

***The O'Reilly Factor's* Maintenance of Hegemony in the Wake of the Trayvon  
Martin Tragedy**

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**Abstract**

Contemporary mass media outlets play an important role in shaping public ideology and influencing the dominant societal narrative. This rhetorical project aims to critically analyze both Bill O'Reilly's communicative devices and how *The O'Reilly Factor* acts to maintain hegemony within American socio-culture. Specifically, this honors thesis analyzes 11 *O'Reilly Factor* episodes covering the Trayvon Martin shooting from March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012 to August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Within these news segments, O'Reilly blamed African Americans for fueling "pathologies" destroying their local communities, "condoned" George Zimmerman for his actions against Trayvon Martin, worked to delegitimize African-American leadership, safeguarded the traditionalist notion of "individualism," supported the legitimacy of The American Dream and made statements that functioned to protect the dominant white power structure. Overall, O'Reilly was able to formulate purely opinionated arguments while providing an illusion of "fair and balanced" to his viewers.

### Acknowledgements

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### *Introduction*

It is evident that, within modern American socio-culture, information gathering has been converted into a routine, effortless process. Rapid increases in media consumption allow for public ideologies to be directly influenced through organizational biases and misleading news trends. *The O'Reilly Factor*, being the “most successful” television news program within the contemporary mass media culture, has accumulated massive quantities of popularity amongst the American public and is widely considered as the “jewel” of the Fox News organization. However, especially when considering the substantial influence the television broadcast has upon its’ audience, it is vital to critically analyze O'Reilly’s communicative strategies and overarching political agenda. In regard to crime within American society, African-American youth are frequently framed by mass media as “initiators” behind an alleged increase in lawlessness. Furthermore, by frequently being overrepresented as criminal suspects by such institutions, the African-American community is commonly subject to racial bias and “blamed” for their own socio-economic hardships. In the wake of the Trayvon Martin tragedy, O'Reilly and his politically charged powerhouse network presented a string of highly opinionated broadcasts while attempting to honor their popular slogan “fair and balanced.” However, in actuality, O'Reilly aimed to utilize his coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting and George Zimmerman trial in order to accomplish a specific (and momentous) socio-political objective.

As argued in the later sections of this rhetorical analysis, O'Reilly strategically attempted to “legitimize” dominant white power structures and maintain hegemony within American society. Overall, my data consists of 11 episodes from *The O'Reilly*

*Factor* that cover the Trayvon Martin shooting and George Zimmerman trial. Within these broadcasts, O'Reilly identified the "grievance industry" and "radical liberal media" as being "destructive" forces for the American public, blamed the African-American community for engaging in harmful practices that draw attention to "pathologies" destroying urban minority communities, defended the Florida legislation of "Stand Your Ground," advocated the racially bias police policy of "stop and frisk," and attempted to legitimize "individualism" and "the American Dream" in the eyes of his audience. By drawing on scholarly literature covering mass media's impact on public ideology, *The O'Reilly Factor's* rhetorical/communicative devices and hegemony, my rhetorical project aims to formulate a comprehensive argument supported by notable intellectuals in the field of communicative studies. Furthermore, by utilizing specific examples from O'Reilly's television broadcasts, this honors thesis strives to identify how *The O'Reilly Factor* strategically reinforced dominant "white" hegemonic power structures within U.S. American socio-culture and (in turn) ways in which the television broadcast presented an immediate threat to African-American households.

### **Background Chapters**

Before entering into the bulk of my analysis, it is essential to ensure that the reader is “up to speed” on key information that will be utilized in the later sections of this rhetorical project. The first of two background chapters aims to provide the reader with important information on Bill O’Reilly and *The O’Reilly Factor* that will be utilized in the analysis portion of this honors thesis. Furthermore, this chapter includes previous racial controversies that O’Reilly has been a part of in order to give the reader a proper background on *The O’Reilly Factor’s* “controversial” reporting methods. The second background chapter functions to educate the reader on events occurring before and after the Trayvon Martin shooting. This chapter aims to provide the reader with information regarding the demographics of the Sanford community, the background of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman, an explanation of what happened on the night of the shooting and a description of the American public’s response to Zimmerman’s actions. Furthermore, key events to the George Zimmerman trial are provided in the later sections of the chapter in order ensure that a detailed/overarching description is provided.

### **Background of The O’Reilly Factor**

#### **The O’Reilly Factor**

*The O’Reilly Factor*, having originally aired as *The O’Reilly Report* from October 7<sup>th</sup> 1996 to November 1998, is an American talk show on the Fox News Channel. Hosted by Bill O’Reilly, a self proclaimed “independent traditionalist,” the television broadcast often addresses controversial political issues and is usually prerecorded (although it is

occasionally aired live if breaking news or special events are being covered).<sup>1</sup> *The O'Reilly Factor* has been a long-time “powerhouse” broadcast of the Fox Network, containing 17 seasons (with 5,321 episodes) and overpassing *Larry King Live* on CNN in 2001. Within the year of 2009, *The O'Reilly Factor* peaked at 3.1 million viewers and was the most watched cable news broadcast for 106 consecutive weeks. The show celebrated 100 continuous months of being the most viewed show on cable news and averaged three million viewers per night. Within the years of 2012 and 2013, the broadcast averaged 2,831,000 viewers. Outside of the television broadcast, O'Reilly has a daily radio program covering more than 400 stations, a continuous newspaper column in hundreds of papers and websites that provide access to his editorial content.<sup>2</sup> Not only so, but O'Reilly has authored three best-selling books within the last decade entitled *Killing Jesus*, *Killing Lincoln* and *Killing Kennedy*.<sup>3</sup> These non-fiction novels follow a similar trend of detailing the assassination of various important socio-political figures and “uncovering” controversial schemes against government officials.

Regarding the broadcast itself, *The O'Reilly Factor* begins with a brief commentary regarding various social/political news trends and then moves into interviews with guests (which often are contemporary political figures). The broadcast is usually prerecorded, being taped between 5:00 P.M. and 7:00 P.M Eastern Time and airing weekdays at 8:00 P.M and 11:00 P.M. O'Reilly and his producers gather to discuss potential topics to cover twice a week and, in order to prepare for the broadcast, a

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<sup>1</sup> Mike Conway, et al. “Villains, Victims and the Virtuous in Bill O'Reilly's ‘No-Spin Zone’.” *Journalism Studies* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2007), 198-220.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Gorman. "Obama Administration Boosts O'Reilly Factor TV Ratings." *TVbytheNumbers*, last modified February 6, 2014, <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2009/02/06/obama-administration-boosts-oreilly-factor-tv-ratings/12326/>.

<sup>3</sup> “O'Reilly Books” *Bill O'Reilly: The Factor Online All the Time*. Last modified January 25, 2014. <http://www.billoreilly.com/pg/jsp/billsbooks/billsbooks.jsp>.



researcher provides an information packet containing possible “angles” O’Reilly can explore.<sup>4</sup> *The O’Reilly Factor* contains 11 different possible news segments with two to three being utilized during each night in accordance with the commentary in the beginning of the episode. Within these segments, the “Talking Points Memo” details O’Reilly’s commentary on a current news trend or on the present state of the country. Also, the “Top Story segment” is an approximate seven minutes of coverage discussing one of the top news stories of the day with interviews from important political figures, newsmakers, esteemed analysts or other Fox News Channel reporters. Furthermore, regarding the demographics of his viewers, 66% identify themselves as conservative, 24% moderate and 3% liberal. Within the realm of political talk shows, *The O’Reilly Factor* typically consists of an “older” audience. Furthermore, 64% of his viewers are 50 or older, 20% between the ages of 30-49 years and 12% are between 18-29. *The O’Reilly factor* is nearly evenly split between male/female viewers (with 56% male and 44% female).<sup>5</sup>

### **Bill O’Reilly**

William James (Bill) O’Reilly was born on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 1949 in New York City and is an American talk show host, author, columnist and political commentator. O’Reilly worked in the late 1970’s and in the 1980’s as a news reporter for various local television stations in the U.S., most notably CBS News and ABC News. From 1989 to 1995, he was the anchor of the news program *Inside Edition* and has been widely

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Ariens. "Q3 Cable Ratings: FNC Shows Fill Top 10; #3 Network on Cable; Beck Grows Timeslot 136%," *TVNewser & Media Bistro*, last modified 29 Sept. 2009. [http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/q3-cable-ratings-fnc-shows-fill-top-10-3-network-on-cable-beck-grows-timeslot-136\\_b27054](http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/q3-cable-ratings-fnc-shows-fill-top-10-3-network-on-cable-beck-grows-timeslot-136_b27054)

<sup>5</sup> Dale Hicks, "In Changing News Landscape, Even Television Is Vulnerable." *Pew Research Center for the People and the Press RSS*, last modified September 27, 2012, <http://www.people-press.org/2012/09/27/in-changing-news-landscape-even-television-is-vulnerable/>

considered as promoting Republican ideologies through his broadcasts. Furthermore, O'Reilly characterizes himself as a "traditionalist" and an Independent voter.<sup>6</sup>

In his early years, O'Reilly attended Chaminade High School (a private Catholic boys high school in Mineola). After graduating, O'Reilly was accepted into Marist College in Poughkeepsie, New York and spent his time writing for the school newspaper. He soon became recognized as an honors student and decided to major in history in 1967. O'Reilly decided to spend his junior year in his college studies abroad at the Queen Mary College in the University of London. After graduating, O'Reilly taught English and History at Monsignor Pace High School from 1970 to 1972. O'Reilly returned to college in order to obtain a master of arts degree in broadcast journalism from Boston University and, while attending the university, he was a reporter and columnist for various local newspapers. Soon after, O'Reilly was accepted to Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government and received a master of public administration degree in 1996.<sup>7</sup>

### **Previous Controversies with Bill O'Reilly**

O'Reilly has frequently been in the spotlight regarding racial controversies, including his statements made within his discussion about race on a September 2007 edition of the Radio Factor. When talking about his visit to Sylvia's restaurant (a soul food restaurant located in Harlem in New York City), O'Reilly stated:

"You know, when Sharpton and I walked in, it was like... big commotion and everything. But everybody was very nice. And I couldn't get over the fact that there was no difference between Sylvia's restaurant and any other restaurant in New York City. I mean, it was exactly the same, even though it's run by black, primarily black patronship... No one in Sylvia's was screaming 'I want more iced tea'... I think black Americans are starting to think more and more for themselves, getting away from the Sharpton's and the Jacksons and people trying to lead them into a race-

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<sup>6</sup> "Bill O'Reilly's Culture Warrior," *Fox News Online*, last modified 23 Oct. 2006. <http://www.billoreilly.com/pg/jsp/billsbooks/billsbooks.jsp>.

<sup>7</sup> "O'Reilly Bio" *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified January 25, 2014. <http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/personalities/bill-oreilly/bio/#s=m-q>.

based culture. They're just trying to figure it out. 'Look I can make it. If I work hard and get educated, I can make it.'<sup>8</sup>

Comments such as the one O'Reilly gave within his radio broadcast have continuously drawn both the public's attention and criticism by civil rights activists. After attending Sylvia's Restaurant with Revered Al Sharpton, O'Reilly defended his comments by arguing that he was attempting to show "white America" that they did not have to fear blacks. Furthermore, he argued that his statements were "taken out of context" and that mass media outlets had "fabricated a racial controversy that does not exist."<sup>9</sup> Al Sharpton, on his own radio show, had labeled O'Reilly's remarks as "disturbing and surprising." Also, news outlets such as ABC News continuously wrote against O'Reilly's actions, claiming that "the last time a talk show host uttered racially charged comments, he was fired."<sup>10</sup> In response to the controversy, O'Reilly made statements on *The O'Reilly Factor* arguing that "white journalists" cannot report on "African-Americans and their problems because we don't want to be put in a situation where our opinion is taken out of context, rammed down our throat as Media Matters and all those sleazoids do." O'Reilly went on to state, "unless it's a big thing, if it's an optional thing where I used to do it, I'm not doing it anymore."<sup>11</sup>

### **Background of the Shooting**

#### **Demographics of Sanford Florida**

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<sup>8</sup> Ryan Jenkins. "Fox News Host Bill O'Reilly Says Restaurant Comments Not Racist." *CNN*, last modified September 22, 2007, <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/SHOWBIZ/TV/09/26/oreilly.race/>.

<sup>9</sup> Loten, Angus. "The O'Reilly Factor in Harlem." *Inc.com*, last edited September 27, 2007, <http://www.inc.com/news/articles/200709/oreilly.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Donaldson James. "O'Reilly Said Media Reaction 'Fabricated Racial Controversy'" *ABC News*, last modified September 26, 2007, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/story?id=3649826&page=1>

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Terkel. "O'Reilly: I Don't Report On 'African-Americans Or Their Problems' Much Because I'm Afraid Of Being Called Racist," *ThinkProgress RSS*, last modified April 31, 2010, <http://thinkprogress.org/media/2010/04/13/91359/oreilly-race/>

On the night of the shooting, Trayvon Martin was killed at The Retreat in Twin Lakes (a gated community) in Sanford, Florida. Having a population of 53,570 citizens, 57.3% are White/Caucasian, 30.5% are African American and 20.2% are Hispanic/Latino. Furthermore, approximately 18.4% of all Sanford inhabitants are below the “poverty line.” The city also received the greatest population percent change within Florida from 2000 to 2010 at 39.9%.<sup>12</sup> The encounter between George Zimmerman (a 28-year-old Hispanic) and Trayvon Martin (a 17-year-old African American) occurred on February 26<sup>th</sup> 2012. Though the exact specifics of what took place remain obscure, some of the details remain uncontested. George Zimmerman called the police at 7:09 P.M, claiming that an “unknown male” was acting “very suspicious.” Furthermore, Zimmerman was the neighborhood watch coordinator for the gated community.<sup>13</sup>

### **Background on Trayvon Martin**

Trayvon Benjamin Martin was a 17-year-old African American born in Miami Gardens, Florida in 1995. Martin had attended both Norland Middle School and Highland Oaks Middle School in north Miami-Dade County, Florida. Afterwards, Martin had attended Miami Carol City High School in Miami Gardens for his freshman and sophomore years and, during the time period of the shooting, was a junior at Dr. Michael M. Krop High School in north Miami-Dade. Regarding his family life, Martin was the son of Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin (who had divorced in 1999). During the year of the shooting, Fulton was a program coordinator at the Miami-Dade Housing Authority while Tracy was a truck driver. Martin also had an older brother named Jahavaris Fulton,

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<sup>12</sup> “Sanford Florida’s Demographics.” *Official Website of Sanford, Florida*. Last modified April 14<sup>th</sup> 2011. <http://www.sanfordfl.gov/index.aspx?page=393>

<sup>13</sup> Isabelle Zehnder. “George Zimmerman’s 911 Call Transcribed,” *Examiner.com*, last modified March 24, 2012. <http://www.examiner.com/article/george-zimmermans-911-call-transcribed>.

who was 21 years old at the time of Martin's death. Jahavaris is enrolled at Florida International University and currently majors in information technology.

During an interview with CNN's Anderson Cooper, Tracy Martin had stated, "Trayvon was a kind and loving person, not the thug the media made him out to be." Furthermore, Tracy Martin claimed that (when he was still married to Fulton) Martin's mother was around her son "90% of the time" and that "she went to all his football games and took care of him when he was sick."<sup>14</sup> Trayvon Martin had enjoyed sports video games and was interested in flying or designing planes for a future career. Martin was enrolled into Carol City High School in Miami Gardens for his freshman year and a large portion of his sophomore year until he decided to transfer to Krop High School in north Miami-Dade in 2011. While attending Carol City, Martin would attend classes in the morning before spending the rest of his day at Baker Aviation School (who had told the press that Martin was a normal student who had attended all of his classes). According to a teacher at Carol City High School, Martin's favorite subject was math and they had never seen him be disrespectful in the classroom setting. However, Martin had transferred to Dr. Michael M. Krop High School for his junior year. During this time, Martin had been an "average" performing student and had "behavioral issues in school." At the days leading up to the shooting, Martin was under a ten-day suspension for carrying a Marijuana pipe and an empty bag containing marijuana residue. He had been suspended twice before for tardiness and writing graffiti on a school doorway. Furthermore, when a Miami-Dade School Police officer looking for the graffiti marker searched his backpack,

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<sup>14</sup> "AC360: Anderson Cooper Speaks with Trayvon Martin's Parents." *Anderson Cooper 360*. Last modified July 17, 2013. <http://cnnpressroom.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/17/ac360-tomorrow-night-andersoncooper-speaks-with-trayvon-martins-parents/>

the officer had found approximately a dozen pieces of women's clothing, a watch and a screwdriver that the officer said Martin was using as a burglary tool.<sup>15</sup>

### **Background on George Zimmerman**

George Zimmerman was born on October 5<sup>th</sup> 1983 in Manassas, Virginia. Zimmerman was raised as a Catholic and attended the All Saints Catholic School in Manassas before attending a public high school. At age 14, Zimmerman had joined an after school Junior Reserve Officers' Training Core because he had wanted to enlist to become a marine when he was of age. After graduating high school, Zimmerman moved to Lake Mary, Florida to find work within an insurance agency. After residing in Florida for 3 years, Zimmerman had married Shellie Dean (a cosmetologist) and they had decided to rent a townhouse at Twin Lakes in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman enrolled in Seminole State College in 2009 and was working on obtaining an associate degree in criminal justice. In December of 2011, Zimmerman was allowed to participate in a school graduation ceremony even though he did not meet the requirements to have a degree. In early 2011, Zimmerman had participated in a citizen forum at the Sanford City Hall to protest the beating of a black homeless man by the son of a white Sanford police officer. Zimmerman had stated that he had witnessed "disgusting behavior" while in the ride-along program with the local police (even though that the Sanford Police Department said they did not know when, if ever, Zimmerman was in that program).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jeff Burnside and Brian Hamacher. "The Trial of George Zimmerman." *NBC 6 South Florida*, last modified March 27, 2012. <http://www.nbcmiami.com/news/Trayvon-Martin-Shooting-Sanford-Cops-Requested-Arrest-Warrant-144606055.html>

<sup>16</sup> Chris Francescani, "George Zimmerman: Prelude to a Shooting." *Reuters*, last modified April 25<sup>th</sup> 2012. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/25/us-usa-florida-shooting-zimmerman-idUSBRE83O18H20120425>

However, outside of the 2012 Martin shooting, Zimmerman had other negative encounters with law enforcement. This included two incidents in 2005 and five incidents in 2013. In July of 2005 (when he was 21), Zimmerman was arrested after shoving an undercover alcohol-control agent while his friend was being arrested for underage drinking. The charges were dropped when Zimmerman had decided to attend anger-management classes. Also in 2005, his ex-fiancé filed a restraining order against him for domestic violence. On September 9<sup>th</sup> of that year, Zimmerman's wife had told the police that he had threatened both her and her father with a gun and had punched her father in the face. However, no gun was found at the scene and Zimmerman was only briefly detained. His wife had decided not to press charges and stated that Zimmerman never truly had a gun at all. After reflecting on the event further, she had later stated on the Today show "in hindsight I should've pressed charges and I really regret that." On November 18<sup>th</sup> 2013, Zimmerman's girlfriend had called the police stating that, after she had told him to leave her home, he had pointed a shotgun at her and began breaking her belongings. After the police arrived, Zimmerman initially did not let them inside and continuously said that he wanted everyone to "know the truth." Zimmerman had barricaded himself inside the apartment before the local police had forced their way in and arrested him.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Night of the Shooting**

During the months leading up to the encounter, Zimmerman had called the police several times to report suspicious behavior. Between 2004 and 2012, Zimmerman had made approximately 50 calls to the police to report various local disturbances. Martin, a

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher Collette. "George Zimmerman Arrested Following Domestic Dispute with Girlfriend Samantha Sheibe in Seminole County." *10 News*, last modified 19 Nov. 2013. <http://www.wtsp.com/news/breaking/article/345207/20/George-Zimmerman-arrested-in-Seminole-County>.

Miami native, was visiting his father in Sanford and was watching the NBA All Star Game at a house in Twin Peaks. Trayvon Martin had left a 7-11 on Rinehart Road 0.8 miles west of his home at Twin Lakes at 6:34 p.m. carrying Skittles and Arizona Iced Tea. On the walk back, Trayvon had caught the attention of Zimmerman (who was patrolling the neighborhood in a sport-utility vehicle). At 7:11 p.m., Zimmerman had called 911 and stated to the police “this guy [Trayvon] looks like he is up to no good or he is on drugs or something.” He was also heard stating, after claiming that Trayvon had his hand in his waistband and was walking around looking at homes, “these assholes, they always get away.” When the police dispatcher asked Zimmerman whether or not was following Trayvon, Zimmerman responded with “yeah.” The dispatcher claimed, “we don’t need you to do that,” but Zimmerman disregarded such a directive and continued following Trayvon. After the call ended at 7:15 P.M., a violent encounter took place, in which Zimmerman fatally shot Martin through the chest 70 yards from the townhouse where Martin was staying. Several minutes later, other 911 callers in the neighborhood had claimed that Zimmerman and Martin had gotten into a wrestling match on the ground with one of the pair being heard screaming for help.<sup>18</sup>

### **Public Criticism of Zimmerman**

After the shooting, Zimmerman was criticized heavily by both the Martin family and in the media for following Trayvon when specifically instructed not to do so. Furthermore, Sanford Police Department’s Wendy Dorival (a volunteer coordinator) castigated Zimmerman’s actions, claiming that they had “trained neighborhood watchers to watch from a safe location.” Stating that Zimmerman should have left the matter to

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<sup>18</sup> Adam Weinstein. “The Trayvon Martin Killing Explained,” *Mother Jones*, last modified March 18, 2012, <http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2012/03/what-happened-trayvon-martin-explained>.



the police department instead of acting “recklessly,”<sup>19</sup> Dorival continuously criticized Zimmerman for promoting “irrational behavior.” Protests were also organized around the nation prior to Zimmerman’s April 11<sup>th</sup> indictment of murder charges with over 2.2 million signatures being collected on a Change.org petition calling for his arrest.<sup>20</sup> This online petition was created by Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton (the parents of Trayvon Martin) in order to gather public support for the arrest and prosecution of Zimmerman for his “horrendous crime.” Not only is this the largest online petition to date, but also various “high-profile” citizens made public comments calling for a “full investigation” of Zimmerman including Reverend Al Sharpton, Reverend Jesse Jackson and President Barack Obama. However, in opposition to such remarks, former Presidential candidate Herman Cain and former Texas NAACP President C.L Bryant labeled Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson as “race hustlers exploiting the death of Trayvon to inflame racial passions.”<sup>21</sup> This trend was continued by major mass media outlets such as the Fox News network who, in an attempt to address the “true racial problems” occurring within American socio-culture, claimed that the “grievance industry”/civil rights industry were

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<sup>19</sup> Joe Burbank. “George Zimmerman Trial: Man Who Shot Trayvon Martin was Concerned About Burglaries, Police Volunteer Coordinator Says.” *CBS News.com*, last modified June 25, 2013. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/george-zimmerman-trial-man-who-shot-trayvon-martin-was-concerned-about-burglaries-police-volunteer-coordinator-says/>

<sup>20</sup> Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton. “Prosecute the Killer of Our Son, 17 Year-old Trayvon Martin,” *Change.org*, last modified March 12, 2012. <http://www.change.org/petitions/prosecute-the-killer-of-our-son-17-year-old-trayvon-martin>.

<sup>21</sup> Alex Pappas. “Former NAACP leader accuses Al Sharpton and Jackson of ‘exploiting’ Trayvon Martin.” *The Daily Caller.com*, last modified March 26, 2012. [http://dailycaller.com/2012/03/26/\\_former-naACP-leader-accuses-sharpton-and-jackson-of-exploiting-trayvon-martin/](http://dailycaller.com/2012/03/26/_former-naACP-leader-accuses-sharpton-and-jackson-of-exploiting-trayvon-martin/)

utilizing racial hostilities within the United States in order to accumulate “generous ratings.”<sup>22</sup>

On March 8<sup>th</sup> 2012, the New Black Panther Party had rallied outside of the Sanford Police Department offering \$10,000 to whoever could bring them George Zimmerman. Within his statements, Mikhail Muhammad (the chairman of the organization) called for the “immediate capture” of Zimmerman and claimed “we are going to force our government to do their jobs properly, if they don’t we will.”<sup>23</sup> During this time period Reverend Jessie Jackson had spoken in Eatonville calling for the immediate revision of Florida’s “Stand Your Ground Law,” claiming, “if it’s a moment, we go home. If it’s a movement, we go to war.”<sup>24</sup> Soon after, Spike Lee (an African American filmmaker) had tweeted what he had believed was George Zimmerman’s home address to the public. However, the address had actually belonged to an elderly couple's home and Elaine McClaine (one of the residents) had filed a lawsuit against Lee for encouraging a “dangerous mob mentality.”<sup>25</sup> In her lawsuit, McClaine had stated that hostile re-tweets such as “Let the PURGE BEGIN” and “LETS THROW THE BRO A SURPRISE PARTY! \*LOADS GUN\*” were posted. Actions such as these by influential African American leadership greatly affected the racial climate within the United States and added to public unrest regarding Zimmerman’s actions.

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<sup>22</sup> Eric Wemple. "O'Reilly Still Bashing Racial "Grievance Industry," *The Washington Post*, last modified August 27, 2013, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2013/08/27/oreilly-still-bashing-racial-grievance-industry/>

<sup>23</sup> Dale Wesler. "New Black Panthers Offer \$10K For George Zimmerman Capture," *The Inquisitr News*, last modified July 18, 2013, <http://www.inquisitr.com/856630/new-black-panthers-offer-10k-for-george-zimmerman-capture-video/>

<sup>24</sup> Kunerth, Jeff. "Jesse Jackson Calls Trayvon Martin Death a Turning Point." *Standard-Examiner*, last edited March 26, 2012, <http://www.standard.net/stories/2012/03/26/jesse-jackson-calls-trayvon-martin-death-turning-point>.

<sup>25</sup> Ben Child. "Spike Lee Sued over George Zimmerman Tweet." *The Guardian News and Media*, last modified 12 Nov. 2013. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/nov/12/spike-lee-sued-tweet-george-zimmerman>.

On July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2013, George Zimmerman was found “not guilty” of murder against Trayvon Martin. By claiming that he had been acting in “self defense” and was in accordance with the Florida “Stand Your Ground” law, the six female jurors decided to acquit Zimmerman of his manslaughter charges. Soon after the verdict was determined, animosity and racial tensions ensued within the African-American community and civil rights leadership. According to a nationwide poll conducted by *The Washington Post*, 90% of all African American responses called the shooting “unjustified,” compared to 33% of whites. Also, 62% of Democrats disapproved of the verdict in contrast to 20% of Republicans.<sup>26</sup> Ben Jealous, President and CEO of the NAACP, stated, “we are outraged and heartbroken over today’s verdict... we stand with Trayvon’s family and we are called to act.” Also, Reverend Al Sharpton responded to the verdict by claiming “we will continue fighting to remove the ‘Stand Your Ground’ law in every state, laws that played a significant role in Trayvon’s death.” Judith Browne Dianis, the co-director of the Advancement Project, agreed that legislation such as “Stand Your Ground” played an “enormous role in the Zimmerman trial” and that “black men are routinely racially profiled whether by a neighborhood watchman like George Zimmerman, or the stop-and-frisk policy of major cities.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Overall, these two background chapters were implemented in order to ensure the reader is “up to speed” on important concepts that will be used in the analysis portion of this rhetorical project. The first background chapter aimed to educate the reader on

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<sup>26</sup> Jon Cohen, “Zimmerman Verdict Poll: Stark reaction by race.” *The Washington Post*, last modified July 22, 2013. [http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-07-22/politics/40728194\\_1\\_george-zimmerman-trayvon-martin-whites](http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-07-22/politics/40728194_1_george-zimmerman-trayvon-martin-whites)

<sup>27</sup> Joyce Jones. "Black Leaders "Outraged" by Zimmerman Verdict." *BET.com*, last modified July 14, 2013, <http://www.bet.com/news/national/2013/07/13/black-leaders-outraged-by-zimmerman-verdict.html>

important information regarding Bill O'Reilly, *The O'Reilly Factor*, and previous racial controversies that O'Reilly has been a part of. The second background chapter brought together demographics of the Sanford community, background information of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman, details on the night of the shooting and the public's response to the "not guilty" verdict given to Zimmerman in order to ensure that the reader comprehends valuable information to be utilized in the future sections of this project. Furthermore, the "Stand Your Ground" legislation and "stop and frisk" police policies are important concepts that were frequently discussed within *The O'Reilly Factor's* coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting. In order to address rising racial animosities within the African American public, O'Reilly attempted to present his television network as "honestly" reporting racial problems residing within the U.S. American community and "refraining" from inflaming further racial violence.

**Key Events Within the Trial of George Zimmerman**

**2/26/2012** = George Zimmerman shoots and kills Trayvon Martin 70 yards from the townhouse where Martin was staying.

**2/26/2012:** Questioned by police, Zimmerman states that Martin attacked him and he fired his gun in self-defense.

- Zimmerman's 9mm semi-automatic pistol is confiscated by the Sanford Police Department

**3/8/2012:** Tracy Martin (Trayvon's father) holds a press conference and openly criticizes the investigation efforts performed by the Sanford Police Department saying, "We feel justice hasn't been served."

**3/10/2012:** Members of the New Black Panther Party rally outside the Sanford Police Department.

**3/12/2012:** In response to Sanford Police Chief's "inability" to arrest Zimmerman due to his protection under the Florida "Stand Your Ground" Law, Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton post a petition on Change.org calling for the State Attorney (Angela Corey) to prosecute Zimmerman.

- The website gained nearly 900,000 signatures the first week and over 2.2 million signatures in total.

**3/16/2012** The Sanford Police Department releases eight 9-11 recordings in the case.

- One of them with a voice in the background screaming "help, help!" followed by the sound of a gunshot.
  - o It is unclear whose voice it is. Even professional "voice analysts" label the evidence as "unhelpful."

**3/19/2012:** The Justice Department and FBI announce that they will be performing an official investigation of the shooting.

**3/22/2012:** Rev. Al Sharpton, Martin Luther King II and other civil rights activists hold a justice rally at Sanford's Fort Mellon Park "calling for the arrest" of George Zimmerman.

- 10,000 attend the event.

**3/22/2012:** In response to the controversy regarding his hesitation to investigate the case, Sanford Police Chief Bill Lee holds a press conference announcing he is "temporarily stepping down" because his presence presents too large of a distraction to the case itself.

**3/23/2012:** Obama tells reporters that the nation needs to do some "soul-searching" and that "if I had a son, He'd look like Trayvon."

**3/24/2012:** New Black Panther Party states they will provide \$10,000 for whoever can "capture" Zimmerman.

**3/25/2012:** Reverend Jesse Jackson speaks in Eatonville calling for revisions to Florida's controversial "Stand Your Ground" law.

- "If it's a moment, we go home. If it's a movement, we go to war." says Jackson.

**3/26/2012:** Photo of Zimmerman taken moments after the shooting with him having a bloodied head released to the public.

- Zimmerman had told the police that Martin had punched him and slammed his head into the sidewalk several times.
- Thousands of people gather in Sanford to mark one month since Martin was killed.

**3/28/2012:** Surveillance video from the Sanford Police station is analyzed further, shows that George Zimmerman had visible injuries approximately an hour after the shooting. This video is released to the public.

- Enhanced video shows marks to his head and a swollen nose.

**4/3/2012:** Florida State Senator Chris Smith (Democrat) announces the "formation of a task force to review the state's "Stand Your Ground" law.

**4/10/2012:** Zimmerman's attorneys (Hal Uhrig and Craig Sonner) announce that they will no longer be representing him.

**4/27/2012:** Mark O'Mara launches the website GZLegalCase.com as the official site for Zimmerman's legal case.

- O'Mara announces that Zimmerman will plead "not guilty" to second-degree murder.

**5/11/2012:** State Attorney Angela Corey announces the charging of George Zimmerman with second-degree murder.

- Zimmerman turns himself into police willingly.

**5/17/12:** 7/11 surveillance video of Trayvon buying Skittles and Arizona Iced Tea during the night of the shooting is released to the public.

**5/20/2012:** Sanford city manager fires ex-police chief Bill Lee from the police force.

**6/21/2012:** Video re-enactments are released to the public, enacted by Zimmerman in initial days after the shooting.

- Zimmerman claimed, "he (Trayvon) took my head and slammed it against the concrete several times, and each time I thought my head was going to explode."

**11/14/2012:** Governor Scott's "Stand Your Ground" task force concludes its final meeting and recommends no sweeping changes to the law.

**12/3/2012:** A new photo with Zimmerman having a bloody, broken nose on the night of the shooting released to the public.

**2/26/2013:** Martin's family holds a "one-year anniversary" rally of Trayvon's death.

**5/23/2013:** New photos are released from Trayvon Martin's cell phone

- Picture of what appears to be a marijuana plant and a gun on Trayvon's phone.
- Also Zimmerman's attorneys released texts from Trayvon's phone showing the teenager's alleged history of drug use.

**6/24/2013:** Prosecutor provides the opening statement in the long-awaited murder trial of Zimmerman.

- Recounted what Zimmerman had told a police dispatcher shortly after he spotted Martin:
  - o Zimmerman: "F--- punks. These a---, they always get away."

**6/26/2013:** Zimmerman's former neighbor Jayne Surdyka claims that she thought she heard multiple gunshots.

- Surdyka: "I truly believe that the second yell for help was a yelp, it was excruciating. I really felt it was a boy's voice."

**7/13/13:** After 16 hours of deliberations, the jury found Zimmerman not guilty.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> David Lohr. "Trayvon Martin: Key Dates in The Murder Case," *Huffington Post*, last modified June 10, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/09/trayvon-martin-timeline\\_n\\_3412879.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/09/trayvon-martin-timeline_n_3412879.html)

### Literature Review

When covering scholarly literature relating to my rhetorical analysis, it was essential to include material that analyzed popular media images associating African Americans to crime, rhetorical projects aimed at deconstructing Bill O'Reilly's argumentative/communicative devices and scholarly works providing an in-depth analysis regarding the concept of hegemony. These topics are relevant to my rhetorical study for, when viewing *The O'Reilly Factor* through a critical lens, O'Reilly commonly engages in practices "legitimizing" dominant/white hegemonic power structures by using an array of rhetorical devices. Furthermore, the fact that the broadcast has accumulated a large audience presents an immediate threat to the African-American community since (as argued below) powerful mass media networks can shape and reinforce the public mindset.

Dennis Rome, Clarence Dunnville, Darron T. Smith and Mary Oliver perform similar analyses on how mass media outlets can shape public ideology and (in turn) negatively impact the African-American community. These scholars draw connections between media coverage, the "legitimization" of racial bias within institutions and high incarcerations rates for African-American males. Also, scholars such as Raymond Williams and Khali Gibran Muhammad attempt to define hegemony and provide a historical narrative for how the concept has influenced institutional bias. While Williams focuses specifically on how hegemonic practices are able to "maintain legitimacy" within societies, Muhammad analyzes the "origin" of the U.S. American "white culture" and how such a dominant ideological framework has been able to "gain momentum" throughout time. Furthermore, scholars such as Chris Peters, Mike Conway, Maria



Elizabeth Grabe, Kevin Grieves and Matthew Norton interpret communicative strategies apparent within *The O'Reilly Factor* through extensive analysis. Although each of the studies performed consists of a research topic that varies slightly from the others, all three rhetorical analyses aim at examining the reasoning for why *The O'Reilly Factor* has been extremely successful within American society and how O'Reilly is able to present an alleged "fair and balanced" persona within a heavily opinionated broadcast.

### **Literature covering Racial Bias within Mass Media Outlets**

The negative portrayal of African-American youth in the media (specifically around the issue of crime), has received much scholarly attention. Dennis Rome's segment of his book *Black Demons* argues that harmful ideologies are passed on to the American public through popular media outlets.<sup>29</sup> Specifically addressing *The New York Times*, Fox News, CNN and MSNBC, Rome argues that the public's common perception of crime is "invalid." Furthermore, he claims that African-American youth have been strategically labeled as "folk devils" behind the alleged increase in "criminalism" within U.S American socio-culture and are purposely labeled as "inherently violent" in order to maintain hegemonic power structures. By ensuring that African American men are ostracized and labeled as "deservedly incarcerated," the "white upper class" remains shielded from public stigmatism. Rome suggests that contemporary mass media outlets "blanket blame" minority culture and labels the "white" majority as "victims" behind the "reckless African-American youth." Furthermore, Rome argues that these criminal stereotypes are strategically used by "white culture" to suppress the African-American way of life. Claiming that mass media outlets continuously depict African Americans as

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<sup>29</sup> Rome, Dennis, "Theory: UCR, Racial Bias, Public Policy and the Mass Media," *Black Demons: The Media's Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 132-56.

“running from the law,” Rome examines these images and offers a theory for why the phenomenon occurs within the United States. Rome investigates the origins of this criminal stereotype, how it was used throughout American history, and the effect this has on modern minority families. In order to hinder racism within our society, Rome argues that mass media/entertainment outlets must discontinue presenting a “violent image” of African Americans to the public.

Clarence Dunnville’s segment *Senior Lawyer’s Section* “Unequal Justice Under the Law – Racial Inequalities in the Justice System” claims that incarceration rates amongst African-American young adults are much higher than any other ethnic category. Dunnville states that such a phenomenon is a direct effect of “mass media bias” which leads the public (and inevitably juries) to convict African Americans at a frequent rate.<sup>30</sup> Dunnville presents startling statistics, claiming that an African American under the age of 30 has a “one in three” chance of being sent to prison. He argues that gangster rap music, reality crime shows and newscasts have “essentially defined crime and given it a black face.” Such stereotyping, according to Dunnville, inevitably leads to the perpetuation of racist ideologies within the American criminal justice system. One recent Justice Department report, when analyzing a nationwide trend in death sentence cases, determined that 80% of all defendants sentenced to death in federal courts were minorities (with African Americans being convicted at “21 times higher of a rate” than white males). These studies formulated by judicial scholars reveal how harmful “blanket blaming” can inevitably lead to “practical”/real-life dilemmas within the courtroom setting.

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<sup>30</sup> Clarence Dunnville, “Unequal Justice Under the Law – Racial Inequities in the Justice System.” *Senior Lawyers Section* (Virginia: VLRS, 2000), 23-54.

Within his research, Dunnaville quotes a report by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights entitled, “Justice on Trial: Racial Disparities in the American Justice System.” The study concludes that, though the United States has made “significant progress toward the objective of ensuring equal treatment under the law for all citizens,” racial inequality still appears to be growing within the area of criminal justice.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the study claims that (even with congressional actions attempting to endorse civil rights such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act and 1968 Fair Housing Act) African Americans still face unfair persecution/abuse under the law. Dunnaville claims that innocent minority victims “are detained by the police on the street far more than whites” with law enforcement employing tactics that are “shockingly unfair to an African American’s right to privacy and well-being.” Dunnaville quotes the “Justice on Trial” report, which, through analyzing police investigations/interrogations, argues against a “disparate implementation of justice”:

“Unequal treatment of minorities characterizes every stage of the process. Black and Hispanic Americans, and other minority groups as well, are victimized by disproportionate targeting and unfair treatment by police and other frontline law enforcement officials; by racially skewed charging and plea bargaining decisions of prosecutors; by discriminatory sentencing practices; and by failure of judges, elected officials and other criminal justice policy makers to redress the inequities that become more glaring every day.”

Furthermore, Dunnaville’s study investigates the state of Virginia’s criminal justice system, which, in the year of 1996, black males were imprisoned for drug offenses at a rate “21 times higher than that for white males and at a rate 13 times higher than white males nationally.” Within the same study, Dunnaville found that 80% of the defendants sentenced to death in the federal courts were minorities. Such unequal incarceration rates led the Virginia Advisory Committee to find a “serious breach” between African-

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<sup>31</sup> “The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.” *The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights*. Last Modified March 10, 2010. <http://www.civilrights.org/publications/reports/iccpr-shadow-report/democracy-imprisoned.html>.

American citizens and their state's justice system.

Darron T. Smith addresses the media's bias portrayal of black males in his article "Images of Black Males in Popular Media."<sup>32</sup> Smith argues that mass media's portrayal of "token" black males, one-dimensional African-American characters and the "black criminal" justify racial inequities African-Americans encounter in a number of institutions. These are seen in the form of inflated rates of school discipline, underachievement in higher education and higher rates of poverty, homicide, unemployment and "over involvement in the criminal system."<sup>33</sup> Similarly to Rome and Dunnville, Smith states that media images "provide us with a manufactured reality of misrepresentations that guides societal perceptions of black men, whether real or imagined." Smith claims that harmful African-American stereotypes perpetuated by mass media outlets "produce misunderstandings among races." Furthermore, Smith argues that mass media's poor portrayal of the African-American population leads to an "over involvement of blacks in the criminal system." According to Smith, popular television programs reflect the interests of "white culture" (containing "white themes" and values). Smith recognizes that some African Americans "participate in their own marginalization" and reaffirm the negative stereotypes placed upon them through music videos and reality television. The article goes further and discusses how the "white consumer" based movie industry is in the business of relating to "white culture." Therefore, when black actors are hired, they are offered limited options for freedom of expression. According to Smith, this multi-million dollar industry (along with news media) perpetuates harmful

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<sup>32</sup> Darron T Smith. "Images of Black Males in Popular Media," *Huffington Post*, last modified March 15, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/darron-t-smith-phd/black-men-media\\_b\\_2844990.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/darron-t-smith-phd/black-men-media_b_2844990.html).

stereotypes against African Americans onto the public, which, in turn, fuels racism and promotes a highly “racialized” society.

Mary Oliver’s chapter entitled “Race and Crime in the Media: Research from a Media Effects Perspective” attempts to identify why the “fear of crime” is continuously rising within the American community.<sup>34</sup> Even with FBI statistics indicating that crime rates have been steadily decreasing over the past twenty years, concerns about “criminal victimization” is apparent with the new implementation of neighborhood watches, “house and car alarm systems,” the purchase of handguns for personal protection and other means to deter violent crime. Furthermore, Oliver identifies that (within research on “contemporary American racial stereotyping”) individuals portray a perceived fear of African Americans. Oliver argues that the increased portrayal of “fictional crime entertainment,” “reality based programming and news” and the “veil of objectivity” presented by mass media outlets lead the public to accept “racialized messages” endorsed by powerful institutions. Although she argues that mass media does not present as large of a role in contributing to criminal stereotypes as internal discourses and interpersonal factors influencing attitude/impression formation, Oliver states that mass media outlets still are a major force in influencing how the American public views crime. She identifies that, since most individuals in the United States report that the media is their primary source of daily information, the American people’s increased reliance on news outlets limits their ability to “critically evaluate or discount biased or distorted portrayal that are routinely featured.”

### **Scholarly Literature covering Bill O’Reilly and *The O’Reilly Factor***

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<sup>34</sup> Mary Oliver. “Race and Crime in the Media: Research from a Media Effects Perspective.” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 43-58.

In order to further analyze *The O'Reilly Factor's* ability to “lower the threshold” of traditional journalism while, simultaneously, maintaining a credible image to the public, Chris Peters looks critically of how the television network has maintained popularity amongst its’ viewers in his scholarly article “NO-SPIN ZONES: The Rise of the American Cable News Magazine and Bill O’Reilly.”<sup>35</sup> Within his analysis, Peters states that “personal belief” and subjectivity has “crept” its’ way into allegedly “objective” reporting methods. Furthermore, Peters argues that broadcast journalism has dramatically evolved in contemporary society with the anchor often engaging in “belief-driven” practices and “interpreting” facts to the American public. Such an evolution, according to Peters, also resides in the public mindset of mass media. Peters states that audiences “want to know how the journalists they trust feel about things that are important to their lives” instead of settling for the “basic facts of the story.” Peters also discusses how *The O'Reilly Factor* is currently the #1 show on American cable news networks with the program contributing one-tenth of the Fox News Channel’s total yearly revenue. Also, Peters portrays *The O'Reilly Factor* as being extremely multi-faceted with Bill O’Reilly writing four non-fiction books that reached the top of *The New York Times* bestseller’s list. In other words, Peters argues that *The O'Reilly Factor's* influence “stretches far beyond what one would expect from a show drawing between 2.5 and 3.5 million viewers per evening.”

Regarding the structure of the show itself, Peters argues that *The O'Reilly Factor's* “Talking Points” segment is typically utilized as a tool that allows O’Reilly to go on “crusades” that gives instructions and call his audience to act against a “common

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<sup>35</sup> Chris Peters. “No-Spin Zones: The Rise of the American Cable News Magazine and Bill O’Reilly.” *Journalism Studies* (London: Routledge, 2010) 833-846.

enemy.” Peters also discusses how Bill O’Reilly has frequently been criticized for his “accuracy,” “accountability” and “journalistic objectivity” from other major news networks. Furthermore, Peters argues that (while *The O’Reilly Factor* maintains an image of “credibility” and being a “conduit of fact” to his audience) it is unclear whether or not O’Reilly “simply misspeaks, knowingly manipulates or consciously lies” when presenting erroneous claims to the American public. Peters states that, although *The O’Reilly Factor* includes guests on the show that give the appearance of fair representation from all sides of the American political system, O’Reilly presents a “falsified vision of truth” to his viewers.

Mike Conway, Maria Elizabeth Grabe and Kevin Grieves perform a “propaganda analysis” of *The O’Reilly Factor* in their scholarly article “Villains, Victims and the Virtuous in Bill O’Reilly’s No Spin Zone.”<sup>36</sup> Such an analysis focuses upon rhetorical strategies used by O’Reilly within his news segments and on his framing of people/important political figures and dominant ideologies. The scholars argue that, even though Fox News bears the slogan “fair and balanced,” the network has been historically linked with being “brash, opinionated and unashamedly patriotic.” According to Conway, Grabe and Grieves, a propaganda analysis consists of providing the public with the “skills necessary to detect potentially misleading messages” and originated with critiquing muckraking journalists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Within their study, they compare Bill O’Reilly’s “propaganda techniques” to that of Father Coughlin (a powerful Catholic priest that continuously preached anti-Semitic messages to the public during the 1930’s). In this comparison, the scholars argue that O’Reilly relies heavily on the “good

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<sup>36</sup> Mike Conway, et al. “Villains, Victims and the Virtuous in Bill O’Reilly’s ‘No-Spin Zone’.” *Journalism Studies* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2007) 198-220.

vs. evil” tactic within his “Talking Points” segment and continuously labels at least one group of people as “evil” while holding his personal values and the political beliefs of the network to be “virtuous.”

The study also calculated the number of “propaganda incidents” used by O’Reilly within his “Talking Points” segment and classified such devices into 7 categories: *name calling* (or giving a person or idea a “bad label” to make the audience reject such policies/ideas without first examining the evidence), *glittering generality* (or use of “virtue words” that push the audience to “accept an idea or person without examining the evidence”), *transfer* (which involved “using prestige or authority of one idea or person and transferring that to another to make it acceptable or add stature to it”), *plain folks* (or when the host presents “themselves, an institution, another person or idea” as being “one with the common people”), *bandwagon* (or, because “everybody is doing and believing it,” the audience should believe the same), *testimonial* (or a respected/disrespected person endorsing/rejecting another idea or person) and *card stacking* (or the selective and strategic use of facts, “half-truths or lies” to convince the audience to accept or reject an idea or person). Through an in-depth analysis of 105 “Talking Points” segments within *The O’Reilly Factor*, it became apparent that the “backbone” of O’Reilly’s communication strategy relied heavily upon *name calling*. Within their analysis, the scholars determined that O’Reilly had used *name calling* on an average of 8.88 times per minute, had implemented *glittering generality* on an average of 2.96 incidents per minute, *transfer* at 0.10 times per minute, *plain folks* on an average of 0.04 times per minute, *bandwagon* on an average of 0.67 times per minute and *testimonial* on an average of 0.25 times per minute. When directly comparing O’Reilly’s communicative strategies



to Coughlin, they found that Coughlin had totaled 264 “incidents” of using propaganda devices while O’Reilly had used 3,210 in total within the duration of 248.65 minutes of broadcast.

However, Matthew Norton questions aspects of such a study performed above by claiming that the three scholars focused “too exclusively” on the “Talking Points” segment and disregarded other aspects of the television broadcast.<sup>37</sup> Within his analysis, Norton argues,

“The program produces a radically simple partisan schema for interpreting the news, but to do so it relies on the constructed persona of the host, a complex underlying meaning structure formulated around binary oppositions, and a number of rhetorical techniques... It is suggested that this kind of deep analysis of meaning structures is important for making sense of how news analysis programs and mediated partisanship function as a cultural system.”

Furthermore, Norton claims that *The O’Reilly Factor* “creates meaningfully charged situations” and conflicts that are strategically aligned with a pre-determined political agenda. Also, he argues that the broadcast provides an “illusion” of “political victory” for the common people and presents a “simple” framework for understanding the daily news: “our side is right, the other side is always wrong.” For his method, Norton continuously watched *The O’Reilly Factor* television broadcasts from the years of 2005 to 2009 and found common themes and relationships connecting the different episodes. Of these themes, Norton determined that *The O’Reilly Factor* continuously framed itself as being “fair and balanced” within an extremely “radical liberal” mass media culture. He further analyzes the “O’Reilly persona” which, according to Norton, is an extremely important concept for determining why the show has become successful within the contemporary mass media world. O’Reilly continuously labels himself as a “working-class American”

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew Norton. “A Structural Hermeneutics of The O’Reilly Factor.” *Center for Cultural Sociology* (New Haven: Springer Science+Business Media, 2011), 316-344.

that “worked brutally hard” to achieve economic successes. Norton argues that O’Reilly strategically uses this image and emphasizes his “humble origins” in order to protect his persona from being “polluted by association with the delegitimized elite.” The “O’Reilly persona” also involves a “distinctive ‘performative’ style” always in the “service of truth.” According to Norton, O’Reilly continuously identifies himself as being unaccepting of “spinning the news” or skewing factual evidence in order to protect the network’s political agenda.

Within his analysis, Norton also formulates a list of dichotomies that represent “deep meaning structures” behind *The O’Reilly Factor*. These “binaries” consist of the “little guy vs. the system” (where O’Reilly presents himself as protecting the working-class American), “rational vs. ridiculous” (or O’Reilly engaging in “fact-based argumentation and discourse” in order to legitimize his beliefs as “more powerful” than the other side), “fairness vs. media bias” (where O’Reilly continuously presents his show as being “objective” and “balanced”) and “brave/strong vs. cowardly/weak” (or when O’Reilly labels his opponents as being “un-American” and “immoral”). Furthermore, Norton compares O’Reilly’s rhetorical techniques to that of Socrates’ method of winning arguments (or “the elenchus”). Such a rhetorical strategy consists of a rhetorician asking a series of questions “posed to an interlocutor during a dialogue” or “examining a person with regard to the statement he/she has made by putting to him questions and asking for further statements.” Norton argues that O’Reilly’s debate technique directly compares to Socrates’ “cross-examination” method of argumentation.

### **Scholarly Literature covering Hegemony**

Raymond Williams further investigated the idea of hegemonic order within U.S. American society. Within his scholarly book *Marxism and Literature*, Williams discusses the definition of hegemony and the “constitutive and socially constructed nature” of power structures.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, since dominant practices are ultimately socially constructed phenomena, Williams argues that hegemony is a dynamic/ever changing concept and must be continuously renewed by dominant power structures. Furthermore, Williams argues that hegemony is a “relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values or beliefs” that can be “abstracted as a worldview or a class outlook.” In other words, Williams argues that hegemony is often considered as being synonymous with dominant belief systems or the “world view” of controlling power structures. Williams argues that relations of domination are in effect a “saturation of the whole process of living” and go further than “political or economic activity” or a “manifest of social activity.” Also, Williams states that hegemony encompasses a “whole substance of lived experiences” to such an extent that, in effect, the “pressures and limits of specific economic, political and social systems” appear to be the “pressures and limits of common sense.” Williams goes further by claiming that hegemony is usually viewed in terms of “inequalities between socio-economic classes.” Furthermore, he states that hegemony is often viewed as a culture that has to be seen as “the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes.”

Stating that “hegemony goes beyond culture” and “is the whole body of practices and expectations over the whole of the living perpetuating dominant ideologies,” Williams argues such a practice “reciprocally confirms their dominance” through

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<sup>38</sup> Raymond Williams. “Marxism and Literature.” *Oxford University Press* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 109-114.

everyday vernacular. Not only so, but he investigated as to why “dominant publics” cannot ignore/isolate alternative “counter-publics” that oppose such a hegemonic order. Arguing that hegemony “must always include the efforts and contributions of those who are in one way or another contradicting their beliefs” in order to be truly “all-encompassing” within American society, Williams points to the never fully exclusive nature of contemporary power structures. According to the theorist, incorporating counterpublics into the dominant hegemonic narrative allows for such a culture to “control, transform or even incorporate” minority belief systems. For, in order to suppress alternatives and oppositional forces that “threaten its’ dominance,” Williams argues that dominant ideologies/hegemonies must “be especially alert” and “responsive” to differing ideologies and belief systems.

Furthermore, the theorist claims that hegemony is a complex interlocking of “political, social and cultural forces” with power distribution being determined by “active vernacular elements.” Williams argues that hegemony is not only an “active process” but, through having complex features and elements, is the “adequate organization” and “interconnection of otherwise separated and even disparate meanings, values and practices” which the dominant power structures strategically “incorporate” in order to re-affirm an “effective social order.” Furthermore, Williams argues that hegemony relies heavily on the concept of tradition for (through the practice of “selective tradition”) it is an “actively shaping force” and is “the most evident expression of the dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits.” Williams claims that hegemony must continue to “renew, recreate and defend” dominant ideologies in order to accommodate the ever changing historical narrative.

Within his book “The Condemnation of Blackness: Race Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America,”<sup>39</sup> Khali Gibran Muhammad discusses the current U.S. prison population (being the largest of anytime throughout American history) and the reasoning for why more than half of those incarcerated are African American. Furthermore, Muhammad attempts to determine how the statistical link between “blackness” and “criminality” was initially created within U.S. American socio-culture. His research labels the phenomenon as the “negro problem” and identifies the source of long-standing prejudice against the African-American population as being in the wake of the Civil War and Reconstruction era. Within this time period, “specially designed race-conscious laws, discriminatory punishments and new forms of everyday racial surveillance” had been institutionalized by the 1890’s. White social scientists, in an effort to suppress “black freedom,” argued that such practices were objective, color-blind and “incontrovertible.” Muhammad further argues that, after the racialized laws were enacted, debates arguing for the “fundamental racial and cultural differences” between the African-American populations and “white” society began to materialize. Furthermore, at the dawn of the twentieth century, Muhammad attempts to discover the reasoning for why European Immigrants (such as the Irish, Italians and Polish) were able to “shed” their “criminal identities” while African Americans are continuously stigmatized as “inherently violent.” By examining “black crime discourses” within contemporary society, Muhammad labels distinct patterns of how Americans discuss race and crime. Stating that “black crime rhetoric” has historically been a dominant narrative, he argues that “the statistical rhetoric

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<sup>39</sup> Muhammad, Khalil Gibran. "Incriminating Culture: The Limits of Racial Liberalism in the Progressive Era." *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2010), 89-95.

of the Negro criminal” became an agent perpetuating national discourses on black inferiority.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the idea of racial bias within powerful mass media outlets influencing public ideology directly links to topics I will cover within my analysis. *The O'Reilly Factor*, specifically in broadcasts attempting to provide the audience with a background on the life of Martin, contains multiple examples of presenting racial stereotypes linking African Americans to crime. Rome's idea that mass media bias is strategically in place to protect “hegemonic power structures” relates to *The O'Reilly Factor's* role in legitimizing the dominant “white culture” apparent within American society. Furthermore, Dunnaville's critique of a racially bias judicial system illustrates how mass media bias (which is apparent within *The O'Reilly Factor's* television broadcasts) can lead to detrimental “real-life” effects on the African-American population. Also, Oliver's idea that mass media outlets possess a “veil of objectivity” relates to how *The O'Reilly Factor* is able to appear “fair and balanced” while maintaining a pre-determined political agenda. This allows for O'Reilly to strategically protect the dominant “white culture” while simultaneously legitimizing himself as an “objective reporter” of the news.

The rhetorical analyses of *The O'Reilly Factor* discussed above are important for interpreting the communicative devices apparent within O'Reilly's broadcasts. Peters' idea that O'Reilly has historically been given the ability to provide an “opinionated documentation” of current events while maintaining a “fair and balanced” persona through allegedly providing “equal representation” from all sides of the American political spectrum is directly relatable to my rhetorical analysis. This phenomenon not

only explains a contemporary trend in news anchors “interpreting” current situations to the American public, but it also provides reasoning for why *The O’Reilly Factor* has become an extremely powerful and influential television broadcast. Also, Norton’s analysis of “communicative binaries” apparent within *The O’Reilly Factor’s* broadcasts relates to O’Reilly’s portrayal of the American “grievance industry” and Trayvon Martin. Specifically, the dichotomy of “rational vs. ridiculous” is comparable to O’Reilly’s statements condemning “race hustlers”/African American leadership for relying heavily on society and governmental policies rather than “acting for themselves.” O’Reilly frames such a claim as both “ridiculous” and “irrational” for, within a contemporary marketplace relying heavily on “individualism”, African Americans must “solve their own problems” through changes in personal behavior.

And finally, William's definition of hegemony directly correlates with the concept of the U.S. American “white society.” Specifically, Williams’s discussion of the “constitutive and socially constructed nature” of power structures relates to how dominant ideologies on race and crime are created through everyday vernacular. This concept reveals how *The O’Reilly Factor* is able to “re-affirm” dominant hegemonic power structures within U.S. American society and, through presenting an apparently “legitimate” argument to its’ viewers, how the broadcast possesses the ability to influence public ideology. These “active vernacular elements” in *The O’Reilly Factor’s* television broadcasts allocates power to the “complex interlocking of political, social and cultural forces” within the dominant white hegemonic order and, in turn, ostracizes counter-publics (such as the African-American and civil rights communities). Furthermore, Muhammad’s argument that the “black criminal” has been a historically dominant

narrative within American society and how the “statistical rhetoric of the Negro criminal” has become an agent perpetuating national discourses on black inferiority directly relates to *The O’Reilly Factor’s* coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting. By relying on a historical trend linking African Americans to criminal activity, O’Reilly’s arguments both “re-affirmed” dominant narratives and “legitimized” the “white hegemonic order” within U.S. socio-culture.



### *Analysis Part 1*

#### **The Evolution of O'Reilly's Coverage of the Trayvon Martin Shooting**

Throughout *The O'Reilly Factor's* coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting, the show made accusations against the legitimacy of African-American households and criticized the civil rights industry for inciting racial violence. Furthermore, it appeared that crucial events in the George Zimmerman case influenced the portrayal of Trayvon Martin by Bill O'Reilly and how he presented his broadcast to his viewers. Within the first episodes covering the Trayvon Martin shooting, O'Reilly offered statistics to his audience in an objective manner and accused "race hustlers" such as Al Sharpton for "fueling" racial hostility within American society. As time goes on, O'Reilly verbally attacked "liberal" mass media outlets such as MSNBC and became extremely critical of African-American households. Eventually, O'Reilly labeled the economic/criminal problems apparent within African-American communities as "self-inflicted by the black culture" and legitimized white hegemonic power structures within U.S. society.

#### **Friday March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012: Stand Your Ground**

On Friday March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, O'Reilly began his coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting by discussing President Barack Obama's verbal response to the tragedy. In the beginning of his "talking points" segment, O'Reilly attempted to clarify the situation to his viewers by presenting a detailed account of what happened on the night of the shooting. Touching on the Florida "Stand Your Ground" law and other legislation that made it legal for Zimmerman to defend himself when threatened, O'Reilly presented himself as calm and collected to his audience. After discussing recent updates on the potential case on Zimmerman, O'Reilly provided his opinion regarding President

Obama's statements on the Trayvon Martin shooting. Within his public address on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, Obama stated, "when I think about this boy (Trayvon), I think about my own kids." In response to these statements, O'Reilly argued that it is "wrong to convict any American on television" and stated that other mass media outlets (such as MSNBC) were wrongly doing so. Regarding Obama, O'Reilly stated that the president's verbal involvement in the case was "appropriate and completely justified." However, O'Reilly refrained from making any "rushed conclusions" on what occurred during the night of the shooting and claimed "every decent American should want justice in this case."<sup>40</sup>

### **Monday March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012: Al Sharpton Controversy and Immoral News Agencies**

On Monday March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012, O'Reilly began the episode with his "Talking Points" segment and asserted that the Fox News network would not be responsible for "accusing" Zimmerman of murder on television. Furthermore, O'Reilly provided an update on the case by presenting new details on the ongoing Zimmerman trial. This included the fact that Zimmerman would be claiming self-defense and insisted that Martin "attacked" him when approaching the 17-year-old. Furthermore, O'Reilly played a clip of an interview with an eyewitness of the shooting who, when being interviewed by Fox 35 Orlando journalists, claimed, "the one on the bottom was screaming for help... The person who was on top beating up the other guy was the one laying in the grass." Afterwards, O'Reilly argued that powerful mass media outlets such as MSNBC were "hysterically reporting" the Zimmerman trial and that the news organization was "in the wrong" for hiring Reverend Al Sharpton as a correspondent during a "controversial time." O'Reilly then played a clip of a political television critic named Eric Deggans

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<sup>40</sup> "Friday, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012 Talking Points Segment" *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified March 23, 2012, <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3094>.

from the Tampa Bay Times (who also is a current civil rights activist) arguing that Zimmerman was not being treated fairly by the American public. O'Reilly continued to call into question political parties that were "inflaming" the situation such as the New Black Panther Party. The broadcast then transitioned into a clip of an African American named Mikhail Muhammad (the chairman of the New Black Panther Party) calling for the "immediate capture" of George Zimmerman with approximately three of his fellow members beside him. As a reward, Muhammad claimed that his organization would pay "\$1 Million" to whoever has the capabilities of doing so. Furthermore, Muhammad claimed that "we are going to force our government to do their job properly, and if they don't we will." O'Reilly stated that "if Zimmerman is guilty than he must be held accountable, but that must be proved first in a court of law." *The O'Reilly Factor* (again) played a clip of President Obama addressing the American people on the shooting who, in response to the rising public tension regarding the Zimmerman trial, stated, "my main message is to the parents of Trayvon Martin. If I had a son he'd look like Trayvon. I think they are right to expect that all of us as Americans are going to take this with the seriousness it deserves..." O'Reilly stated that, although Obama had the political authority to make such a claim, he should be cautious on how his words might promote a "radical response" to the current events. Furthermore, O'Reilly argued, "news agencies have a responsibility, morally and professionally, to practice restraint in situations like this one" and that "lunatics" such as the New Black Panther Party are being "prodded" by powerful news organizations.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> "Monday, March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Talking Points Segment & Top Story" *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified March 26, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show? action=viewTVShow&showID=3095>.

Within the same broadcast, specifically within *The O'Reilly Factor's* "Weekdays with Bernie Segment," O'Reilly interviewed Bernie Goldberg (the founder of BernardGoldberg.com and a political analyst)<sup>42</sup> about the Zimmerman trial. Goldberg began the segment by clarifying that "every decent American should want justice in this case" and that "if there is a crime that has been committed then the criminal (Zimmerman) should be punished." After stating this, Goldberg called into question the "hypocrisy and sanctimony" of the "national press and civil rights activists." Goldberg then argued that "if Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by another black teenager then President Obama wouldn't have weighed in, Al Sharpton wouldn't be holding rallies, the media would not be running this on television and, except for his family and friends, we wouldn't even know the name Trayvon Martin." Goldberg then stated that the reason for why this story had been a popular one to cover by mass media outlets (which he claimed that he was "glad that it was receiving media attention") was that "Trayvon was black and Zimmerman is white." Furthermore, Goldberg discussed how mass media continuously leave "black on black crime" unaddressed because of the fact that "Liberals in the media like to show their good racial manners... They do not want to shine a flashlight on dysfunctional African-American neighborhoods." To defend his position on the issue, Goldberg provided his audience with the example of Delric Waymon Miller IV. Miller was a nine-month-old African-American child who was asleep at his family's house in Detroit when a gang member had opened fire with an AK-47 in a drive-by shooting. In the gunfire, Miller was shot and killed early in the morning of February 21<sup>st</sup>, 2012. Goldberg criticized the "liberal media" for not covering the story extensively

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<sup>42</sup> "Bernie's Bio" *Bernie Goldberg.com*. Last Modified February 10, 2014. <http://www.bernardgoldberg.com/bio/>

because “in one case the shooter (Zimmerman) had white skin and in the other the shooter (or the gang member who had killed Miller IV) had black skin.” O’Reilly continued the conversation by claiming that civil rights activists continuously call for “protection” from citizens of different color instead of addressing black on black crime within our nation. Goldberg then referenced *The New York Times*’ identification of Zimmerman as a “white Hispanic” and argued that the news organization included “white” under his racial classification in order to “continue the story line” of “white vigilante killing unarmed black teenager.” In response to this “bias news coverage,” Goldberg declared liberal media outlets as continuing a “historical trend” of “black victim and white shooter.” Goldberg then attacked MSNBC for allowing Reverend Al Sharpton to both “hold a rally and be a correspondent talking about the Zimmerman trial at the same time” and argued that the “liberal-minded” news network “only cares about ratings in this issue.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Wednesday March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012: “Stop and Frisk” and African-American Frustration**

The third episode that I will include within my rhetorical analysis comes from *The O’Reilly Factor* broadcast on Wednesday March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Within his “Factor Follow Up Segment,” O’Reilly began by discussing the “unintended consequences” of the Trayvon Martin case. This included Spike Lee tweeting the address of George Zimmerman to the public (which was erroneous) and North Miami Beach High School students looting a Walgreen store. Political commentator Jasmyne Cannick and attorney Faith Jenkins (both being African-American women) were interviewed on the television broadcast. To begin the conversation, O’Reilly asked Jenkins the reasoning for why such

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<sup>43</sup> “Monday, March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Weekdays With Bernie Segment.” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified March 26, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3095>

racial hostility would be present even when it appeared that the Martin family was receiving fair representation in their case against Zimmerman. To begin, Jenkins clarified that the actions the high school students and director Spike Lee conducted were “clearly wrong” and “distracted from the current issue.” Furthermore, Jenkins stated “we (the African-American people) need people to both call for justice for Trayvon, but also to condemn behavior that takes away from the real issues of this case.” Jenkins also argued that these actions “damaged” and “hindered” the conversation about racial profiling that should be taking place in this country. In response to these statements, Cannick stated that “we are witnessing the unification of the African-American community around the issue” who are linked by “an ability to have a conversation” against “white on black” racism. In an attempt to counter their point, O’Reilly mentioned the controversial police policy of “stop and frisk.” O’Reilly argued that, even though the majority of those being “frisked” by police are minorities, the “stats say that the majority of African-American men being killed are killed by other African-American men.” Furthermore, O’Reilly argued that police officers must then “target” the ethnic group committing the highest rates of crime within urban neighborhoods in order to “protect” citizens within these regions. O’Reilly also defended “stop and frisk” policies by claiming, “under these targeted actions, crime in poor neighborhoods dramatically drops as a result.”<sup>44</sup>

#### **April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012: The “Radical Liberal” MSNBC**

The fourth episode to be included in my analysis was aired on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012. Within this “Weekdays with Bernie Segment,” O’Reilly again discussed mass media bias and expressed his concern over MSNBC’s coverage of the Zimmerman trial. O’Reilly

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<sup>44</sup> “Wednesday, March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Factor Follow Up Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show? action=viewTVShow&showID=3097>.

stated that “the problem with MSNBC is that they have no newscast” and that Al Sharpton was allowed to both be a civil rights activist and a news correspondent with their organization. Goldberg agreed with O’Reilly and stated that MSNBC has been historically “irresponsible” with their news broadcast and that NBC should attempt to “cut all ties” with the “damaging” television program. In order to further dismantle the network’s credibility, O’Reilly stated that “the place doesn’t even do that well” and that “it would be one thing if it (MSNBC) were top ten in cable, but they are around twenty-eighth in primetime...” Furthermore, O’Reilly stated that MSNBC was transforming into a “radical liberal” network that does not promote an “open” and “honest” discussion on controversial issues. Goldberg warned the public not to rush to conclusions regarding the conviction of George Zimmerman by stating, “what if it turns out, hypothetically, that the investigation says that Zimmerman was innocent?” Goldberg also argued that *The New York Times* and Florida Democratic congresswoman Frederica Wilson were perpetuating a reckless viewpoint to the American public that “refused to accept” anything less than a guilty verdict for Zimmerman. At the end of the news segment, O’Reilly claimed that Fox News seemed to be the only news network that was “calling out the alarm” against such activity.<sup>45</sup>

### **Tuesday April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012: Rich Benjamin and the Stand Your Ground Law**

On Tuesday April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, Bill O’Reilly brought Rich Benjamin (an African-American *New York Times* journalist) onto the program in order to discuss Benjamin’s “controversial” article on the Martin shooting. Benjamin, in his column entitled “The Gated Community Mentality,” stated “as a black man who has been mugged at gunpoint

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<sup>45</sup> “Monday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012 Weekdays with Bernie Segment.” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified April 2, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow &showID=3100>

by a black teenager late at night, I am not naïve... I didn't dream of harming my teenage assailant, let alone taking his life." Furthermore, Benjamin wrote "Mr. Zimmerman reacted very differently, taking out his handgun and shooting the youth in cold blood." In response to this article, O'Reilly said to Benjamin "convicting Zimmerman in print is wrong." O'Reilly specifically targeted the phrase "murdered in cold blood" that Benjamin used and that, if attacked by Martin, Zimmerman had the right to shoot the teenager under the Florida "Stand Your Ground" law. Benjamin refuted O'Reilly's statements by arguing that what happened on the night of the shooting "meets my definition of cold blooded murder" but he would "never convict him according to a legal definition." O'Reilly also argued that Benjamin was "whipping up" the public through enthusiastic language and careless accusations. After discussing the article, O'Reilly questioned Benjamin about the night he was mugged by a black teenager and stated that, if the confrontation had taken place in Florida, Benjamin would've had the "legal right" to "shoot that assailant dead." Benjamin responded to O'Reilly by claiming, "someone taking my personal property is not a justifiable cause to take their life." Furthermore, even though the mugger had pointed a gun at him, Benjamin stated that he "didn't feel his life was in danger." O'Reilly immediately criticized Benjamin for not taking the issue seriously and argued that "90% of Americans, if somebody is coming at them with a gun and they have one, they are going to use it. And they should be able to use it." In response to Benjamin arguing that his assailant was "only a teenager," O'Reilly replied with "I don't care if he (the mugger) is four years old... If someone was coming at me



with a gun and I had one, I would have shot him.” O’Reilly continued by stating, “that (Stand Your Ground) is the law in America, that’s self defense.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Friday May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012: New Evidence In the Zimmerman Trial**

On Friday May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012, *The O’Reilly Factor* showed evidence that would eventually be used in the Zimmerman trial and that portrayed what Martin looked like on the night of the shooting. O’Reilly brought in Geraldo Rivera, a Fox News anchor and attorney, to interpret the newly released 7/11 surveillance video from the night of the shooting and to provide his personal commentary on the matter. To begin the “Factor Follow Up” segment, O’Reilly presented new evidence in the Zimmerman trial. This included that two witnesses had supported what Zimmerman had stated happened in the encounter with Martin, that Zimmerman can be heard yelling for help 14 times on a 911 call recorded during the fight, and that an autopsy on Martin showed traces of marijuana within his bloodstream. Rivera argued that the marijuana evidence was “not as powerful” as the surveillance tape and stated that “what is important is what Trayvon Martin looked like that night.” Furthermore, Rivera claimed that Martin was wearing “thug wear” and that he was “not a little kid standing at 6 foot 2.” Rivera continued by arguing that “if this young man was a stranger to George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin looks just like the people who had been burglarizing and victimizing that neighborhood for the last 6 months.” Rivera also stated that “racial profiling is based on a reasonable comparison” and that what happened to Martin “may be profiling but if he looks just like the people who have been committing crimes in my neighborhood that’s the person I’m going to focus my suspicion on.” O’Reilly responded to Rivera by claiming that the recent

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<sup>46</sup> “Tuesday, April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012 Factor Follow Up Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified April 3, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3101>

evidence presented (specifically the two witnesses supporting Zimmerman's statements) "bolsters the stand your ground theory" and that "George Zimmerman had a right to do what he did." Rivera agreed with O'Reilly's statements and responded with "there is no doubt in my mind that the special prosecutor in this case, Angela Corey, overcharged George Zimmerman not based on the evidence but based on the enormous pressure from every civil rights activist in this country up to, and including, the President of the United States." Furthermore, Rivera claimed that "there is no murder case here" and that "George Zimmerman wanted to do the right thing." However, O'Reilly refuted Rivera's statement by saying "I don't know if Zimmerman was trying to do the right thing... He may have been simply looking for action." Both O'Reilly and Rivera agreed that there was no "legitimate" murder case due to the overwhelming amounts of evidence supporting Zimmerman. Rivera continued by claiming that "this is about a fight, this is about a big kid (Martin) fighting this squatty guy (Zimmerman)." Furthermore, even though they both agreed that there was truly no case to be had, Rivera stated, "I want a plea, because these parents (Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin) at least deserve something."<sup>47</sup>

### **Monday July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Reaction to the Zimmerman Verdict**

In the beginning of *The O'Reilly Factor's* "Impact Segment," O'Reilly brought on Daryl Parks (an African-American attorney representing Trayvon Martin's family) and asked whether or not he felt the not-guilty verdict was "fair." Daryl Parks answered his question by stating that, even though he didn't want to "second guess the jury," he still felt as if the verdict was "socially illogical." Furthermore, due to the "irrational" acquittal

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<sup>47</sup> "Friday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Factor Follow Up Segment." *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified May 18, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=view TVShow& showID=3134>

of Zimmerman, Parks claimed that the American public was witnessing an “outcry” of disapproval. O’Reilly then asked Parks what he felt about the evidence presented, specifically the fact that “5 out of the 6 jurors” thought that the 9-11 tape substantially backed Zimmerman’s claims. O’Reilly stated to Parks “we should keep this conversation based upon evidence” and asked whether or not he believed the evidence was presented to the jury “fairly.” Parks responded by claiming “I do believe that most of the evidence presented was fair” but that the 9-11 tape was “immaterial” because he believed Zimmerman “was not telling the truth” about what happened on the night of the shooting. Parks went further by stating, “Zimmerman’s team did a fairly good job of presenting him as a nice, model citizen” and defining Martin as a “thug” character. Parks argued that the jury was “easily persuaded” to defend Zimmerman and that his defense attorneys “made Zimmerman look like someone who was needed to protect the neighborhood” against violent criminals. O’Reilly responded in a sincere manner by claiming, “to argue that the jury didn’t convict Zimmerman” due to “racial bias” was “to assume that these six women wanted to do harm to a black man” and that “this cannot be even remotely put forth with any credibility.” Parks responded by stating, “I’m not putting forth that they (the jury) made that decision based upon race” but that “Zimmerman was built as an ideal person and there was too much evidence based on character put into this case than should have been allowed.” O’Reilly responded by stating, “I understand what you are saying” and agreed that there was “a lot of subtleties involved.” He then stated to Parks “I truly hope you and the Martin family accept the verdict as a part of our justice system.” Parks responded by claiming, “we do accept it, we just disagree with it sir.” After hearing this,

O'Reilly stated, "that's fine, we respect your opinion on that and we appreciate you coming on tonight."<sup>48</sup>

### **Tuesday July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013: Black on Black Crime**

The next O'Reilly Factor broadcast discussing the Trayvon Martin shooting took place on July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Within the segment's "Talking Points Memo," O'Reilly began the episode by discussing how the American media was not reporting racial crime accurately. O'Reilly referenced an old interview with Bernie Goldberg (from an episode airing on July 15<sup>th</sup>) specifically when Goldberg stated, "anytime there is interracial crime, there is an overwhelming chance that the victim is going to be white and the criminal is going to be black." O'Reilly then backed up Goldberg's claim by presenting the statistic that 91% of black victim homicides were committed by black offenders between 1976 and 2005. Also, O'Reilly stated, "14% of white victim homicides were committed by black offenders," being "twice as much as the other way around." After interpreting these statistics, O'Reilly made the claim that "black men are not being hunted down by whites, as some hysterical commentators charged after the Zimmerman acquittal." O'Reilly then stated that the "horrendous black on black murder rate is virtually ignored by the press" and that "any exposition of violence in the black community is bad for business." Furthermore, O'Reilly stated that liberal media "believes that it is best to blame the white power structure and look the other way." O'Reilly argued that most liberal commentators do not view "70% of African-American babies being born out of wedlock, the violent rap culture" and "rampant drug use in the inner city" as an immediate problem worth addressing. Afterwards, O'Reilly claimed that "race hustlers" such as Al Sharpton and

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<sup>48</sup> "Monday, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Impact Segment" *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 15, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3435>

Jesse Jackson would “not be in business” if they made “black on black crime” salient to the American public. O’Reilly stated the “liberal line will always be the same” and will “blame society” for the African-American community’s problems.”<sup>49</sup>

Later on in the same television broadcast, O’Reilly interviewed Tavis Smiley (an African-American political radio talk show host) regarding violent crime in contemporary U.S. American society. After being addressed on the arguments made by O’Reilly earlier in the episode, Smiley argued that empathy towards Martin’s life was “lacking in this conversation.” Smiley attempted to dismantle the credibility of O’Reilly’s statistics by claiming “most whites are killed by other whites and most blacks are other blacks” and argued that “in this country, sadly, the life of a black child does not have the same worth and value as the life of a white child.” Smiley continued by stating that Zimmerman “stalked and killed a child (Martin)” on the night of the shooting and that, if Martin were white, he would not have garnered attention from Zimmerman and would not have been killed. Furthermore, Smiley argued that, under the Florida legislation “Stand Your Ground,” Zimmerman had the right to defend himself while Martin did not. O’Reilly refuted Smiley’s argument by claiming “Americans do not have contempt towards the African-American people” and that Smiley “cannot back up his argument with evidence.” Smiley contended that African-American men are frequently viewed as a “menace to society” within the United States and that, if there was a value for “black male life in America” as it is for “white men in America,” the Zimmerman case would have been brought to the public’s attention sooner. O’Reilly again argued that Americans have “no

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<sup>49</sup> “Tuesday, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 16, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3436>

contempt towards black men” and that “a lot of the problem is generated by blacks themselves.”<sup>50</sup>

### **Wednesday July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013: Dishonest Media in Regards to the Zimmerman Verdict**

Within this “Talking Points Segment,” O’Reilly discussed how the “winds may be shifting” in the Zimmerman verdict and that the American media was heavily invested in the race-driven story line regarding Zimmerman’s acquittal. Even though “nearly everyone believed the trial was fair,” O’Reilly argued that mass media outlets still contended “somehow justice was not served because of race.” Furthermore, O’Reilly claimed that the “far-left” was trying hard to exploit African-American animosity. O’Reilly presented an example of this by discussing the “inaccurate reporting” of his statements within an interview on his television program. O’Reilly argued that CNN “deliberately” altered his statement by the network claiming he said, “after an acquittal, black people would run out and cause trouble, after all, you know how those people are.” However, O’Reilly argued that he never mentioned anything about the African-American community within his interview and, soon afterwards, CNN corrected the mistake on their website. Even though O’Reilly appreciated CNN correcting the record, he claimed he was “perplexed at why they allow a radical leftist like Paul Waldman to write for them.” O’Reilly called Waldman a “dishonest Zealot” that CNN shouldn’t have been associated with. However, O’Reilly stated that the “tide is turning” in the case of Trayvon Martin and that he hoped a rational conversation on the topic would be pursued. O’Reilly, again, discussed Tavis Smiley’s argument that African-American men in the United States are often held in “contempt” and wondered why this topic wasn’t “challenged” by

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<sup>50</sup> “Tuesday, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Top Story II Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 16, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=view TVShow&showID=3436>

ABC News' George Stephanopoulos (the television anchor who had interviewed Smiley at the time). O'Reilly brought on Stephanopoulos and asked him directly why his network didn't address Smiley's statements more critically. In defense of the ABC News network, Stephanopoulos argued that he did challenge Smiley's statements by attempting to "redirect him" to the factual evidence of the case. Even though O'Reilly claimed that Smiley was a "stand up guy" for his "firmly held" beliefs, he argued that Stephanopoulos "should not have allowed" these statements to be made within the interview.

Furthermore, O'Reilly stated that "people like you and me" have a "responsibility" to not allow for "radical" beliefs to be spread throughout the American public. O'Reilly claimed that "my responsibility is to stop propaganda cold" and that, even though every interviewer has a different style, Stephanopoulos should have asked Smiley to "back up his statements" with evidence. After this, O'Reilly argued that he was "trying to raise the bar on the network level" and that "there is a strain of hatred in this country that must be challenged by responsible news organizations." O'Reilly continued by claiming, "I want to hear what Tavis has to say, that's why I put him on" and that "I will get right in his face" if he says irresponsible things.<sup>51</sup>

### **Monday July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013: The Disintegration of the African-American Family**

On Monday July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013, O'Reilly took a personal stance on the "problems plaguing black America." Within this "Talking Points" segment, O'Reilly responded to a public address President Barack Obama made on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 2013 regarding the Trayvon Martin case and race problems in America. O'Reilly argued that the President and his administration had "no clue about how to deal with the problems in the black

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<sup>51</sup> "Wednesday, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment" *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 17, 2013. [http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTV\\_Show&showID=3437](http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTV_Show&showID=3437).

community.” Furthermore, O’Reilly stated that “race hustlers” and the “grievance industry” were intimidating any potential open discussion regarding racial problems in American society. O’Reilly claimed that any criticism of the African-American community is disregarded as “racial bias,” leaving “millions of law-abiding African-Americans to pretty much fend for themselves.” After making such a claim, O’Reilly related back to the Trayvon Martin shooting by claiming, “he (Martin) was killed because of the way he looked. Not necessarily his skin color, there is no evidence of that, but because he was a stranger to Zimmerman and was wearing clothing commonly associated with street criminals.” O’Reilly went further by stating that, because so many African-American men are involved in crime, this leads American citizens to racially profile others. O’Reilly presented a criminal statistic to his viewers and claimed “young black men commit homicides at a rate ten times greater than whites and Hispanics combined.” Furthermore, in response to these alarming statistics and the “genocide” in Chicago, O’Reilly argued that the civil rights industry “looks the other way or makes excuses.” Using examples of this, O’Reilly argued, “they (the civil rights community) blames guns, poor education or lack of jobs and rarely do they define the problem accurately.” However, the central point to his argument and main reason (according to O’Reilly) for the recent “chaos in the black precincts” was the “disintegration of the African-American family.” O’Reilly presented more statistics on such a problem, claiming, “73% of all black babies are born out of wedlock.” O’Reilly argued that this “drives poverty” and “the lack of involved fathers leads to young boys growing up resentful and unsupervised.” He continued his argument by saying this problem has been essentially “ignored” by political leaders and civil rights activists. Using another example, he stated



“when was the last time you saw a service ad telling young black girls to avoid becoming pregnant?” and further condemned “race hustlers” for blaming the wrong people for the “black problem.” O’Reilly continued criticizing the African-American community by stating “white people do not force black people to have babies out of wedlock, that’s a personal decision and a decision that has devastated millions of children.” Since young black men are often raised without “much structure,” O’Reilly argued that they are inclined to “reject the education process and gravitate towards the street culture, drugs and gangs.” O’Reilly emphasized the fact that “white society has nothing to do with this decision” and claimed that “nobody forces them to do that, it’s a personal choice.”

O’Reilly continued by stating the “entertainment industry actively encourages such irresponsibility” and “glorifies bad behavior.” Furthermore, O’Reilly argued that “race hustlers and limousine liberals” who claim African Americans are “targeted” by police forces is “all a lie.” O’Reilly attempted to provide a solution to the issue by calling for the “active discouragement of pregnancies out of marriage, to impose strict discipline in public schools, and challenging the entertainment industry from peddling garbage.” After these statements, O’Reilly pointed to the camera and stated, “it’s you Hollywood people and you derelict parents that are hurting these vulnerable children.” O’Reilly argued that “pumping money into the chaos does little, you can’t legislate good parenting or responsible entertainment. But you can fight against the madness with discipline, a firm message and little tolerance for excuse making.” O’Reilly’s final point was directed towards President Obama and Civil Rights activists, claiming that “it is time for the

African-American leadership to stop the nonsense, to walk away from the world of victimization and grievance and lead the way out of this mess.”<sup>52</sup>

Within the same episode, O'Reilly continued to analyze Obama's remarks about racial tensions within U.S. American society. O'Reilly brought on Karl Rove, a Fox News analyst and former senior advisor to ex-president George W. Bush, onto the show in order to discuss the issue further. Rove stated that, in response to President Obama's public address regarding the acquittal of George Zimmerman, he found “a lot between the beginning and the end of the speech to be problematic.” Rove argued, “there was no evidence at all of racial profiling” occurring during the night of the shooting and that “police racial profiling is not the dominant issue either.” He continued by stating that Obama did not address the “pathologies plaguing the African-American community” that are making them “less and less a part of the American Dream.” O'Reilly responded to Rove by stating that the “white power establishment is cowardly on this inner-city/black men issue... they abdicate all responsibility.” In response to this statement, Rove argued that there are indeed members of the “white power establishment” working to fix the issue, particularly “evangelical Christians and Protestant churches are confronting some of these pathologies.” O'Reilly refuted Rove by stating “that isn't enough” to fix the problem and that powerful political leadership in our country “isn't telling the truth, they know what the thing is but they just won't say it.” In response to President Obama's speech, Rove stated that “he (Obama) could have brought the country together on something... instead he used it as another instance to build old resentments.” Rove

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<sup>52</sup> “Monday, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 Top Story Segment” *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 22, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow &showID=3440>

continued by saying that Obama focused “far too much on race” when, according to factual evidence, “it was not what this was about.”<sup>53</sup>

In another “Weekdays with Bernie Segment” within the same television broadcast, O’Reilly again brought Bernie Goldberg on the show in order to discuss (very similarly to the conversation with Karl Rove) President Obama’s speech on racial tensions within American society. Goldberg argued that the president should have said “while racism in America is not yet dead and buried, in the year 2013 white racism is the least of the problems plaguing black America... babies having babies is a much bigger problem.” He continued by claiming that poor education rates within African-American communities and high incarceration rates regarding black males is “a much bigger problem.” Goldberg argued that civil rights leaders present a “pathetic” argument that “white guys are out to kill them.” O’Reilly agreed by stating that “Obama never got to the root of the problem” and the “black grievance industry” doesn’t want to get to the bottom of it” because it would be “bad for business.” Goldberg again mentioned the statistic that “73% of black babies are born out of wedlock” and believed this is an immediate issue worth bringing to the attention of the American public. He then goes on to read a quote from Martin Luther King’s speech in 1961 from a church in Saint Louis, stating “we know there are many things wrong in the white world, but there are many things wrong in the black world too. We can’t keep on blaming the white man, there are things we must do for ourselves.”<sup>54</sup>

### **August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013: Anniversary of the “I Have A Dream Speech”**

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<sup>53</sup> “Monday, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 Impact Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 22, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3440>

<sup>54</sup> “Monday, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 Weekdays With Bernie Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 22, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3440>

Within this “Talking Points Segment,” O’Reilly discussed the “big event” (or the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have A Dream” speech) where a variety of Democratic political leaders and civil rights activists spoke in Washington. O’Reilly stated that President Obama was the headliner and the event “excluded black Republicans and Conservatives.” O’Reilly called this a “glaring error” that did “not promote inclusion” in an extremely divided and hostile U.S. political landscape. Although O’Reilly said that a majority of the speeches made during the event were “uplifting and respectful to America” he claimed that Marc Morial (the President of the National Urban League) made a public address that was “counterintuitive.” Morial made statements both regarding the Trayvon Martin shooting and arguments against police brutality such as “attack dogs and water hoses were replaced with tasers and widespread implementation of stop and frisk policies... nooses were traded for handcuffs.” O’Reilly stated, “this kind of grievance mongering does the cause of civil rights no good whatsoever.” Also, O’Reilly criticized President Obama’s speech and found the “political” aspects of his speech concerning. Within his statements, Obama stated, “the gap in wealth between races has not lessened, it’s grown... making the dream Dr. King described even more elusive.” O’Reilly claimed that this income gap has increased due to President Obama’s attempts to managing the economy during his second term and also because the “skill level of many Americans has been declining.” O’Reilly continued by arguing that “you have to be able to speak proper English and conduct yourself responsibly” in order to succeed in the modern workplace. He claimed that “millions of Americans have not mastered the basics of the marketplace” which has led to economic stagnation for the working-class. Arguing that corporations are “actively looking for minority workers,”

O'Reilly claimed, "they (African-Americans) have to perform and have enough educational success to get a shot." O'Reilly stated that "there is little institutional bias in this country" and "individual bigotry" can never be fully solved. O'Reilly argued, "most Americans are fair-minded" and want "all American citizens to succeed." Also, O'Reilly claimed, "self-reliance and hard work is the key to success in life." He goes on to state "President Obama and many others in the civil rights industry believe that government must provide for those who fail, even if it's their fault." O'Reilly argued "America remains the land of opportunity, but only for those who are honest and responsible."<sup>55</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Overall, *The O'Reilly Factor's* coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting from March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012 to August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013 went through a very interesting evolution. Within the first episodes addressing the Martin tragedy, O'Reilly called for his audience to "not convict" Zimmerman on national television and to view the "radical liberal media"/"grievance industry" as inciting racial divides in the United States. However, as the broadcasts continued (and as it appeared more likely that Zimmerman will be acquitted for his crimes), O'Reilly began attacking the African-American community for engaging in "self-destructive" practices limiting their socio-economic success. Also, O'Reilly legitimized racial profiling crime prevention methods by authority figures and supported controversial legislation such as "Stand Your Ground." And finally, once Zimmerman was officially declared "not-guilty," O'Reilly specifically blamed the "dissolution" of the African-American family as one of the most powerful reasons for why black teenagers drift towards criminal lifestyles. O'Reilly explicitly labeled this as a

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<sup>55</sup> "Wednesday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment" *The O'Reilly Factor*. Fox News. New York. 22 Jul. 2013. Television.

“personal decision” that “white people have nothing to do with” to his viewers. Within the last episode discussing the Martin shooting, O’Reilly safeguarded the socio-economic construct of The American Dream and promoted the concept of “individualism” to his audience.

## *Analysis Part 2*

### **Introduction**

This chapter aims to provide the reader with a critical rhetorical analysis of *The O'Reilly Factor's* coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting drawing upon scholarly literature surveyed in the literature review section of this thesis. By utilizing data from the episodes provided in the preceding chapter, the following six sections detail how O'Reilly used his broadcasts in order to label traditional forms of African-American leadership as “destructive” for the U.S. public, identify “pathologies” within urban black communities as “self-perpetuated” and “condone” Zimmerman for his actions against Martin by supporting legislation such as “Stand Your Ground” and “stop and frisk” crime prevention methods. Furthermore, within his 11 *O'Reilly Factor* episodes covering the Martin tragedy, O'Reilly legitimized socio-economic constructs such as “individualism” and The American Dream and presented himself as “fair and balanced” to his audience while actively working to maintain hegemony.

### **The Grievance Industry and its' Partnership with Liberal Media**

Within *The O'Reilly Factors'* broadcasts, O'Reilly continuously criticized African-American leadership for “adding to” problems plaguing the black community. In order to further ostracize this political grouping, O'Reilly labeled civil rights activists and the “radical liberal media” as residing within the “grievance industry.” According to O'Reilly, such an industry too often consists of “immoral reporting,” “radical liberal” ideologies, an “overreliance” on governmental policies and statements that strategically intimidate open discussion on racial problems occurring within the African-American public. Resting under the false notion of “fair and balanced,” O'Reilly strategically

delegitimized the culture working for societal change and one that actively challenges American hegemonic power structures.

To begin, O'Reilly targeted civil rights activists who "intimidate" an "open discussion" of racial problems within the U.S. socio-culture. Within his broadcasts, O'Reilly questioned the African-American community for not responding to criticism in a reasonable fashion. O'Reilly called out the "irrational" African-American leadership in his Monday July 22<sup>nd</sup> "Talking Points Memo" by claiming, "any criticism of the African-American community is disregarded as racial bias, leaving millions of law-abiding African-Americans to pretty much fend for themselves."<sup>56</sup> This link is an important one for, instead of the civil rights industry working to better their constituents' circumstances, O'Reilly claimed that African-American leadership is "failing" their followers and "inflaming" the black community's socio-economic problems. O'Reilly continuously criticized the "grievance industry" for being "radicalized" and "in the business" of inflaming racial divides in American socio-culture. Regarding the latter, O'Reilly claimed that "race hustlers" such as Al Sharpton "would not be in business if they discussed black on black crime to the American public."<sup>57</sup> O'Reilly's linking of "race hustlers" to "power-hungry" behavior directly relates to Norton's binary of the "little guy vs. the system." This dichotomy represents a strategic communicative device O'Reilly uses to identify himself as the "protector" of the working-class American and "watchdog" against powerful/"radical" institutions. When viewing his statements through a critical lens, it becomes apparent that O'Reilly attempted to "flip" the common notion that civil

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<sup>56</sup> "Monday, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 Weekdays With Bernie Segment" *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last Modified July 22, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3440>

<sup>57</sup> "Monday, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment" *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 16, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow &showID=3436>



rights activists are fighting the unfair/powerful white system. By using language such as “in the business” and “power-driven,” O’Reilly identified “race hustlers” as being the true enemy to the “little guy” (or the African-American people). In other words, O’Reilly argued that, instead of blaming white society for their harsh circumstances, the African-American community should view their leadership critically and question how activists such as Al Sharpton gain momentous levels of power. This linkage delegitimizes the civil rights industry for being both detrimental to American society and “riding the wave” of racial violence.

Furthermore, within his television broadcasts, O’Reilly attacked the “radical liberal” media and associated mass media outlets such as MSNBC as residing in the “grievance industry.” Very similarly to his arguments condemning civil rights activists, O’Reilly presented liberal news media as being “radicalized” and destructive toward the American people. Particularly within his early coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting, O’Reilly criticized MSNBC for “caring only about ratings”<sup>58</sup> and promoting racial violence through convicting Zimmerman on national television. Like the “race hustlers” in the civil rights industry, O’Reilly blamed MSNBC for not promoting an “open” and “honest discussion” on controversial racial issues. Furthermore, O’Reilly presented the “far-left” as “exploiting African-American animosity.” By arguing that the “far-left” (especially CNN writer Paul Waldman) was promoting an “irrational” perspective regarding race within the United States, O’Reilly identified the “radical liberal” media as both irresponsible and “harmful” to the American people. Specifically regarding the Zimmerman trial, O’Reilly stated that the “radical liberal” perspective “refused to

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<sup>58</sup> “Friday, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2012 Talking Points Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified March 23, 2012, <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3094>.

accept”<sup>59</sup> anything less than a guilty verdict and introduced massive amounts of racial bias in order to protect their political agenda. Furthermore, O’Reilly presented real-life effects of such media bias within his Monday March 26<sup>th</sup> “Talking Points” segment. In this broadcast, O’Reilly linked MSNBC’s “hysterical coverage” of the Zimmerman case to the New Black Panther Party’s bounty placed on Zimmerman and North Miami Beach High School students looting a local Walgreens. By arguing that “liberal bias” inevitably leads to harmful consequences on the American community, O’Reilly strategically presented the “radical left” as “damaging” innocent civilians.

Also, when discussing Al Sharpton’s involvement within MSNBC, O’Reilly soon began making statements linking “race hustlers” to “limousine liberals.” O’Reilly argued that both parties “blame the white power structure” and refuse to acknowledge the “true problem”<sup>60</sup> residing within African-American communities. Within O’Reilly’s “Weekdays with Bernie” segments, Goldberg claimed (when being asked about the Trayvon Martin shooting) that “liberal minded news networks” are continuing a “historical trend” of “black victim, white shooter.”<sup>61</sup> Goldberg also presented evidence that “liberal news media,” similarly to the civil rights industry, refuses to cover stories highlighting “dysfunctional African-American communities” in detail. By *The O’Reilly Factor* linking the “grievance industry” to “radical liberal” news media outlets, the program was able to “radicalize” these two networks and “delegitimize” these groups in front of the broadcasts’ viewers. However, *The O’Reilly Factor* also attempted to push

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<sup>59</sup> “Monday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2012 Talking Points Segment.” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified April 2, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=310>.

<sup>60</sup> “Tuesday, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 16, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3436>.

<sup>61</sup> “Monday, March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Weekdays With Bernie Segment.” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified March 26, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3095>

the African-American people to “separate” themselves from the “grievance industry” and the “radical liberal” media. Both O’Reilly and Goldberg presented these two parties as “using” the African-American culture’s racial animosity in order to accumulate power. In other words, by not attempting to solve the “true” racial problems within this country and having a lack of coverage of “pathologies” within the African-American community, the “grievance industry”/“radical liberal media” uses the African-American people and “rides the wave” of racial hostility in order to maintain a commanding influence. Through extensive criticism of the “grievance industry,” *The O’Reilly Factor* strategically labeled this political entity as harmful to the American people and (in turn) to the African-American community itself.

### **“Gangsta Culture” and “Pathologies” Within the African-American Community**

Within his broadcasts, O’Reilly identified “pathologies” within the African-American community (which include the cultures’ tendency to drift towards crime) in order to clear white society of any responsibility for recent stagnations in urban communities. Overall, O’Reilly continuously presented statistics to his viewers that aimed to “correct” the common notion that African Americans are “hunted down” by white society. O’Reilly presented claims such as “91% of black victim homicides were committed by black offenders.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, O’Reilly claimed, “14% of white victim homicides were committed by black offenders” which (according to his sources) is “twice as much as the other way around.” Very similarly to his categorization of civil rights activists/liberal media, O’Reilly provided his audience with a convenient label to illustrate such a “reckless” African-American socio-culture. By characterizing the black

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<sup>62</sup> “Tuesday, July 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 16, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3436>.

community as being one embedded within “gangsta culture,” O’Reilly furthered the divide between the “innocent” white society and the “reckless” African-American youth. This categorization was used by the broadcast in order to present Martin as a “thug” within *The O’Reilly Factor*’s television coverage of the tragedy. By O’Reilly and Rivera arguing that Martin’s outward appearance on the night of the shooting led to Zimmerman becoming “suspicious” of criminal-like behavior, the two Fox News correspondents presented Martin as residing within the “gangsta culture” identified above. Specifically, Rivera identified Martin as wearing “thug wear” and presenting an appearance that “resembled the people who had been burglarizing and victimizing that neighborhood for the past six months.”<sup>63</sup> This characterization functioned to make salient “pathologies” within the African-American community by using Martin as an example. In response to the “radical liberal media” and the “grievance industry” (mentioned above), O’Reilly attempted to convince his viewers that white society has nothing to do with these pathologies existing within the African-American community. In other words, O’Reilly attempted to become the “voice of reason” in a “radicalized” political climate and labeled the “genocides” occurring within African-American urban neighborhoods as a “black problem.” By stating, “white people have nothing to do with it,” O’Reilly legitimized the dominant white society and further ostracized the minority by presenting African-American communities as contributing to their own poor circumstances. This concept links directly to Rome’s argument that mass media outlets “blanket blame” the African-

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<sup>63</sup> “Friday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Factor Follow Up Segment.” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified May 18, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3134>.

American culture and label minority society as “deservedly indignant.”<sup>64</sup> As stated in the literature review section of this thesis, Rome claims that powerful news organizations are strategically in place in order to protect dominant hegemonic power structures (or white society) and suppress the African-American public from accomplishing societal reformation. By branding the African-American community (and Martin himself) as undermining their own chances of succeeding within the modern marketplace, O’Reilly attempted to protect the “white upper class” from public stigmatism and safeguarded dominant societal values from being challenged.

Not only so, but O’Reilly’s statements regarding the “disintegration of the African-American family” is an important rhetorical device that functioned to further “legitimize” white society. On his “Talking Points” segment on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013, O’Reilly blatantly attacked the African-American community for raising their children in illegitimate household settings. Specifically, he presented the claim that “73% of all black babies are born out of wedlock... this drives poverty and the lack of involved fathers leads to young boys growing up resentful and unsupervised.”<sup>65</sup> By bringing questionable birth statistics to his viewers, O’Reilly immediately made the connection between childbirth outside of marriage to single parenting (and, therefore, an “illegitimate” household to raise a child). However ambiguous this relationship may be, O’Reilly (again) labeled African-American destitution as a “self-perpetuated” problem and blanket blamed black communities for “failing” their children. This condemnation functioned to safeguard “white culture” and remove “society” from being a reason for African-

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<sup>64</sup> Rome, Dennis, "Theory: UCR, Racial Bias, Public Policy and the Mass Media," *Black Demons: The Media's Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), 132-56

<sup>65</sup> “Monday, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 Top Story Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified July 22, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3440>

American problems. Specifically, O'Reilly argued, "white people do not force black people to have babies out of wedlock, that's a personal decision and a decision that has devastated millions of children." By presenting the "black problem" as perpetuated by poor individual choices, O'Reilly delegitimized the African-American community's claims for "societal change" and "white oppression." O'Reilly attempted to "solve" the "pathologies" plaguing the black community by calling for the "active discouragement of pregnancies out of marriage" and for African-American parents to "impose strict discipline" on their children. Furthermore, O'Reilly flagrantly criticized the African-American family by (literally) pointing to his audience and stating, "it's you derelict parents that are hurting these vulnerable children."<sup>66</sup> Not only do these statements, again, label the African-American people as "irresponsibly" failing their children, but O'Reilly blanket blamed the black community in order to further clear white society of any blame for recent stagnations in urban societies. O'Reilly's argument directly relates to Smith's analysis of major mass media sources. Relating back to the literature review section of this rhetorical project, Smith argues that powerful news organizations legitimize racial inequalities that African Americans commonly face within institutions (such as inflated rates of school discipline, underachievement in higher education and higher rates of poverty, homicide and unemployment) in order to both protect white society and present the black community as "deserving" of their poor socio-economic circumstances. In the words of Smith, O'Reilly "justified the racial inequalities" that African Americans face

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<sup>66</sup> "Monday, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment" *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last edited July 22, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3440>

within institutions by perpetuating “negative understandings of black males”<sup>67</sup> within his broadcasts.

### **“Stand Your Ground” and “Stop and Frisk”**

So then how should white society respond to such an alleged “gangsta culture”? Should the strong traditionalist society fall victim to reckless “thugs” and poor parenting? Fear not for, according to O’Reilly, one still has the ability to defend themselves from African-American criminals. Within the history of his coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting, O’Reilly continuously defended laws such as “Stand Your Ground” which (not coincidentally) was a major piece of Florida legislation used to defend Zimmerman while on trial. His defense of such legislative policy was explicit within his Wednesday March 28<sup>th</sup> “Factor Follow Up” segment,<sup>68</sup> specifically in his interview with Rich Benjamin. In response to Benjamin taking a peaceful approach when being mugged at gunpoint, O’Reilly argued that “any reasonable American” (or “90%”) would defend themselves through deadly force when being assaulted. Furthermore, O’Reilly claimed that “Stand Your Ground” is “the law in America” and can be directly associated with an individual’s right to “self defense.” However, by defending the controversial piece of Florida legislation, O’Reilly “condoned” Zimmerman for his actions and placed blame on Martin for his own demise. By safeguarding the ability of a citizen to “stand your ground” when being physically assaulted, O’Reilly’s statements functioned to further “blame” pathologies within the African-American community (specifically its’ “gangsta culture”) for encouraging its’ constituents to engage in destructive practices. In other words, *The*

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<sup>67</sup> Darron T Smith. “Images of Black Males in Popular Media,” *Huffington Post*, last modified March 15, 2013, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/darron-t-smith-phd/black-men-media\\_b\\_2844990.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/darron-t-smith-phd/black-men-media_b_2844990.html).

<sup>68</sup> “Wednesday, March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Factor Follow Up Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show? action=viewTVShow&showID=3097>

*O'Reilly Factor* identified Zimmerman as “legitimized” to take the life of the African-American teenager due to Martin’s “gangsta” appearance and “thug-like” behavior.

Throughout his broadcasts, O'Reilly provided his viewers with evidence that Zimmerman was repeatedly “calling for help” against his assailant and that he had been simply attempting to defend himself in the eyes of a “violent” African-American teenager. Within his May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012 broadcast,<sup>69</sup> O'Reilly stated to his audience that this new evidence (or two witnesses supporting Zimmerman’s claim that he was being assaulted and that he could be heard calling for help 14 times on a 911 call recorded during the fight) significantly “bolstered the stand your ground theory” and further exemplified that “Zimmerman had a right to do what he did.” These statements explicitly legitimized Zimmerman’s right to kill Martin and (in turn) placed all blame on the black teenager for “forcing” the neighborhood watchman to use deadly force. Overall, O'Reilly’s argument (again) identified “pathologies” within the African-American community and labeled Martin’s actions as being a result of “gangsta culture.”

But yet, *The O'Reilly Factor* goes further by legitimizing police tactics reliant on racial profiling and justifying Zimmerman’s suspicions of Martin on the night of the shooting. Within his Wednesday March 28<sup>th</sup> “Factor Follow Up” segment,<sup>70</sup> O'Reilly defended “stop and frisk” police tactics through providing statistical data. In the conversation with African-American political commentator Jasmyne Cannick, O'Reilly argued that (even though the black community is extremely frustrated with being racially profiled and commonly targeted by police forces) racial stereotypes linking African

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<sup>69</sup> “Friday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Factor Follow Up Segment.” *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified May 18, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3134>.

<sup>70</sup> “Wednesday, March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Factor Follow Up Segment” *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3097>



Americans to criminalistic behavior exist based upon factual evidence. Specifically, O'Reilly stated "stats say that the majority of African-American men being killed are killed by other African-American men" and "under these targeted actions of 'stop and frisk', crime in poor neighborhoods dramatically drops as a result." However, *The O'Reilly Factor* went further than merely supporting "stop and frisk" police policies. Relating back to his Wednesday March 28<sup>th</sup> episode covering "new evidence" in the Zimmerman trial, O'Reilly and Fox News anchor Geraldo Rivera reviewed the 7/11 tape that captured Martin's appearance on the night of the shooting. In response to the video, Rivera argued that "what is important is what Trayvon Martin looked like that night.... he's wearing 'thug wear' and is not some little kid standing at 6 foot 2 inches." Furthermore, Rivera claimed "if this young man was a stranger to George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin looks just like the people who had been burglarizing and victimizing that neighborhood for the past 6 months." O'Reilly and Rivera both weighed in on the issue by agreeing that "racial profiling is based upon a reasonable comparison" and that Martin presented a criminal image to Zimmerman. O'Reilly's defense of "stop and frisk" police policies and his collaborative effort with Rivera to legitimize practices stimulated by racial profiling were used in tandem to "justify" Zimmerman's suspicions of Martin. For, since Martin was dressed in "thug wear," *The O'Reilly Factor* presented the argument that Zimmerman had no choice but to investigate the young teenager in order to "better" his community.

Overall, O'Reilly's defense of "Stand Your Ground" Florida legislation and "stop and frisk"/racial profiling functioned to completely clear Zimmerman of blame and label Martin as "irresponsibly" constructing a harmful situation that led to his own demise. By

arguing that “stop and frisk” policies lead to dramatic decreases in violent crime, O’Reilly supported Zimmerman for being suspicious of Martin based on his outward appearance (for racial stereotyping inevitably leads to “productive results”). Also, O’Reilly’s backing of Florida’s controversial “Stand Your Ground” legislation asserted that (once the neighborhood watchman was engaged by Martin) Zimmerman had an “obligation” to protect his own life by killing the teenager. Such an inimical combination provided his audience with the overarching argument that, since Zimmerman was justified to approach Martin and (when assaulted unjustly by the teenager) authorized to shoot his assailant, Zimmerman was simply placed under unfortunate circumstances that Martin had generated. Furthermore, O’Reilly used his previous argument identifying “pathologies” within the African-American community in order to present Martin as a rebellious teen deserving of Zimmerman’s attention. In other words, *The O’Reilly Factor* presented Martin as residing within the African-American “gangsta culture” in order to further legitimize racial profiling tactics used by authority figures and (in turn) commemorate Zimmerman for stalking the black teenager.

The impact of *The O’Reilly Factor*’s condemnation of Martin’s actions can be related to Oliver’s argument that mass media outlets “play a major role in attitude formation.”<sup>71</sup> Relating to the direct effect powerful news organizations have on the public’s perception of crime, Oliver claims these institutions influence American citizens to maintain a “perceived fear of ethnic minorities” or, specifically, the African-American community. Since segments of the American people have relied heavily upon contemporary news outlets such as Fox News for daily information, this severely limits

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<sup>71</sup> Mary Oliver. “Race and Crime in the Media: Research from a Media Effects Perspective.” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 43-58.

audiences' ability to "critically evaluate or discount biased or distorted portrayal that are routinely featured." This lack of in-depth assessment of information presented by mass media outlets such as *The O'Reilly Factor* leads the public to "accept" and disseminate harmful ideologies perpetuated by the news broadcasts (such as what constitutes a "justified reason" to investigate a fellow American citizen). As Oliver had warned us within her scholarly writings, this can lead to erroneous images of crime and (in the extreme case) lead to American citizens "taking justice into their own hands" by emulating Zimmerman's actions.

### **O'Reilly's Defense of Individualism and The American Dream**

O'Reilly's defense of traditionalist notions such as "individualism" and The American Dream functioned to repress arguments for societal change and challenges to "white society." Relating back to the earlier portions of this analysis, O'Reilly strategically exposed "pathologies" residing within the African-American community in order to present commonly argued "societal problems" to be based entirely on poor individualized decisions. Within his attacks on the "grievance industry," O'Reilly made statements such as "African Americans frequently call for government help for those who fail, even when it is their fault."<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, within his coverage of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the renowned "I Have a Dream" speech, O'Reilly openly criticized poorly educated minority workers in order to safeguard the notion of "individualism." O'Reilly's statements functioned to protect the belief that American citizens, especially within an extremely competitive contemporary marketplace, must rely upon their own hard-work ethic instead of "calling on help" from large governmental

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<sup>72</sup> "Wednesday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment" *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*, last modified July 22, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=view TVShow&showID=3467>

structures. This argument, very similarly to his criticism of “pathologies” within the black community, identified the poor socio-economic circumstances African Americans face as “self-perpetuated” by “irresponsible” behavior. In regards to the shooting itself, O’Reilly incorporated Martin into his argument by categorizing the black teenager as “rejecting” characteristics essential to succeeding within the modern marketplace. By engaging in “thug-like” behavior (such as presenting a “criminal” appearance to Zimmerman and engrossing himself in “gangsta culture”), O’Reilly argued that Martin was an illustration of “pathologies” residing within the African-American community. Overall, O’Reilly utilized the tragedy in order to use Martin as an “example” of poor individualized choices that further the African-American public’s chances of finding socio-economic success within contemporary U.S. society.

However, O’Reilly presented the illusion that African Americans within urban communities possess both the freedom of choice and the same educational freedoms of Americans within “wealthier” neighborhoods. Specifically, O’Reilly argued African-American teens commonly “reject the education process and gravitate towards the street culture, violence and gangs... nobody forces them to do that, that’s a personal choice.”<sup>73</sup> By characterizing African Americans as being “given” the opportunity to succeed in the modern workplace but “rejecting” any possibility of bettering their circumstances, O’Reilly delegitimized the African-American community’s call for societal change and ostracized minority publics for “failing” to be adequately prepared for economic success. Furthermore, Bernie Goldberg’s citing of Martin Luther King’s 1961 statements calling for the African-American community to “stop blaming the white man” and to focus on

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<sup>73</sup> “Monday, July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last edited July 22, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3440>

the wrongdoings within the “black world” further presented the “black problem” as being an individual issue. Goldberg used the civil rights activist’s argument to call for the “irresponsible” African-American community to “take it upon themselves” to better their socio-economic circumstances rather than calling on others to do it for them.

This concept of “individualism” is a core tenet within the socio-economic construct of The American Dream. By arguing that African-American citizens have “not mastered the basics of the marketplace,” O’Reilly defended the notion that every American (if they work hard enough and embrace their equal opportunity of success) can thrive economically and socially. Relating back to his August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013 broadcast,<sup>74</sup> O’Reilly’s argument that “there is little institutional bias in this country” and that “corporations are actively looking for minority workers” both placed blame on the African-American minority for not “working hard enough” to find job positions and criticized these communities for their own economic shortcomings. By labeling minority workers as lacking the ability to be self-sufficient, O’Reilly and his followers dismantled claims for “societal reformation” by African-American leadership for (as long as it’s constituents “work hard enough”) the black community has every possibility of economic success. Not only does this argument present an immediate threat to African-American communities, but it implies that every American is initially placed on an “equal playing field” when competing for employment. This belief is a common tool used by traditionalists such as O’Reilly to repress any arguments for societal change and ultimately ignores the “lesser” probability African-American children within poor urban neighborhoods face of gaining a proper education and attaining competitive/essential

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<sup>74</sup> “Wednesday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*, last modified July 22, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=view TVShow&showID=3467>

professional qualities for the modern marketplace. To use a specific example, O'Reilly's statement, "America remains the land of opportunity, but only for those who are honest and responsible," functioned to defend the notions of "individualism" and (in turn) legitimized The American Dream to his viewers.

**"Fair and Balanced" Within the Alleged "No Spin Zone"**

By analyzing O'Reilly's communicative strategy, it becomes apparent that *The O'Reilly Factor* aimed to present its' television broadcast as "objective" while simultaneously including heavily opinionated news coverage. O'Reilly expertly hid behind his famous slogan "fair and balanced" and asserted to his viewers that his arguments were based within the objective "no spin zone." To present such an illusion to his viewers, O'Reilly used the tactic of bringing on the "other side" within his television broadcasts and even (on occasion) questioned his fellow Fox News correspondents. By bringing on important African-American figures such as Daryl Parks, Tavis Smiley, Rich Benjamin, Jasmyne Cannick and Faith Jenkins, O'Reilly presented himself as "considering all options" before making a "well educated" opinion. Furthermore, when O'Reilly did go on a diatribe of the "radical liberal media" or the "grievance industry," the audience was more likely to accept his point of view as fact for (as he has done throughout the 17 seasons of *The O'Reilly Factor*) all perspectives appear to have received an equal voice on the matter. As Peters had argued within his communicative analysis of *The O'Reilly Factor*, O'Reilly strategically includes guests that give the

appearance of fair representation from all sides of the American political system while presenting a “falsified vision of truth” to his viewers.<sup>75</sup>

As stated earlier, O'Reilly frequently “challenged” his fellow Fox News correspondents in order to present himself as showing critical intelligence. Although his objections against them are extremely moderate, O'Reilly expertly crafted an analysis that called into question his peer's statements just enough to appear “balanced” on the topic but (in order to protect the legitimacy of Fox News) conservative enough to not dismantle the news pundit's argument entirely. Within an interview with Geraldo Rivera, and in response to Rivera arguing that Zimmerman was “just trying to do the right thing,”<sup>76</sup> O'Reilly disagreed with the Fox News anchor by stating “I don't know if Zimmerman was trying to do the right thing... he may have been simply looking for action.” However, by the end of the episode, O'Reilly and Rivera ultimately came to a conclusion that there was “no legitimate murder case” against Zimmerman and that Martin had “deserved suspicion” for his “thug wear.” Although these disagreements are relatively small in scale, O'Reilly balanced his accusations to present himself as “objective” while (in actuality) he worked collaboratively with his fellow Fox News correspondents to maintain an underlying argument. This communicative tactic provided his viewers with an appearance of “truthfulness” which, in turn, increased the probability that his audience accepted and defended O'Reilly's opinionated segments.

Throughout *The O'Reilly Factor's* coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting and Zimmerman trial, O'Reilly successfully crafted convenient (and hostile) “names” of his

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<sup>75</sup> Chris Peters. “No-Spin Zones: The Rise of the American Cable News Magazine and Bill O'Reilly.” *Journalism Studies* (London: Routledge, 2010) 833-846.

<sup>76</sup> “Friday, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Factor Follow Up Segment.” *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified May 18, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3134>

political enemies in order to “label” these parties based upon their poor qualities. An obvious example was O’Reilly’s phrasing of “grievance industry,” “race hustlers” and “radical liberal media.” In other words, using Mike Conway and his fellow scholarly authors’ phrasing, O’Reilly used the propaganda technique of “name calling”<sup>77</sup> in order to delegitimize his opponents and categorize these groups into easily identifiable categories. This would make sense considering that O’Reilly uses the communicative device 8.88 times per minute and was determined to be the “backbone” of his broadcasting technique by Mike Conway, Maria Elizabeth Grabe and Kevin Grieves. By implementing “name calling” continuously throughout his broadcasts, O’Reilly worked to provide his viewers with a “label” of “radical” parties calling for societal change that can be easily circulated throughout the American public. O’Reilly’s usage of the terms “grievance industry” and “race hustlers” when detailing the modern civil rights community presented traditional forms of African-American leadership as “using” the animosity of its’ constituents in order to further accumulate power. In other words, O’Reilly further delegitimized the civil rights industry by blaming its’ spokespeople for “purposefully” maintaining “grievances” within the African-American community and inciting racial divides within the United States in order to stay “in business” (which is implied by the term “industry”). Overall, this technique functioned to influence O’Reilly’s 3.1 million daily viewers to believe that the civil rights industry and, in turn, the African-American community is a “radicalized force” that cannot be trusted or reasoned with.

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<sup>77</sup> Mike Conway, et al. “Villains, Victims and the Virtuous in Bill O’Reilly’s ‘No-Spin Zone’.” *Journalism Studies* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2007), 198-220.



However, Norton's analysis of the "O'Reilly persona"<sup>78</sup> explains the reasoning for why *The O'Reilly Factor* possessed the capabilities to present purely subjective claims while appealing to his viewers' interests. By continuously emphasizing his "humble origins" and presenting himself as being a "working class American" to his viewers, Norton argues that O'Reilly protects his persona from being polluted by association with the "delegitimized elite." In other words, O'Reilly avoids ostracizing himself as being "un-relatable" to his audience by claiming he is "one with the people" and is in the business of protecting the "little guy." This concept also relates to Norton's dichotomies representing the deep meaning structure behind *The O'Reilly Factor*. Specifically, O'Reilly regularly implements binaries such as the "little guy vs. the system" and "fairness vs. media bias." By claiming that the "radicalized liberal media" dominated the conversation regarding the Trayvon Martin shooting and asserting that *The O'Reilly Factor* and Fox News would not participate in "immoral news practices" found in mass media networks such as MSNBC,<sup>79</sup> O'Reilly attempted to align himself alongside an "outspoken majority" within an "extremist system" controlled by the "grievance industry" and "race hustlers." In other words, O'Reilly labeled the "radical liberal" media as an illegitimate "system" that the "common people" (or O'Reilly, his network and his viewers) must work to undermine.

Furthermore, O'Reilly discussed President Obama's "grievance industry friendly" socio-political beliefs in order to further legitimize his argument that the dominant "system" has been run by "radical" racial policies. O'Reilly incorporated

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<sup>78</sup> Matthew Norton. "A Structural Hermeneutics of The O'Reilly Factor." *Center for Cultural Sociology* (New Haven: Springer Science+Business Media, 2011), 316-344.

<sup>79</sup> "Monday, March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012 Weekdays With Bernie Segment." *The O'Reilly Factor: Fox News*. Last modified March 26, 2012. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=viewTVShow&showID=3095>

President Obama into the “grievance industry” by claiming, “President Obama and many others in the civil rights industry believe that government must provide for those who fail, even if it’s their fault.”<sup>80</sup> Also, Goldberg’s argument that President Obama, Al Sharpton and the “radical liberal media” would not have “weighed in” on the subject of Trayvon Martin if “Zimmerman had been black and Trayvon white” attempted to associate the President with a “radical” racial network. *The O’Reilly Factor’s* coverage functioned to “connect” President Obama to the “grievance industry” in order to further the argument that the dominant narrative regarding racial relations within the United States has been controlled by “race hustlers” and the “radical” left (which, as stated in the earlier sections of this analysis, O’Reilly argued were synonymous with one another). This association was used to bolster his argument that O’Reilly, and his viewers, fell into the category of “little guy” vs. “the system” (or the partnership between the “radical liberal media” and the “grievance industry”). This communicative tool functioned to both relate to a majority of the American public (since O’Reilly is “one with the people”) and ostracize the “irrational” African-American leadership.

Overall, the O’Reilly persona’s utilization of these dichotomies constituted a successful communicative device that was used with the goal of relating to its’ viewers while attracting a massive accumulation of followers. By presenting his program as “fair and balanced” by bringing on the other perspective and “challenging” his fellow Fox News correspondents, O’Reilly was able to present himself as showing critical intelligence and (therefore) presented his arguments as “credible” to his viewers. O’Reilly also employed the propaganda technique of “name calling” on a continuous

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<sup>80</sup> “Wednesday, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Talking Points Segment” *The O’Reilly Factor: Fox News*, last modified July 22, 2013. <http://www.billoreilly.com/show?action=view TVShow&showID=3467>

basis and applied various dichotomies (as identified by Norton) within his broadcasts. These communicative tools worked in tandem to allow O'Reilly's arguments to relate to a large majority of his viewers while simultaneously label African-American leadership as an irrational (and powerful) socio-political organization reliant upon racial animosities.

### **What This Means in Terms of Hegemony**

Hegemony, according to Williams, is the "whole lived social process practically organized by specific and dominant meanings and values that encompasses a whole substance of lived experiences."<sup>81</sup> Williams also argues that hegemony is synonymous with dominant power structures that articulate a specific "worldview or class outlook" and that "subordinate"/dominate minority publics. To integrate all of the arguments presented in my analysis, O'Reilly used his program's coverage of the Trayvon Martin shooting in order to further legitimize white hegemonic power structures and maintain a credible image of white society to the public. In order to accomplish such a socio-economic agenda, O'Reilly strategically "incorporated" and "interconnected otherwise separate and disparate meanings, values and practices" in order to re-affirm the "dominant" hegemonic order. O'Reilly did this by safeguarding the notions of "individualism" and The American Dream while simultaneously ostracizing the African-American counterpublic. In other words, *The O'Reilly Factor's* coverage of the Trayvon Martin tragedy functioned to "subordinate" minority publics who "challenge" the dominant hegemonic order and call for power redistribution/societal change within U.S. culture. By delegitimizing African-American leadership within the "grievance industry" and labeling the "radicalized liberal media" as "destructive" for the American public, *The*

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<sup>81</sup> Raymond Williams. "Marxism and Literature." *Oxford University Press*. (Oxford, U.K: Oxford University Press, 2004). Pgs. 109 – 114.

*O'Reilly Factor* aimed to inhibit counterpublics that have historically resisted “white culture” ideologies.

O'Reilly's open criticism of the African-American public for fueling “pathologies” plaguing their urban communities functioned to present the minority community as “self-destructive.” This characterization of a “reckless” African-American society worked collaboratively with O'Reilly's open defense of “individualism” and The American Dream. By arguing that every American can better their own socio-economic status through “hard work” and the maintenance of ethical values, O'Reilly further ostracized the African-American community for “failing themselves” by engaging in destructive practices and not accumulating employable characteristics. As identified above, these “pathologies” range from high birth rates outside of wedlock, “choosing” a lifestyle of crime instead of gaining a proper education and an overwhelming lack of parental discipline. This argument functioned to denounce claims for “societal change” and challenges to the status-quo/dominant white society by labeling the current “pathologies” within the African-American public as a purely “individual” problem (which can only be solved by the “correction” of behavior within these urban communities). Overall, O'Reilly's portrayal of the “black problem” within U.S. culture presented dominant hegemonic power structures as having “nothing to do with” poor decision making. This argument functioned to clear all blame from white society and, in turn, criticize the African-American community for their own socio-economic problems.

Furthermore, O'Reilly's backing of legislation such as “Stand Your Ground” and the police crime-prevention technique of “stop and frisk” was a communicative strategy implemented to “condone” Zimmerman's actions against Trayvon Martin and abolish

arguments claiming that the white society is “out to get the black male.” By legitimizing the use of racial profiling by authority figures, O’Reilly argued that African Americans are not being “hunted down” by whites. O’Reilly’s statements both utilized questionable statistical data to present racially targeted police tactics as “good” for society and functioned to protect dominant hegemonic power structures within American socio-culture. Specifically, *The O’Reilly Factor’s* coverage combated a common argument presented by the civil rights industry that challenges the dominant “white culture.” This contention encompasses the belief that African Americans (especially after the Trayvon Martin tragedy) are unfairly being “hunted” by white society and falling victim to racist crime prevention methods. However, by claiming that focusing attention on African-Americans within urban communities lowers crime, O’Reilly protected dominant hegemonic power structures being called into question by the “grievance industry.” Overall, O’Reilly’s statements functioned to present white society as “protectors” of the innocent and “accurately” working against the African-American criminal (who engage in self-destructive practices that decimate their chances of succeeding in the modern workforce). This argument delegitimized African-American leadership’s challenges to dominant power structures and worked to maintain hegemony within U.S. culture.

Overall, through presenting an alleged appearance of being “fair and balanced,” the O’Reilly persona was able to formulate a politically biased argument while (simultaneously) maintaining a significant influence over the U.S. racial conversation. In turn, O’Reilly utilized his political authority to protect white society and actively

maintain hegemony within the U.S. American socio-culture. As argued by Williams,<sup>82</sup> hegemonic power structures (such as the dominant white society) cannot isolate or ignore counterpublics and “must always include the efforts and contributions of those who in one way or another contradict their beliefs.” In other words, hegemonic processes must be attentive to oppositional forces that question its’ dominance and work actively to repress these challenges. As argued in the earlier section of this analysis, O’Reilly provided his audience with the illusion that the opposing perspective is “included” and given a “voice” within his broadcasts. However, *The O’Reilly Factor’s* incorporation of competing points of view within its’ news coverage functioned as a tool to castigate African-American leadership and presented O’Reilly as the “truthful victor” within an open public arena.

It is evident that O’Reilly was provided with significant power to dictate what was covered within these “conversations” with his guests (which he used strategically to ensure that his side was the clear victor by the end of the opinionated news segment). By having the ability to decide which topics are covered (since it is his television program), utilizing loaded questions and “entrapping” his guests by forcing them to answer yes or no questions, O’Reilly was able to maintain a commanding influence over how his opponents respond and (in turn) over the debate itself. This authority allowed for O’Reilly to appear “fair and balanced” while simultaneously re-affirming dominant hegemonic power structures. By “including the efforts” of African-American leadership, O’Reilly presented himself as willing to “negotiate” with the radical “grievance industry” by allowing them an opportunity to defend their perspective. In other words, O’Reilly

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<sup>82</sup> Raymond Williams. “Marxism and Literature.” *Oxford University Press*. (Oxford, U.K: Oxford University Press, 2004). Pgs. 109 – 114.

provided the illusion to his viewers that he contained critical intelligence and was “openly considering” competing perspectives that challenge dominant societal values. However, by the end of all 11 episodes covering the Trayvon Martin shooting, O’Reilly ultimately proclaimed himself as “victor” to his audience and refused to recognize weaknesses in his argument. This communicative strategy functioned to illegitimately display O’Reilly as both “fair and balanced” and a “voice of reason” within a bifurcated racial landscape. In turn, *The O’Reilly Factor* was able to present O’Reilly’s arguments as being “challenged” by a worthy opponent within the alleged “no spin zone” but yet (since his perspective is based on “reasonable” assumptions) able to overcome the oppositional point of view. Such “victories” enabled O’Reilly’s messages to be viewed as “truth” to his viewers and amplified the apparent legitimacy of his perspective. Overall, this skewed argumentative process allowed for O’Reilly to project himself as “fair and balanced” to his audience while simultaneously suppressing oppositional forces that question the dominant hegemonic order. By being “attentive” to the African-American counterpublic that question U.S. authoritative power structures and “defeating” these foes within his skewed television debates, O’Reilly was able to delegitimize his opponents in the eyes of his viewers while actively working to maintain hegemony.

### Conclusion

Overall, *The O'Reilly Factor's* defense of white hegemonic power structures within U.S. American society provides us with important lessons to take forward within an extremely dynamic and hostile contemporary political landscape. To begin, it is essential that the American public view ideologies perpetuated by powerful mass media outlets critically and abstain from rushing to uneducated resolutions. Although it can be argued that some news organizations endorse more "agreeable" political agendas, engaging in myopic decision-making practices by "blindly" accepting viewpoints of dominant belief systems has the utmost capability to produce disastrous outcomes. By not critically investigating *The O'Reilly Factor's* alleged "fair and balanced" approach, it is likely that the television broadcast will erroneously appeal to a segment of the American public and negatively influence dominant ideology. Furthermore, this rhetorical analysis calls for the U.S. American community to "legitimately" consider alternatives to the dominant narrative. Although O'Reilly attempted to present himself as showing critical intelligence by bringing on African American political figures within his program, *The O'Reilly Factor* refused to take notice of differing perspectives in order to maintain hegemony within the American socio-culture. In order to avoid ostracizing counterpublics within the contemporary political landscape and formulate ideologies that work to effectively solve inequalities residing within U.S. society, it is essential to fully encompass the minority perspective into dominant institutions' decision-making processes. Not to "control" those that oppose the hegemonic order (as O'Reilly had attempted) but, instead, to work collaboratively alongside those in need of "societal help" in order to better their socio-economic circumstances. Furthermore, this rhetorical study



calls into question the legitimacy of white power structures that continuously suppress counterpublics that resist dominant ideologies. Specifically, blatantly opinionated mass media outlets such as *The O'Reilly Factor* must be challenged by the American public in order to interpret the political agenda behind these broadcasts. For, in the wake of the Trayvon Martin tragedy, the active defense and maintenance of white hegemony within U.S. socio-culture legitimizes inequalities that African Americans are commonly confronted with in their daily lives. Through the perpetuation of racially biased institutional practices, such an authorization paves the path to a continued ethnically divided climate and ruptured American landscape.

### *Limitations To This Study*

Although this rhetorical analysis aims to provide an encompassing and convincing argument by linking scholarly literature to *The O'Reilly Factor's* 11 broadcasts covering the Trayvon Martin shooting, there still reside limitations that can potentially challenge my findings. To begin, the data implemented into my honors thesis excludes O'Reilly's television broadcasts that were aired between the dates of May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012 and July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Although O'Reilly continued to excoriate the African American community for engaging in self-destructive practices that sustain "pathologies" devastating their urban neighborhoods within this time period, the television broadcast never mentioned Trayvon Martin or George Zimmerman explicitly to the American public. Even though it appears that O'Reilly "used" the Martin tragedy to "fuel" his racially focused crusade, I decided to not include these broadcasts into my data in fear that "linking" these episodes to the shooting would be both an overly ambitious task and also that this connection resided outside the focus of my analysis. Although I searched deliberately for *O'Reilly Factor* broadcasts that specifically speak of Zimmerman or Martin within this time period (and found the next episode that mentioned either of these actors came from the July 15<sup>th</sup> episode), it can be argued that the inclusion of this data into my rhetorical analysis could challenge the arguments made in the earlier sections of this rhetorical project.

Also, O'Reilly presented a very "genuine" and "compassionate" persona to his viewers when talking with representatives of the Martin family. This was especially relevant in his episodes covering the "not-guilty" Zimmerman verdict and within his discussions with Daryl Parks (an attorney hired by Tracy Martin and Sybrina Fulton). Although it is clear that he engaged in hostile debates with "radical" African-American

leadership who are not affiliated with the Martin family, O'Reilly often decided to "tone it down" and presented himself as sympathetic to the unfortunate circumstances leading to Martin's death. O'Reilly's support of the Martin family can challenge my argument that the television program blamed Martin for his own fate and "legitimized" Zimmerman's use of deadly force against the teenager. Even though it is obvious that O'Reilly castigated African-American households for "failing" their children, it remains questionable whether or not *The O'Reilly Factor* made this link to the Martin family. Furthermore, although it appears indisputable that O'Reilly used Martin's lifestyle as an example of "pathologies" destroying African-American communities (since Martin had a history of committing minor criminal offenses while in school and presented himself as a "thug" to Zimmerman), he never explicitly made this connection to his viewers. Overall, O'Reilly's sympathy to Tracy Martin, Sybrina Fulton and representatives of the Martin family complicates the argument that his television program used Martin as an illustration of "pathologies" destroying urban African-American communities. This uncertain connection (no matter how obvious it may appear) can be used to dispute the arguments made in the earlier sections of this thesis.

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