son" (Whitaker, 2015, para. 4); these shocking words were said by a coworker in reference to Roof, a stark difference from a right-wing news article criticizing former President Barack Obama for stating that "if [he] had a son, he'd look like Trayvon" in a statement on the Martin shooting condemning the Cambridge police force ("Jesse: Trayvon," 2012, p. 1). Whitaker noted that many whites did not see Roof as "the latest in a long line of racist mass [murderers];" rather, they "[granted him] ... the kind of absolution many people of color can only imagine receiving" (Whitaker, 2015, para. 4). Whitaker speculated that perhaps this common public sentiment was the exact reason that, even after committing such an unspeakable crime, Dylan Roof was taken to Burger King by the

officers that arrested him, a stark comparison to the countless unarmed young black men killed by officers claiming they felt threatened.

Whereas mainstream news outlets focus on the viewership of the stories they cover and refrain from presenting themselves as choosing a side, and while conservative news outlets continue to choose a path of prejudice and bias members of the black press are unafraid to call out injustices. Many of the stories found on publications like the *Philadelphia Tribune* and the *Chicago Defender* presented the uncomfortable truths that other news outlets avoid, but if the public is not made uncomfortable with the harsh realities of our society, then the cycle of the reinforcement effect will continue; if all news outlets present news in a strong and biased way, the way it is now, then people will continue to choose to watch the news that most comfortably fits with their views.

In another study conducted by Kristin Dukes and Sarah Gaither, the authors determined with certainty that the specific language used by newscasters depicting a shooting victim has palpable effects on public sentiment toward the case (Satsky, 2018, para. 2). Dukes and Gaither gathered participants to act as jurors and then proceeded to give them pertinent information related to whichever case they would be evaluating. The two refrained from giving their hypothetical shooting victim a race and simply gave their participants either positive information--good student, family oriented, etc.-- or negative information---violent past, involvement in gangs, etc.--and asked their participants to determine how they felt about each case and how the shooter should be penalized, if at all. Dukes and Gaither noticed that when the participants were presented with a case involving positive information about the victim, they were more likely to request a stricter punishment for the shooter and were more sympathetic toward the victim. In contrast, when given negative information about the victim, the participants

were more likely to be skeptical of the victim, oftentimes placing blame on them, and were more lenient about penalties for the shooter. If jurors are exposed to biased media coverage of these cases, Dukes and Gaither's findings demonstrated that the media's language has concrete effects on the rulings. Not only do journalists and reporters need to "adjust their training protocols and reporting methods" (Satsky, 2018, para. 6), but they should also focus on "only releas[ing] information that is actually pertinent to that specific shooting incident" (Satsky, 2018, para. 7). The cases of Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin inspired Dukes and Gaither to conduct this study. As much of the information presented in this paper illustrates, it is clear to experts that there are inconsistencies in the way the media frame stories, inconsistencies that have adverse effects.

In order for the media to be rid of these biases, people must first confront the fact that white people currently benefit from a system of institutionalized racism. Although these biases come from perceptions perpetuated by the media and stereotypical beliefs, these perceptions run much deeper than that. As Joe Feagin expertly stated in an interview with George Yancy, "all whites, no matter what their racial prejudices and other racial framings entail, benefit from many racial privileges routinely granted by this country's major institutions to whites" (Feagin, 2015, p. 2). As discussed throughout this paper, many people do not realize that their actions and beliefs are laced with biases they inherit through the system in which they live. It is no coincidence that there is an oversaturation of portrayals of black people as violent criminals in the news in a society based upon "white-virtue framing," which Feagin describes as an ideology that includes "superior white values and institutions, the white work ethic, and white intelligence" (Feagin, 2015, p. 3), all of which many people see as standard frames. As long as we live in a society that refuses to have the difficult, oftentimes uncomfortable discussions found

in the black press, the cycle will not only go on, but also continue to benefit white people at the expense of black people.

The process of undoing a system of media infused with biased perceptions will not be as easy as diversifying work environments. Creating a diverse stream of media owners, managers, reporters and other workers will help cancel out these stereotypes in an attempt to provide what many would consider the “whole truth;” however, in order to truly provide “an authentic liberty-and-justice framing” (Feagin, 2015, p. 5), we must first disconnect the many aspects of “racist stereotyping, ideology, imagery, emotions and narratives of [the] white racial frame” (p. 5). To truly take apart and improve this system, the responsibility must be put on the individual; as long as there still exist people in power in the media with racist sentiments, the biases will continue to seep into the practice of journalism. Conservative and mainstream white viewers must turn inward and confront any racist tendencies they hold; in so doing, they should realize that even if they do not recognize their own biases, they still benefit from a system that puts them first.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of the articles collected, it has become quite clear that the unraveling of the biases deep-rooted within society will be a complex process. Conservative news sources must realize that their tendency to further their agenda by skewing stories to delegitimize the issues many mainstream and black press sources bring to the public's attention harms the impression of all media, including themselves. Although the mainstream news claims to remain impartial, in reality, they simply remain complacent about the injustices they cover poorly. Black Press news outlets need to be given a platform to expand their outreach to the public and be able to share and truly spark conversations about the injustices black people face in America.

Initially beginning my research, I started my process with a solution to my research question already in mind; the solution to biased news perceptions is clearly to have a more diverse news force. It seemed like a no brainer. However, upon further in-depth research, I realized that the solution is much more complex. There is no answer to eliminating bias in the news industry; in any environment where humans are present, bias will also be present.

Through my research, a multifaceted solution has presented itself. Although there is no clear-cut way of news outlets ridding themselves of biases, each news outlet can implement measures to deliver news objectively. All news sources should refrain from having any political affiliations and leanings; when news stories become partisan, the focus is no longer on presenting the facts of a story. Contrary to what media professionals might have hoped for in creating many different outlets that cater to people with differing views, having so many sources of information creates inconsistencies in the way each story is delivered, often affecting the response to the original story. While diversity in the workplace will not cause an immediate

change in the perpetuation of biased perceptions by the media, I believe it is an important step in addressing the impact of media in everyday life for people of color. Diversification is a step in the right direction for media outlets as a whole; however, to address the in-depth issue of personal biases, we must look to individual media workers to confront their complacency in a system that benefits them at the expense of others.

Soraya McDonald eloquently expressed a sentiment that puts into perspective how we as individuals view the way biases are analyzed in our society; she stated that "so much of the onus to explain, illustrate and eradicate racism is placed on the party that's victim to racism, rather than the party that's perpetrating and benefiting from it" (McDonald, 2014, para. 1). After researching the black press and recognizing that many black news sources could serve as examples of how to powerfully conduct objective work, it dawned on me that people and workplaces should not need guidelines on how not to feed into prejudiced mindsets; in fact, the undoing of these biases starts at the level of the individual. Our society must be better in the execution of self-awareness and criticism. It is not an easy endeavor to look inward and analyze how the way you conduct yourself and your everyday actions might negatively affect another, however, I do believe people must perceive life beyond the scope of their own in order to begin the process of ridding our society of racist perceptions and beliefs.

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