

Race, Rioting, and Black Lives Matter: An Exploration of the Perception of Black Peoples and Their Movements in Media

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how mainstream sources such as social media, broadcasting, and journalism, have shaped and continue to shape the perception of race, racial justice, and minority opinions with a focus on Black communities and movements such as Black Lives Matter. Media is critical in the distribution and dissemination of information, especially pertaining to issues and organizations that rise in response to critical events, opinions, and injustices. The growing prevalence of technologies and internet sources such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and others, along with more traditional forms of communication such as CNN and Fox News, have increasingly given a platform to large-scale social issues such as the George Floyd racial justice protests and calls by Black communities for systemic and social change. This article also explores the utilization of racialized stereotypes and unconscious biases present in media that have shaped the language used when discussing social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter, and the perceptions formed around Black Americans.

Introduction

With the growing prevalence of technology and media in the 21st century, news is both increasingly available and increasingly polarized. Platforms such as Instagram and Twitter, along with major news sources and broadcasting stations have helped to elevate social concerns and discussions, bringing increased awareness to the movements of marginalized communities and their struggles. However, mass media has also harbored a tendency to sensationalize and reduce social movements to individual or outlying actions to make the information more interesting to a larger audience. Analysis of racial patterns in mass media (particularly in television), and how they shape attitudes towards African Americans has found that white perceptions of Black people are largely based on media coverage rather than on personal interactions and that current media supports the public's preconception of Blacks without often pushing for comity¹. Additionally, the prevalence of middle to upper-class white males in media coverage and journalism may be contributing to a greater disconnect between the movement's actual goals and the public perception. This is in part due to the presentation of racialized incidents and issues pertaining to people of color (such as the Black Lives Matter movement) by individuals not involved or connected to that minority group or issue. These tendencies often lead to the increased use and normalization of racialized language and stereotypes that are promoted and spread in mainstream news outlets and social media platforms.

The perpetuation of racialized biases and stereotypes in part can be attributed to the lack of diversity and perspective in the newsroom (those in the broadcasting, newspaper, and internet publishing industries), especially when such language is used in the discussion of marginalized communities and their struggles. Only about 7% of newsroom employees are non-Hispanic Blacks, a smaller percentage than the U.S. workforce overall¹². The average journalist tends to be white, male, and relatively educated¹³, which lends to a lack of deeper understanding and connection to issues of race and socioeconomic status. The "average journalist" is not a part of the racial minority or a

victim of the discrimination against which the issue is set and does not have the same perspective or depth into a subject as someone within that minority group or movement. Research has also shown that unconscious biases and stereotypes can lead to journalism that unintentionally reinforces stereotypes and prejudices against minority groups¹⁴. These prejudices, unknowingly spread through racially charged or harmful rhetoric can further spread inaccurate or offensive perceptions of movements and marginalized groups. The absence of Black journalists may in part contribute to the frequent utilization of anti-Black stereotypes, with non-Black writers sometimes using racially charged language in part due to a lack of understanding or bias against the aforementioned group.

Black men are increasingly subject to exaggerated negative associations in mainstream media and television, especially concerning unemployment, crime, and poverty⁴. Caricatures such as the “Black welfare queen” employed by Reagan and the “lazy Black man” leeching off of “hard-working Americans” have become well-known stereotypes, often employed even in the media today. And as explored in the Opportunity Agenda’s “Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys”, “The idle black male on the street corner is not the “true face” of poverty in America, but he is the dominant one in the world as depicted by media”⁵. These notions carry not only a historical weight and history of discrimination against Black Americans, but also create a negative connotation around the very perception of a Black individual in society. Black males have been shown to be both underrepresented in media and overrepresented in the stereotypical depictions of the “hostile”, “criminal” and “lazy” Black man⁶. The presentation of these stereotypes when discussing and describing Black men serves to unintentionally reinforce existing biases against Black men or create a derogatory perception in the minds of the audience this language reaches. This confirmation of racially charged caricatures or derogatory language in even popular culture serves to reinforce these often-unconscious biases, furthering both the alienation and demonization of Black individuals.

Black men are victims of this damaging language not only in television and social media but also in the documentation and reporting of Black men by reputable news sources and issues not pertaining to race or racial movements. Michael Eric Dyson highlights the inherent racial prejudices in the media and the damaging nature of the language used against Black people in his book *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*. In his assertion that “if the Militant Advocates help to frame for their generation the racial consequences of a natural and economic disaster, the media was critical in framing perceptions of people and events surrounding the catastrophe”⁷, Dyson highlights the prominent role media played in shaping the often negative perception of Black individuals. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, photos published by the Associated Press employed racially charged words for the actions of a Black man, and not of the white family committing the same action. In the caption, a young Black man is described as “looting a grocery store”, while a white couple carrying food is described as “finding bread and soda from a local grocery”⁸. The language used paints the same picture in a very different narrative. The actions of the white couple are seen as reasonable, framing their action as chance and removing blame for their actions. However, the Black man is held responsible for his “looting” of food; an unlawful, questionable action, and a seizure of goods that are not meant to be his. The choice of “looting” also carries a historical connotation, often applied to civil disobedience carried out by Black Americans to condemn their struggle for racial justice. In the selective usage of the word, the AP creates a division between “good” and “bad”; the Black individual is guilty of a crime, while the white family is utilizing their surroundings. Dyson reiterates the idea of the Black man in media being portrayed in a manner that conforms to pre-existing anti-Black sentiments, in that “black folks are ‘framed’... to fit a negative idea of blackness, or called on to fit a slot reserved for the outlaw, thug, or savage--[which] shapes how we are frowned on or favored in mainstream society”⁹. His analysis exemplifies a perspective felt by many Black Americans; that they are often reduced to their race, and with that, a crude caricature of what a “Black man” in society is expected to be. These biases and selective framing of Black men in media greatly impact how Black men as a whole are seen in society, with negative perceptions in broadcasting or newsrooms being amplified and absorbed by thousands of non-Black audiences across the country.

This idea of a “brute” or “thug” commonly attributed to Black men, although continually used by modern-day public figures, social media users, and prominent news sources has an extensive legacy extending back to the Reconstruction era of the United States. The initial emancipation of Black men brought with it a new derogatory

stereotype, engineered to continue the suppression and alienation of freedmen in society. Formerly enslaved persons began to be depicted as the “savage Black brute”: a violent aggressor that threatened white women and the law and order of society. These fear-mongering tactics and destructive connotations were used to generate fear and apprehension around Black men, characterizing them as a “menace” to society and the values supposedly upheld by white Americans. Even now, this stereotype remains, albeit less overtly shown in depictions of Black males in media. The April 2008 Vogue cover of LeBron James holding supermodel Gisele Bündchen harkens back to the poster “Destroy This Mad Brute”, in which a gorilla holds a helpless white woman in his arms¹⁰. The resemblance of the posture and expression of LeBron along with the racially coded language and symbolism of the original poster paints an eerily similar story of the Black “brute” running off with a white woman. This term has been more recently substituted by the term “thug”, a word commonly associated with “criminal” Black men or those involved in more destructive protests regarding racial justice and police brutality. After the death of Freddie Gray while in police custody, prominent voices such as Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and former President Barack Obama referred to those rebelling and looting in response as “criminals and thugs”¹¹. The choice of such historically significant phrases carries with it a extensive legacy of violent and harmful rhetoric used to continue the suppression of Black men, whether intentionally or unintentionally employed. This normalization of this language towards Black men exemplifies the existing prejudices and presentation of Black men as inherently wrong for actions such as protesting or anger against issues such as police brutality.

The reinforcement of these racist stereotypes is also frequently seen in both popular media and around movements such as Black Lives Matter, its participants, and the victims of police brutality from which these movements are inspired. Officer Darren Wilson, in his 2014 interview regarding the arrest and death of Michael Brown claimed, “When I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan...and then after he did that, he looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked”¹⁵. This description of Brown as a “Hulk” a “demon” and “aggressive” played into the image being portrayed at the time, of Brown being a large, threatening person. This was used as a justification for the use of lethal force, even though Brown and Wilson were in the same height and weight class. In the context of the historical demonization of Black men as hyper-aggressive threats, the continued focus on Brown’s physical attributes and “violent” temperament eerily fit the negative caricature often used to scapegoat Black men in the 1800s. Conflicting stories were also presented on the robbery and confrontation between Brown and Wilson, with Ferguson Police Chief Tom Jackson asserting that “the initial contact between Darren Wilson and Mike Brown was not related to the alleged theft of cigars,”¹⁶ and some eyewitness accounts detailing that Brown had his hands up when Wilson opened fire¹⁷. However, the broader story pushed by news outlets was often one of a robbery that focused heavily on his size and “threatening presence”, often downplaying the larger implications of a shooting of an unarmed Black man. Comments on the death of Mike Brown such as “Mike Brown was a thug #AllLivesMatter” exemplify the application of racially charged terms such as “thug” to excuse the deaths of Black victims of police brutality. The usage of this weighted language in reference to the killing of unarmed Black men highlights the normalization of such language, and the attempts to reinforce and reassert the power of the police while condemning a Black life, even after death.

And although Black Lives Matter protests were over 90% peaceful¹⁸, these protests were often labeled as riots, perpetuating the trend of painting Black social movements and protests as destructive and violent forces. Oxford English Dictionary’s analysis of roughly 2800 articles published in May and June 2020 relating to events incited by the death of George Floyd found that while the word “protest” appeared most frequently, the use of “riot” was widespread, used once for every seven times “protest” was used. “riot” was used roughly 28 times more than “uprising”, and was 175 times more common than rebellion¹⁹. “Uprising” or “rebellion” more clearly suggests a struggle against an oppressive or corrupt system, while “riot” more often connotes meaningless violence and has a history of being used to reduce Black protest to Black people creating senseless chaos and destruction in cities. The title of rioting was heavily attributed to the Black civil unrest of the 1960s, dismissing the movement’s purpose and the larger issue of the mistreatment of Black people and continuation of racist Jim Crow Laws in favor of focusing on the destruction

caused. As the University of Michigan's Thompson comments, many "would rather focus on the minority incidents where things have gotten particularly chaotic... as a way to dismiss it"²⁰. The high prevalence of the word "riot" in the discussion of often peaceful protests epitomizes the tendency of the media to focus on violent, reactionary issues or anomalies that will gain an audience's attention over peaceful, recurring events. The prevalence of this term in reference to Black Lives Matter and other race-related protests can be regarded as both a product of this media focus and the condemnation and stereotypes impressed on Black peoples and their struggles.

The perception of Black Lives Matter as a movement of rioting has become increasingly prevalent on both social media and more "mainstream platforms, with sites such as Fox News and CNN alongside prominent political figures on social media often focusing on any violence within the movement. Rioting and looting are often linked with BLM and similar protests against police brutality, with comments such as: "So when do the looting and fires start?" reappearing on social media sites in reference to Black Lives Matter protests. Former President Trump's inflammatory tweets have also contributed to the association of Black Lives Matter with looting, rioting, and unnecessary violence. There have been repeated instances of President Trump spreading misinformation regarding Black Lives Matter: retweeting a video incorrectly correlating Black Lives Matter and Antifa with a Black man assaulting a white woman in New York, using racially charged language such as calling protesters in Minneapolis "thugs", vowing that "when the looting starts, the shooting starts."²¹, and calling BLM a "symbol of hate"²². His massive audience as a former US president, along with the ease of the spread of information through Twitter allowed him to amplify incorrect or biased information and opinions about Black Lives Matter and their protests. Former President Trump's reliance on Twitter coupled with the previously lax limitations on incorrect or harmful speech allowed him to project his perception of BLM as a violent, unlawful organization to millions of Americans. His opinions not only reflect a large percentage of Americans but also highlight the platform on sites such as Twitter that has been given to millions of people to share unchecked and often rampant misinformation. And although some of his more inflammatory tweets were flagged for 'glorifying violence', those racist and emboldened ideas amplified by Mr. Trump continue to be disseminated in a manner that is often very hard to regulate.

The very presence and amplification of highly partisan, reactionary groups on sites such as Twitter exemplifies the ability social media has given in providing inflammatory groups a vehicle to disseminate misinformation on a rapid scale without the necessity to fact-check or ground claims. This phenomenon has greatly contributed to misinformation and derogatory or even threatening motions being made against people of color and prominent protest movements such as Black Lives Matter. These social media platforms have also been utilized as tools for white supremacists to amplify their views and recruit new members, often targeting Black activists and organizations in the process. The initial video retweeted by Trump in September of 2020 was posted by Twitter account TDN_NOTICIAS, which had posted it with the caption "Black Lives Matter/Antifa". The account at the time had no operational website, affiliated organization, or previous credentials, and a "heavy focus on partisan political messaging"²³. The site is "dedicated to spreading inflammatory, racist news"²⁴ and, facilitated by President Trump and his platform, helped to amplify negative stereotypes and associations of Black individuals and organizations with violent, division movements. The correlation of BLM with Black, aggression and anti-white action exemplifies the attempt by many social media accounts to create a hyper-politicized, negative portrayal of Black communities and their social movements. Although the tweet was later flagged and the account suspended, both the video and TDN received an outpour of media attention and even support, garnering thousands of sympathetic and interested viewers.

This intensification of inflammatory, hateful speech helps to not only stir controversy on racialized topics but also to divide public sentiment along racial and political lines, often against Black communities. Social media often provides an echo chamber for racist rhetoric and hate, allowing for the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and biases against marginalized groups such as Black Americans. This negative media coverage may be decreasing support among whites; according to a Civiqs survey of over 210, 387 people in 2020, the approval rating of the Black Lives Matter movement has fallen from 10% net support among white voters to -8% net support²⁵. The violent rhetoric associated with Black Lives Matter, coupled with the rapidly changing environment and attention media gives to

movements seems to create a limit on the ability for communities to share their issues, creating a barrier for movements such as Black Lives Matter due to the lack of continued interest in mainstream media.

Although there are many limitations on the extent and effectiveness of social media and news sources as a proponent of social change and awareness for Black Americans, these forums have allowed for a larger demographic to be exposed to a range of issues and movements and have encouraged changing attitudes towards organizations such as Black Lives Matter. According to a 2020 Pew Research study, 23% of surveyed social media users in the United States and 17% of overall adults say they have “changed their views about a political or social issue” due to exposure on social media in the last year². With a global reach and billions of users, social media allows for previously underrepresented groups and topics to be discussed on a larger scale platform. The relatively widespread use of social media also brings in a more diverse demographic of both cultural, racial, and ethnic perspectives that may not have traditionally been cognizant or even concerned with such topics. According to the study, 12% of the adults studied say their opinions on the Black Lives Matter movement or about police brutality and reform have changed. 11% said they changed their views about race relations or politics. Many comments highlight the change in perception and interaction of different races, with individuals highlighting how social media allowed them to “become more aware of systematic racism and the reasons for protests and riots”, and how media forums “ha[ve] opened my eyes to the degree of systemic racism in this country and the world”³.

Social media sites have facilitated international interaction between diverse groups, amplifying and quickly disseminating information to a higher degree than traditional forms may have been able to. An additional study from Pew Research has shown that social media is considered an important political outlet for Black Americans, and a powerful perceived proponent for change. Seven in ten Black social media users studied believed that these platforms are effective in changing an individual’s mind about political and social issues, creating sustained social movements, and raising public awareness. On average, 70% of participants also believed that social media helped give a voice to more underrepresented groups, such as Black Americans. The large extent to which those surveyed believed in the power and effectiveness of social media exemplifies the increased trust and usage of such platforms in discussions of race and marginalized communities, and the perceived potential of its usage for Black self-empowerment and education. However, this increased dissemination and exposure through social media is often catered to a younger demographic, with older individuals being less active on such sites and relying more on traditional forms of media such as broadcasting and newspaper.

The mode through which these issues are presented each cater to different communities, often only focusing on over-simplified or sensationalized sources that may provide greater engagement with the selected demographic. The presentation of historically or racially charged issues and the pre-existing biases in media platforms can also lead to a reliance on inaccurate representations of marginalized communities and their unrest to simplify or spur controversy.

Media is a very powerful proponent in shaping the opinions and outcomes of countless social movements, pushing hundreds of organizations, issues, and injustices to the forefront of society and helping to bring awareness to less-available perspectives. Yet these small gains are still formed under a system that adheres to the euro-centric perspective of the majority of its journalists and readers and reinforces often harmful racial or cultural stereotypes and stigma. With this, media is still essentially subject to the fleeting attention span of the audience it attempts to interest, often limiting any long term. Although social media and news outlets have provided greater access to information about issues such as Black Lives Matter, that increased accessibility has also encouraged the increased availability and spread of inflammatory and biased misinformation. Much of the language used to demean Black peoples and their protests is still being used, albeit in more subtle varieties. The continuation of these stereotypes and the evolution of the language used to condemn and confine people of color exemplifies the systematic, continued discrimination against black, brown, and minority communities that has not disappeared, but instead has also evolved and become ingrained in mainstream media and society. Until we eradicate the perpetuation of this discriminatory and racist language and biases in the media, the oppression and marginalization of people of color will continue to occur.

Endnotes

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