

The Racialized Stereotype of a Criminal as presented within Television Newscasts

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Abstract

Throughout various decades, the news media has provided readily accessible depictions of criminality to audiences. The importance of the criminal suspect to the broadcast medium means that crime news is often presented with racial imagery. The criminal typification of race is characterized as the representation in which crime is stereotypically portrayed as an African American phenomenon (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002). To examine this issue, I produced a 20-minute podcast titled *I Am Not What You Think*. The podcast focuses on sharing the personal story of an African American male student who experiences the adversity that comes with being stereotyped as a criminal. I chose to produce a podcast because the audio platform allows for audiences to hear the emotions that come with an individual telling their story of how racialized stereotypes have affected their lives. Based on the research and the project that I conducted, I conclude that the criminal typification of African American males within local television news not only reinforces racist stereotypes to audiences, but also negatively influences the social identity of African American males.

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Chapter One: Literature Review

Introduction

Throughout various decades, the news media has provided readily accessible depictions of criminality to audiences (Welch, 2007). “Stories about crime provide several necessary ingredients for the successful marketing of news-concrete events with powerful impact on ordinary people, drama and emotion, and, above all, attention-getting visuals” (Gilliam- Iyengar, 2000, p. 560). Considering the visual nature of the medium, the importance of the suspect to the script means that crime news is often accompanied by racial imagery (Gilliam- Iyengar, 2000). The criminal typification of race is characterized as the representation whereby crime is stereotypically portrayed as an African American phenomenon (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002). Welch (2007) found that local television broadcasts play a significant role in defining and over representing African American males as criminals. African-Americans who appeared on television newscasts in any role were more than twice as likely to appear as criminal suspects than Caucasians (Welch, 2007). The criminal typification of African American males within local television news not only reinforces racist stereotypes to audiences, but also negatively influences the social identity of African American males. Within this paper, I will begin by focusing on the historical origins of racialized crime suspects. I will then focus on modern racism within local television broadcasts. In closing I will focus on the influence that criminal typification can have on the social identity of African American males.

Historical Origins of Racialized Crime Suspects

“The racial stereotyping of criminals has been an enduring and unfortunate feature of American culture” (Welch, 2007, p. 276). According to Welch (2007), it has long been viewed that criminal behavior was an inherent characteristic of African Americans. Tracing back to the enslavement of Africans in the United States, darker skin tones generated fear and incited the American public to link this fear to criminality. During the 19th century and early 20th century, criminal tendency was viewed as a “biological flaw” of African Americans (Welch, 2007). It was not until the 1970s and early 1980s that the stereotype of the young African American man evolved in the eyes of many American citizens from that of a thief into that of an ominous criminal predator (Welch, 2007). Today, the stereotyping of African Americans as criminals is so pervasive throughout society that “criminal predator” is used as a euphemism for “young Black male” (Welch, 2007).

The visual representation presented within local television newscasts of threatening African American men galvanized the stereotype of the ominous criminal predator. “Research on media influence has concluded that Blacks are indeed more likely to appear as criminally threatening on local television news, suggesting that this may encourage the social construction of threat in relation to Blacks (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002)” (Welch, 2007, p. 283).

The Criminal Typification of African Americans

“It is well established that there is a disproportionate amount of media coverage devoted to violent crimes for which Black males are more likely than others to be arrested (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Surette, 1992; Young, 1985)” (Welch, 2007, p. 281). In Omaha, Nebraska,

crime-related stories accounted for more than 60% of lead news stories, yet African American males were featured in the primary crime story subject nearly 70% of the time despite state crime statistics showing that African Americans were only responsible for 31% of the arrests (Creighton, Walker, & Anderson, 2014). When African Americans and Caucasians are shown in local television news stories, African Americans are much more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to be portrayed as criminals as opposed to police officers, role models, news commentators, or other positive figures (Welch, 2007). Researchers have term this overrepresentation of Black criminals as the “criminal typification of race” (Welch, 2007).

Social scientists have found that local television newscasts are biased in respect to how they project the idea that crime is violent and that criminals are all African American (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002). In Los Angeles, African American arrests for violent crimes were 2.8 times higher than the African American share of the population, whereas African Americans appeared as violent crime suspects on television news 3.2 times greater than their population share (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002). “By this measure, Blacks were overrepresented on TV news about violent crime by 14 percent, but Whites were overrepresented by a factor of almost 2.5” (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002, p. 405).

When conducting nationwide research assessing the representation of African Americans in local television news coverage, social scientists found that the criminal typification of African Americans in television newscasts occurred 2.4 times more often than the criminal typification of Caucasians (Welch, 2007). “Whereas black suspects were usually shown in handcuffs and in custody of police officers, white suspects were typically seen with their attorneys (Entman 1990, 1992)” (Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996, p. 8). The visual overrepresentation of African Americans as criminals within local television news highlights the unfortunate state of

much of “the public’s prevailing view of crime-that Blacks run amok committing depraved unprovoked acts of violence against Whites (Russell, 2002, p. 354)” (Welch, 2007). For this reason, the link between race and crime that is visually presented within local television news contributes to a phenomenon social scientists have labeled as “modern racism” (Entman, 1992).

Modern Racism

To understand the media’s influence on racial attitudes, it is critical to acknowledge the subtle change from traditional to modern racism (Entman, 1992). “Traditional racism comprises negative ‘beliefs about black intelligence, ambition, honesty and other stereotyped characteristics, as well as support for segregation and support for acts of open discrimination” (Entman, 1992, p. 342). This type of racism is thus open bigotry that endorses “restrictions on interracial social contact... and opposition to equal access or equal opportunity....” (Entman, 1992, p. 342). Traditional racist sentiments include statements such as “Black people are generally not as smart as whites” or “It is a bad idea for blacks and whites to marry one another” (Entman, 1992, p. 342).

Modern racism abstains from overt expressions of racial superiority or inferiority and is characterized instead by a dispersed “anti-black affect- a general hostility toward blacks” (Chircos & Eschholz, 2002). “One result of this effect is a tendency for some Whites “to lump all or most blacks into categories with negative characteristics (Entman 1992:345)” (Chircos & Eschholz, 2002, p. 401). According to Creighton, Walker and Anderson (2014), African American males are lumped into five categories that are stereotypically used to describe criminals: dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant and disturbed. For television audiences, stereotyped thinking is reinforced at levels likely to remain below conscious awareness (Entman,

1992). Racializing the stereotype of a criminal is the way that TV can encourage modern racism, without derogating African Americans through traditional racist sentiments (Entman, 1992).

One example of a stereotyped news subject that associates negative affective responses within television viewers is that of a “threatening young black male” (Entman, 1992). Welch (2007) discovered that within television news crime stories, African Americans are frequently depicted as nameless, which in turn serves to denote personal identity. “When blacks are not given a name in a picture, it suggests the visual representation can be assimilated to a larger, undifferentiated group, in this case the stereotype of a dangerous black male” (Entman, 1992, p. 350). This aspect of modern racism within local television newscasts can be understood as a crime-specific form of racial prejudice and discrimination (Welch, 2007). It specifically highlights another facet of modern racism that is displayed within crime new stories, which is the use of the racial hoax (Welch, 2007).

The Racial Hoax

Racial hoaxes support the notion that African Americans have been stereotyped in criminally biased ways (Welch, 2007). Racial hoaxes are false criminal allegations based on the race of a fabricated perpetrator (Welch, 2007). According to Entman (1992), local television news reporting is defined largely in emotional terms; it alerts viewers to threats and provides reassurance. African American crime is considered newsworthy because it alerts audiences comprised of many ethnicities to possible dangers and sources of assistance (Entman, 1992). The use of a racial hoax has had the most consequential impact on African American communities because the suspect within racial hoax is frequently referenced as a nameless Black offender (Welch, 2007). “Racial hoaxes are usually employed to deflect attention away from the

individual making the accusation, who is typically the actual criminal in many of these circumstances” (Welch, 2007, p. 285).

Within the last decade, there have been highly profiled examples of television newscasts eliciting a fair amount of coverage to individuals using racial hoaxes to incite a misdirected search for a falsified African American perpetrator. The most recent example occurred in January 2018: Lizzie Dunn, a 52-year-old Caucasian woman reported that she was walking down a street in Staten Island, New York, when an African American assaulted her with acid (Magness, 2018). After undergoing police questioning and television coverage, Dunn admitted to spraying herself in the face with acid and making up the story of the African American suspect (Magness, 2018). The use of the racial hoax takes advantage of preexisting racialized stereotype about the involvement of African Americans in crime (Welch, 2007). Furthermore, it communicates these racialized stereotypes by providing alarming and violent examples of unidentified African American criminals (Welch, 2007). The more that racial hoaxes are used to accuse fictitious African American suspects of committing falsified crimes, the more that the racial typification of crime is reinforced within the public psyche (Welch, 2007).

Social Identity

A growing number of media effects experiments suggest that distorted portrayals by news organizations can negatively influence the social identity of African American adolescents (Dixon, 2008). “Social identity is defined as ‘the individual’s knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership’ (Tajfel 1972a: 31)” (Abrams & Hogg, 1990, p. 2). In other words, social identity is defined as an individual’s self-conception of belonging to a group (Abrams & Hogg,

1990). According to Phenice and Griffore (2000), social identity involves processes of categorization, labeling, and construction of stereotypical views. Social scientists who have researched the social identity theory have found that individuals are thought to identify with groups of which they perceive to be members of and seek to construct a positive view of self, based on advantageous intergroup comparisons (Phenice, Griffore, 2000). “Social identity positively affects whites in the form of privilege (McIntosh, 1998), whereas this is not necessarily the case for ethnic minorities” (Phenice, Griffore, 2000).

Researchers readily acknowledge the power that media images can have on self-conception (Welch, 2007). “The media constructs a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the ‘problem of race’ is understood to be” (Welch, 2007, p.282). Concerns about stereotypes of criminality not only concern basic demographic membership, but also acknowledge the variations in physical appearance typically associated with racial groups (Oliver et al., 2004). Physical features, in and of themselves, function as cues that an individual is a member of a stereotyped group (Oliver et al., 2004). Researchers have discovered that more Afrocentric physical features, such as darker skin tones, fuller lips and wider noses, are significantly associated with negative stereotypes such as being criminal, poor, and aggressive (Oliver et al., 2004). The social identity formed by many African American adolescents is the consequence of being identified as a member of a negatively defined social group (Phenice, Griffore, 2000).

Television News viewing can be part of a process that makes the cognitive linkage between African Americans and criminality frequently activated and therefore chronically accessible (Dixon, 2008). When taking into account the considerable amount of research that news stories associate criminality with African Americans, coupled with research reporting

people's greater fear of and assumed criminality of African Americans compared to Caucasians, it follows a trend that many television viewers would likely envision an African American rather than a Caucasian criminal (Oliver et al., 2004). "This situation manifests in a variety of settings, including store clerks who keep a particularly keen eye on African American male customers who are targeted as potential shoplifters and Caucasian women who clutch their pocketbooks more closely when in the presence of black men" (Oliver, 2003, p.3).

Television broadcast is a powerful news medium because audience members are more likely to trust the veracity of news images over entertainment (Dixon, 2008). "This focus is particularly important given the significant role that physical appearance plays in a variety of settings, including racial profiling, witness identification, and tragic police shootings of innocent persons assumed, based on stereotypes, to be dangerous or criminal" (Oliver et al., 2004, p. 89). When black men appear in the media, they are either a jewelry bedecked drug pusher, a misogynous pimp or a vicious thug (Chircos & Eschholz, 2002).

The news media and individuals who are captured on video, such as politicians and government leaders, frequently link race and crime, which reinforces a criminal image for the public consumption (Welch, 2007). Within local televised newscasts, African American males are overwhelmingly portrayed in scowling mug shots (Welch, 2007). In recent years, this stereotypical image has created a greater negative impact to the social identity of African Americans because it has been reinforced by the president of the United States of America. During a speech to law enforcement officials in July 2017, President Donald Trump suggested that law enforcement shouldn't be worried about roughing up African American criminal suspects (Tracy, 2017). President Trump stated, "When you see these towns and when you see

these thugs being thrown into the back of a paddy wagon, you just see them thrown in, rough, I said please don't be too nice" (Tracy, 2017).

President Donald Trump's statement is significant because it not only plays on the fear that associates race with criminality, but it also reinforces the typical stereotype of an African American male to mass audiences. According to Welch (2007), the "get-tough" advertising rhetoric of American politicians, conservative and liberal alike, frequently manipulates the fear and indignation of citizens by conjuring fright-inducing images. The "get-tough" advertising rhetoric has been proven to be effective because among television viewers, negative stereotypes of African Americans were associated with greater perceived guilt and more harsh recommendations of punishment for an African American suspect who was featured in a television news story (Oliver et al., 2004).

The linkage of race with criminality is dangerous to the social identity of African Americans because as more stereotypes of African Americans are disseminated and reinforced, preliminary attitudes and perceptions concerning the social identity of the ethnicity become more negative and can result in psychological conflict for an African American individual (Phenice, Griffore, 2000).

Chapter Two: Creative Project

I Am Not What You Think Podcast

For my Honors Thesis creative project, I created a 20-minute podcast. Within *I Am Not What You Think*, audiences will be able to hear the story of an African American male student who has battled the racialized stereotype of a criminal all his life. The objective of this podcast is to share inspiring stories of individuals who deal with adversity every day.

This podcast is intended for an ethnically diverse audience that comprise the ages of 13 to 75.

For link please contact joba6803@colorado.edu

Chapter Three: Discussion and Conclusion

Description

For my honors thesis, I decided to research the racialized stereotype of a criminal as presented in television newscasts and create the *I Am Not What You Think* podcast. When I started the process of completing an honors thesis last semester, I did not find it difficult to choose a research topic around which to design an honors project. Ever since I was a little girl, I have always been curious as to the negative perception of my culture and identity as an African American. I first became interested in broadcast journalism as a result of experiencing racial inequality. Throughout elementary to 12th grade education, I heard many bitter and crude comments pertaining to my ethnicity. I was told several times that my skin color would hold me back from succeeding in school. Many students did not want to be taught in the same class as me. Statements inferring that I would be less academically inclined than my student peers, due to my ethnic background, made me ashamed and I would often try to find some form of escapism from reality.

Every single time I would turn on the television, I was flooded with images of African Americans who were portrayed in mug shots or in handcuffs. The message that I constantly received was that African Americans were unintelligent individuals who committed the majority of crimes. To debunk this stereotype, I made it my mission to be the best student that I could be, but as the ignorance of my peers continued in school, I realized that the task of proving that I could master a lesson by receiving the highest grades within my classes was not enough. In order to evoke change, I had to challenge myself to step outside of my comfort zone and break down

negative stereotypes people had about my skin color by becoming a vocal leader within and outside of the classroom. Struggling with adversity in school and around my community helped me to understand that sharing my story with others and unleashing the potential I have can alter the perception people have about me.

My experiences in dealing with adversity inspired me to create the *I Am Not What You Think* podcast because I found it important to give students of color at the University of Colorado, Boulder the opportunity to tell their story. As an aspiring broadcast journalist, I am accustomed to sharing individuals' stories for them through the production of news packages. But throughout this honors thesis process I found that there was power in listening to a person tell their own story for an audience. I believe that it was important for me to produce a podcast to bring to light voices that were affected by the larger issues of stereotypes presented within television newscasts.

Feelings

I really enjoyed the experience of completing an honors thesis. When I was presented with the opportunity to pursue a year-long project that would allow me the freedom to delve further into the effect that racialized stereotypes could have on students of color, I was very excited. I grew up attending schools that were predominantly Caucasian and for many years I wrestled with an internal conflict of trying to figure out why the complexion of my skin was associated with negative stereotypes. Prior to completing this honors thesis, I was never given the chance to investigate the grassroots of racialized stereotypes. The research that I discovered through completing the Literature Review portion of my honors thesis helped to alleviate the internal conflict that I struggled with throughout the years.

In the process of completing my literature review, I discovered Welch's statistic that African Americans who appeared on television newscasts in any role were more than twice as likely to appear as criminal suspects than Caucasians. This discovery inspired me to investigate different facets of racism and stereotypes. One of the most pivotal pieces of information that I discovered during the process of completing my honors thesis dealt with the shift from traditional to modern racism. Prior to starting this honors thesis journey, I was aware that traditional racism comprised of bigotry, but I was not aware that broadcast news inadvertently contributed to the shift from traditional to modern racism. Within television newscasts, one example of a stereotyped news subject who presented negative affective responses was a "threatening young black male" (Entman, 1992). Journalists who repeatedly transmitted this stereotype through crime news reports may not have supported modern racism themselves, but their news reports regarding African Americans males distinctly supported the practice (Entman, 1992). After completing this honors thesis, I feel that I am equipped with the knowledge that I need to help dissolve modern racism within television news reports.

Evaluation

I am very proud of the creative project that I produced. But, it was difficult to step outside my comfort zone and try to create a forum discussing a very contentious topic. There were a couple of challenges that I encountered while creating this podcast. The first challenge that I encountered was finding an interview subject who was willing to share their experience for the podcast. Last semester, I was able to casually talk with several students of color at the University of Colorado, Boulder who revealed their experiences to me without the microphone present. When I invited them to share their experience for the podcast, they declined the opportunity. I

asked many of them about their decision to decline and the overwhelming response was that they were afraid that there would be repercussions for sharing their story on a broadcast platform. I was finally able to find a student of color who was willing to have his story recorded for the podcast under one stipulation. He did not want his name to be revealed within the podcast. After I finished editing the podcast, I was able to send him a copy of the recording and he was very pleased that his name was kept anonymous. He was grateful for the experience of being able to tell his story, which made the completion of my honors thesis project that more meaningful. Another challenge that I encountered was choosing a title for my podcast. I found this to be challenging because I wanted to choose a title that was interesting, yet serious. The first title that I chose for the podcast was *I Am What I Am*. After discussing this title with one of my advisors, I decided to change the title to *I Am Not What You Think*. The purpose behind the podcast title was to highlight the notion that many ethnic individuals do not identify with the stereotypes that they are associated with.

The skills that I learned through the completion of my journalism courses helped me in creating this project. The main lesson that I applied to the creation of my podcast was centering the narrative around a main character. In constructing news packages for class assignments, I learned that it was important to focus a news story on a main character because the presence of a central character can help the audience to engage and connect with the information that is being conveyed. I decided to focus my podcast around an individual's story because I wanted the audience of my podcast to connect and empathize with the individual through listening to his voice tell his story.

Another lesson that I applied to the creation of my podcast was to feature an expert. Dr. Irene Blair is a professor of social psychology and neuroscience at the University of Colorado,

Boulder. Her research focuses on stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination in regard to subtle processes that underlie such events. I decided to feature my interview with Dr. Blair that highlights her research on Afrocentric physical features. Within *I Am Not What You Think*, it was important for me to interweave excerpts of my interview with Dr. Blair so that my audience could further understand that there is scientific research that supports not only my main character's experiences, but also my honors thesis findings that the racialized stereotype of a criminal negatively affects the social identity of African American males.

One aspect of my journalistic project that was different from my other journalistic work was conveying a story through audio journalism. I was accustomed to telling a story with visuals to accompany my script and soundbites, but with the creation of a podcast, I had to rely on sound effects instead of video clips to help me convey my main character's story. Podcasts are a very popular form of media. I wanted to challenge myself to create a podcast instead of a news package because I thought that it was important for audiences to hear the emotions that come with individuals telling their own story. With news packages, audiences have the opportunity to see visual storytelling, but with podcasts, audiences have the opportunity to imagine the story they hear through the use of audio and sound effects. I believe that having the opportunity to imagine the visuals from listening to an individual tell their story with accompanying sound effects is a powerful experience. In my opinion, focusing on listening to a story rather than watching a story allows an audience member to envision themselves in someone else's shoes. The subject within my podcast highlighted different situations that he has experienced, such as being stereotyped on a playground and within a store. I thought that it was important to include audio of a store bell ringing and kids laughing on a playground to help an audience imagine what

it must be like to deal with adversity in a setting that non-minorities do not normally have to worry about.

Analysis:

When I reflect on the process of completing my honors thesis, I believe that one of the strengths of my project was the interviews. I really enjoyed interviewing Dr. Irene Blair and the University of Colorado, Boulder student. Having the opportunity to sit down with the interviewees helped me to further understand my research on the racialized stereotype of a criminal. I interviewed the student before Dr. Blair. His interview provided me with insight on how the criminal typification of African Americans can influence the social identity of African American males. The personal stories that he shared helped me to understand that although racialized stereotypes can negatively affect the social identity of African American males, they can also inspire African American males to work hard and prove that the stereotypes that are associated with the complexion of their skin does not define their self-worth. Dr. Blair's interview provided me with scientific insight on how Afrocentric physical features can be associated with the racialized stereotype of a criminal. The research that she shared helped me to understand that stereotypes can mentally and physically affect individuals of color.

I believe that another strength of my project was the ability to produce a cohesive narrative. There are many factors that contribute to the production of a podcast. Some of these factors include music, sound effects, interviews and narration. I am proud that I was able to combine all of these factors to produce a podcast that guides audiences through a cohesive narrative.

The main limitation of my project was the number of episodes that I was able to produce. One thing that I could have done differently was produce a collection of episodes which highlight different stories of students of color battling the racialized stereotype of a criminal. There were a few factors that contributed to this limitation. The first factor was finding students of color who were willing to record their stories. As I previously mentioned, many students of color were afraid to record their personal experiences of dealing with adversity at the University of Colorado, Boulder. Another factor that contributed to this limitation was time. There is a lot of time and preparation that goes into producing a podcast. It took me the majority of my senior year to conduct research, interview and produce the *I Am Not What You Think* podcast. One way that I could have improved this limitation was to reach out to students of color at other universities within the state of Colorado. I believe that producing multiple episodes of the *I Am Not What You Think* Podcast would have helped audience members to understand that the racialized stereotype of a criminal is a large problem that affects the social identity of many students of color.

Conclusion:

The objective of the *I Am Not What You Think* podcast was to share inspiring stories of individuals who deal with adversity every day. Racial tensions are running high in the United States of America. During this time of political unrest, it can be difficult for individuals to be heard. I hoped that producing this podcast and broadcasting it to an audience could contribute to the conversation of investigating stereotypes and the effect that they can have.

Gilens (1996) states that objectivity and accuracy remain primary goals among news professionals. Broadcast journalists' efforts to accurately portray the subject matter of their

stories depend not only upon the specific information that is gathered for a particular story but also upon background understanding (Gilens, 1996). “While journalists’ understandings of society derive in part from their professional work, they inevitably share as well the popular understandings- and misunderstandings- held by the larger society in which they live” (Gilens, 1996, p. 534).

As I enter the work field as a journalist, I plan to utilize the information that I have discovered within my honors thesis to report on news stories that represent minorities in positive roles within their communities and help negate the racialized stereotype of a criminal. In 2012, the Associated Press Stylebook updated its record on when journalists should publish information about an individual’s race within news stories (Tenore, 2012). “The update says that race is pertinent in stories about crime suspects who have been “sought by the police or missing person cases,” so long as “police or other credible, detailed descriptions” are used” (Tenore, 2012). One of the challenges of this update is determining if the descriptions of the suspect are accurate (Tenore, 2012). The social identity formed by many African American adolescents is the consequence of being identified as a member of a negatively defined social group (Phenice, Griffore, 2000).

I hope that through my journalistic efforts to report on stories that represent minorities who positively contribute to their community in various professional sectors, I will be able to help change the negative perception of African Americans. I truly believe that representation matters and I would like to be a positive example for audiences to look up to and know that during this political time in America, I am a journalist who is fighting to represent minorities in the positive light that they deserve.

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