

IN BLACK AND WHITE:  
THE AMERICAN MEDIA'S CONSTRUCTION OF POLICE KILLINGS

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## Preface

Summer 2014 was an exciting transitional period for me as I was leaving a six-month stint at an office job after graduation and returning to my alma mater for graduate study. That July, a New York City police officer choked Eric Garner to death after a confrontation over Garner's sale of illicit loose cigarettes. In August, shortly before classes began, police officers in Ohio shot and killed John Crawford III as he strolled around a Walmart with a pellet gun from the store's shelf. Days later, a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, shot and killed Michael Brown after confronting him perhaps for jaywalking or perhaps for shoplifting cigarillos. Protests in New York, in Ohio, in Missouri—in cities and on campuses all over the country—rocked the national conscience, as television screens were flooded with scenes of tear gas and rubber bullets and armored vehicles.

Then, right before Thanksgiving break, an Ohio police officer shot and killed twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, who had been playing with a pellet gun in a park. By the end of the year, it seemed every day saw a protest against police violence as well as another police killing. I flipped through footage of riot gear and dogs and neighbors healing one another with milk, wanting to be in those streets too; I read every #ICantBreathe, #BlackLivesMatter, and #Ferguson with a heavy heart, wanting to donate the “fortune” that was my assistantship stipend to the cause. Finally, watching the 11 o'clock news in despair, I realized that my role in the movement was to contribute the best way I knew: as an academic, through my research. So, as a graduate student of English, I have spent the last two years working to use my knowledge of linguistics to bring awareness to issues of race in our society.

Morgan Kristine Johnson

In Black and White: The American Media's Construction of Police Killings

With several highly publicized police killings during the latter half of 2014, the issue of police violence has been re-ignited in the United States as emotionally charged a topic as ever, dividing Americans politically and socially and racially. From Eric Garner to Nicholas Robertson, the media has been greatly influential on public perception of police killings. Based on 163 digital news articles about cases of police killings from the top ten visited American news sites of 2015, this study analyzes how the American media's language contributes to readers' perception of police killings, focusing on patterns of race-related modifiers, passivization, and evaluation. Use of these linguistic features can influence public perception of the role of race, police accountability, and societal expectations. Considering the findings, I advocate for media literacy education as professional development for journalists.

Susan Shepherd, PhD, Chair

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## Introduction: What's Going on

The police killings from July 2014 to December 2014 re-ignited the conversation about policing in America. We've been asked to confront several harsh realities. That petty crimes, playing "cops and robbers," and even shopping have death sentences for some; that the black community is disproportionately affected by policing. And that current policy enables police violence with impunity. However, many have divided into one of two camps: those crying for the end of racist and deadly policing and those adamant against demonizing The Boys in Blue who protect and serve.

The Counted, a website created to compensate for the lack of comprehensive records of police killings, reported that 1,145 people were killed by police in 2015. Three hundred and four of those killings were of black people—27% despite being only 12% of the population<sup>1</sup>—and 292 of those, or 96%, were male (Swaine et al). The Washington Post's record of 2015 police shootings contains comparable figures.<sup>2</sup>

With statistics like this, it only makes sense that this disparity extends to citizens' perceptions of policing. Weitzer and Tuch (2004) report, "Indeed, race is one of the most salient predictors of attitudes toward the police and other criminal justice institutions: blacks are more likely than whites to express dissatisfaction with various aspects of policing" (305). A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in early 2015 provided some specifics about this difference, revealing "About seven-in-ten whites (71%) expressed a great deal or fair amount of confidence in local police to treat blacks and whites equally, compared with just 36% of blacks. ... The gaps were similarly wide when

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<sup>1</sup> "Population Distribution by Race/Ethnicity." The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. Accessed March 10, 2016. <<http://kff.org/other/state-indicator/distribution-by-raceethnicity/>>

<sup>2</sup> "Investigation: People Shot and Killed By Police This Year." The Washington Post. Accessed March 10, 2016. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/>>

the question was asked in 2009 and 2007” (Drake). Weitzer and Tuch go on to suggest that this difference is due to distinct group interests: “If the dominant group believes that it is entitled to valuable resources, it follows that the group will have an affinity with the institutions that serve their interests. Policing is one such institution. Whites tend to hold a favorable opinion of the police, favor aggressive law enforcement, and are skeptical of criticisms of the police” (306).

This polarization extends to the role of the media as well. While police departments and groups of readers/viewers alike have accused the media of fostering unnecessary outrage and complicating the judicial process, others have praised the media’s efforts, specifically journalists who have provided on-the-ground reporting. The controversy over whether the media is helping or hurting the public with its honorable or disgraceful reporting tactics is nearly as divisive as the cases of police killing themselves. In whichever camp you reside, however, the media has proven itself a greatly influential body in public perception the last two years.

Speaking to the power of the media, for better or for worse, Bednarek and Caple (2012) suggest, “we might conceptualize [the] complex relationship between news discourse and context as a two-way flow—where aspects of the context shape news discourse and where news discourse itself shapes, or even establishes, aspects of the context” (37). The latter half of this proposal is akin to the theory of linguistic relativity,<sup>3</sup> which suggests language influences thought and perception. Despite the various forms of this theory,<sup>4</sup> “they all claim that certain properties of a given *language* have consequences for patterns of *thought* about reality” (Lucy 292; original emphasis). In the

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<sup>3</sup> Also commonly called “the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.”

<sup>4</sup> For example, a “stronger” version of this theory is *linguistic determinism*.



context of news media, efforts here are “not on the ‘nature’ of news events, but rather on how such events are mediated through language and image...[on how] news values are not ‘inherent’ aspects of events or internalized beliefs, they are values that are established by language and image use” (Bednarek and Caple, 2012, 45). That is, through control of language, media producers—journalists, broadcast news writers, commentators, et cetera—determine what society deems important and why.

Questions of this relationship between discourse, power, and influence are best addressed through discourse analysis, specifically Critical Discourse Analysis or sociopolitical discourse analysis (van Dijk, 1993, 249). Chaney and Robertson (2014) define Critical Discourse Analysis as “an approach that studies written and spoken texts to determine how structures of power, inequality, and bias underscore the true meaning of discourse” (113). This approach is significant to the study of media discourse and police killings, because, as Gee states,

Cultures, social groups, and institutions shape social activities: there are no activities like “water-cooler gossip sessions” or “corridor politics” without an institution whose water cooler, social relations, corridors, and politics are sites of and rationale for these activities. At the same time though, cultures, social groups, and institutions get produced, reproduced, and transformed through human activities...language-in-use is everywhere and always “political.” (1)

While news outlets report about sociopolitical events, their reports reproduce those events, contributing to readers’ understanding of them and influencing the existence and progression of those events in society—all through *language*. In this way they are often responsible for (re)producing power dynamics through “overt support, enactment, representation, legitimation, denial, mitigation or concealment of dominance, among [other practices]” (van Dijk, 2003, 250).

Many scholars have explored the effects of media discourse as they relate to issues of race. For example, studies show that media discourse influences race relations, “constructing, shaping, and reinforcing perceptions...particularly among White Americans” (Domke 317). Because news media is governed predominately by white owners<sup>5</sup> and primarily influences white Americans, the institution of news media has limited interests, excluding many other perspectives from its production and consumption processes. Domke (2001) suggests this influence occurs in two phases: “First, news coverage likely influences whether certain racial attitudes become rooted and, secondly, helps to reinforce them once established” (321). However, expanding upon previous research about single reports of police misconduct, Weitzer and Tuch find exposure to media reports about police misconduct over time is the strongest predictor of citizens’ perception of the issue. Those who repeatedly encounter media reports on the subject are more “inclined to believe that misconduct is a common occurrence in both their city and their neighborhood, and such media exposure affects blacks, Hispanics, and whites alike (though minorities more strongly)” (321). This indicates that today’s media is as important and influential as ever with seemingly daily reports about police killings, police misconduct, and related matters.

Additionally, the media contributes to stereotypes that facilitate targeted and violent policing. Chaney and Robertson (2014) note that media representations of black men are often negative, usually characterizations of “studs, super detectives, or imitation White men,” affecting how society views and treats men of color. “Such characterizations

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<sup>5</sup> Flint, Joe. “FCC Media Ownership Survey Reveals Lack of Diversity.” *Los Angeles Times*. Los Angeles Times, 14 November 2012. Web. 20 March 2016; Federal Communications Commission. “Report on Ownership of Commercial Broadcast Stations.” 14 November 2012.

can be so visceral in nature that ‘prototypes’ of criminal suspects are more likely to be African-American” (483-484; Bryson 1988; Oliver et al. 2004). This means that the construction of blacks in the media contributes to blackness indexing a host of negative qualities in society. However, Chaney and Robertson caution against giving too much credit to media influence, citing Oliver et al. (2004) to remind, “it is important to keep in mind that media consumption is an active process, with viewers’ existing attitudes and beliefs playing a larger role in how images are attended to, interpreted, and remembered” (89). That is, “it is probable that less than flattering depictions of Black males on television and in news stories are activating pre-existing stereotypes...Moreover, it is reductionist to presuppose that [an] individual is powerless in constructing a palatable version of reality and is solely under the control of the media and exercises no agency” (Chaney and Robertson 484).

So, while the media does contribute to the development of beliefs, its influence primarily lies in its ability to reinforce already-held beliefs, including stereotypes and prejudices. Furthermore, in a reciprocal fashion, media itself is affected by social, political, and economic agendas. The importance of media studies becomes self-evident as we examine its power over our belief systems and, in effect, societal change.

As van Dijk says in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, “The undeniable power of the media has inspired many critical studies,” and that is indeed what it has done here (2003, 359). He suggests focus on “the role of discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance,” so this is a discourse analysis of mainstream news reports that aims to highlight ways in which the media reproduces social inequalities through its construction of police killings (1993, 249). Specifically, this study focuses on

participants, events, and perspective through analysis of race-related modifiers, passivization, and evaluative parameters respectively. These are significant variables because they each provide insight into the construction of various aspects of police killings. Modification ascribes properties or qualities to entities. This constructs participants in certain ways as it reveals indexical information about those entities. Passivization constructs events in certain ways as it involves orienting participants to the event as well as to one another. Finally, evaluation constructs one's stance or perspective to the event by expressing the event with respect to certain norms, standards, or values (Bednarek and Caple, 2012, 139).

The goal here is two-fold, reflecting the goals of discourse analysis identified by Gee (1999): “illuminating and gaining evidence for our theory of the domain, a theory that helps to explain how and why language works the way it does when it is put into action; and contributing, in terms of understanding and intervention, to important issues and problems in some ‘applied’ area...that interests and motivates the researcher” (8). I endeavor not only to examine linguistic patterns that reproduce issues of institutional power but also to draw conclusions about better practices that might facilitate social change.

Because of this, Critical Race Theory also lends itself to this study. As this study aims to challenge the status quo of media production through multidisciplinary theories and methods in an effort to bring awareness of the particular social justice issue of police killings, the presence of all five tenets of Critical Race Theory, as articulated by Chaney and Robertson (2014), is self-evident: “(1) the primacy of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination; (2) a questioning of the dominant

belief system/status quo; (3) a commitment to social justice; (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and (5) a multidisciplinary perspective” (484). Olmstead writes that “[Critical race theory] is noteworthy because it uses rhetorical ideas as both its ideological base and methodology,” arguing “that solutions to problems resulting from racism require the use of language to reshape reality” (324). I believe that both the producers and consumers of media have a responsibility to do just that, to use language to reshape our dangerous reality rather than to perpetuate current institutional inequalities and injustices.

Van Dijk (1993) identifies the core of critical discourse analysis to be “a detailed description, explanation, and critique of the ways dominant discourses (indirectly) influence...socially shared knowledge, attitudes, and ideologies, namely through their role in the manufacture of concrete models” (259). I hope this study not only acts as a valuable description, explanation, and critique but also sheds light on better practices that might facilitate more effective and collaborative public discourse about police killings in America.

## Methodology

The data set for this study consists of digital news reports about police killings from 2014-2015. I chose to focus on digital news, instead of broadcast or print news, because the internet has become the customary news source for the majority of Americans. In fact, Pew Research Center reports,

In 2013, 82% of Americans said they got news on a desktop or laptop and 54% said they got news on a mobile device. Beyond that, 35% reported that they get news in this way “frequently” on their desktop or laptop, and 21% on a mobile device (cellphone or tablet). (Pew Research Center: Journalism & Media Staff).

Not only has digital news become more significant with the proliferation of internet access and usage but the digital format allows outlets to break news and provide updates seemingly instantaneously, a desirable quality to any news audience. The data set consists

**Figure 1: Top 50 Online News Entities (2015)<sup>6</sup>**

Rank	Media	Unique Visitors in 01/2015
1	ABC NEWS	127,995
2	CNN	101,540
3	NBC News	101,145
4	Huffington Post	100,000
5	CBS News	84,153
6	USA Today	78,804
7	BuzzFeed	77,992
8	The New York Times	57,132
9	Fox News	56,857
10	Daily Mail	51,181
11	The Washington Post	47,815

Source: "Digital: Top 50 Online News Entities (2015)." Pew Research Center. <http://www.journalism.org/media-indicators/digital-top-50-online-news-entities-2015/#>.

of articles from 2015’s top ten American online news entities (see Figure 1). Because these were the top visited news sites in January of 2015, I believe my data set is a representative sample of mainstream digital media consumed from 2014-2015.

This study focuses on eight cases of police killing: the killings of Eric Garner, John Crawford III, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Walter Scott, Sam

<sup>6</sup> Though Daily Mail is ranked tenth, it was excluded from the data set because it is a UK-based outlet. The Washington Post was considered the tenth outlet.

Dubose, and Nicholas Robertson. These cases were not selected randomly but were chosen for the following reasons: (1) All eight cases were highly publicized; (2) The cases span a time period of two years, with half in 2014 and half in 2015; (3) The cases are geographically varied—from New England to Los Angeles, from the South to the Midwest—illustrating that police violence is a national matter rather than a regional one, or, as President Obama has called it, “an American problem.”<sup>7</sup>

The fact that all of the cases concern males<sup>8</sup> is not to disregard the women who are killed by police nor to discount the work done by organizations like Black Lives Matter, founded to include underrepresented victims and activists. The cases all concern black men in order to limit the number of variables. However, I believe this is still a representative sample, because police killing disproportionately affects black males. Supplemental data on reports of the police killings of three white males—Keith Vidal, John Winkler, and David Kassick—were analyzed for comparison. For background on each of the aforementioned cases, see Appendix III.

After identifying the news sources, I used the “Advanced Search” feature on Google to locate two reports from each of the aforementioned cases. The first set of articles was initial reports about the deaths of each citizen,<sup>9</sup> and the second set was initial reports about legal results of each case (e.g., charges, grand jury decisions). This yielded a total of 163 articles, as some news sources had incomplete coverage of some cases (see Figure 2). All of the reports—articles, including cues for embedded videos and images—

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<sup>7</sup> He first said this at the 2014 White House Tribal Nations Conference on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, the day of the Eric Garner grand jury decision was announced.

<sup>8</sup> I use “males” instead of “men” because Tamir Rice was twelve years old.

<sup>9</sup> The use of “citizen” to refer to people killed by police is an attempt to find the least problematic word choice. Earlier iterations of this study used “deceased” and “civilian,” which dehumanized the individuals and evoked militarization respectively. The use of citizen, however, is not to suggest that police officers are in any way distinct from citizens; they themselves are citizens.

were organized first by news source and then chronologically. For citations of each article analyzed, see Appendix I.

**Figure 2: Data Set**

	ABC	Buzzfeed	CBS	CNN	Fox	HuffPost	NBC	NYT	USA	WaPo
Vidal				× ●	× ●	×	× ●			
Winkler			×		×				×	
Kassick		●	× ●	× ●	●		× ●	●		●
Garner	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●
Crawford			× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●		×	× ●
Brown	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●
Rice	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●
Scott	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●
Gray	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●
Dubose	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●	× ●
Robertson	×	×	×	×	×	× ●	×	×	×	× ●

× article about killing ● article about legal results

A coding sheet (see Appendix II) was used to analyze the data. Analysis focused primarily on the 143 articles about cases with black males. The twenty articles about cases with white males were analyzed as needed for comparison purposes. The discussion that follows concerns the 143 articles about cases with black males unless qualified otherwise.



## Data and Discussion

In this section, I examine the use of modification, passivization, and evaluation in articles about police killings. As Lucy states in his article “Linguistic Relativity,” “Language embodies *an interpretation* of reality and language can *influence* thought about that reality” (292; original emphasis). I discuss how these linguistic features can influence readers’ perception of police killings through their construction of participants, events, and values (respectively). Furthermore, I speculate how journalists might alter their approach to these articles—to change their language, and therefore interpretation—for more effective discourse on the issue.

### Modifiers: Constructing Identity

In order to analyze the media’s construction of identity, I focused on adjectives. As previously stated, adjectives ascribe properties to entities (Frawley, 437). In English, adjectives appear in three forms: attributive adjectives, predicative adjectives, and secondary predicative adjectives. Adjectives that are attributive modify the noun directly (e.g., “a black man,” BF06). Predicative adjectives appear after a copula (e.g., “Crawford is black,” HP04), and secondary predicative adjectives “combine with an event verb and...help to characterize the final state of the theme argument of the verb” (Baker 219).

A pilot study I did in 2014 revealed the most distinct pattern concerning modifiers to be with race-related adjectives. Race-related adjectives are descriptors like “African American,” “black,” “Caucasian,” “white.” When used to modify a human entity, these words serve as identity markers. Edwards (1985) views the entire enterprise of sociolinguistics as a concern for the “formation, presentation, and maintenance” of

identity, recognizing a variety of identity markers: “age, sex, social class, geography, religion,” et cetera (3).

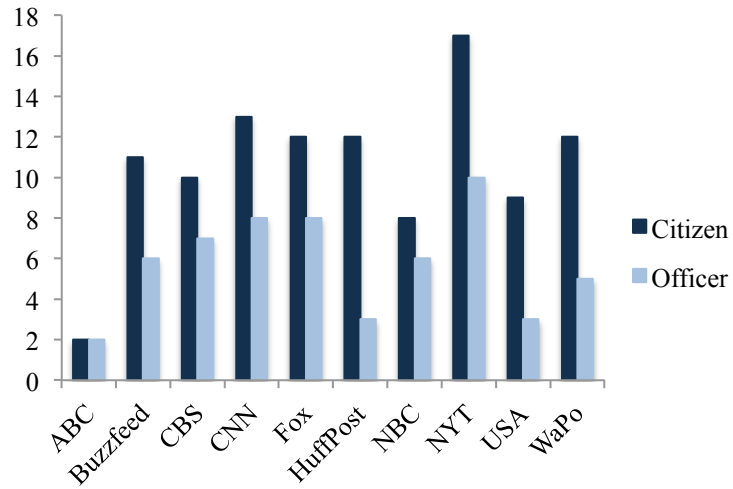
Markers of identity are mentioned only if they matter for some reason in adherence to the Gricean maxims of relation and quantity. For example, it would be odd if a newspaper reported that the police shot a second-generation Italian-American during a routine traffic stop. Readers would pause to wonder about the relevance of identifying the citizen in this manner. This is significant in contributing to readers’ perception of police killings, because it constructs perspectives of race relations in several ways. First, it impacts the perception of community between the citizen and the reader, either establishing a sense of solidarity with readers of the same race or “othering” them from members of different races. Second, using race descriptors influences readers’ perception of the event as racially influenced. That is, if race is signified to be an important aspect of either or both participants’ identity(s), then it can also be inferred that race is a significant factor in the event at hand. Furthermore, there is something telling about stating the race of one participant and not the other; if race is an important aspect of only one participant’s identity, that participant is essentially marked.

Markedness is a linguistic concept that refers to “the asymmetrical and hierarchical relationship between the two poles of any opposition” (Waugh 299). Unmarked forms are the basic/standard, broader (in meaning), and/or more frequently occurring forms while marked forms often contain affixes and have narrower meanings (DiCamilla). Markedness can involve various linguistic structures, having to do with gender (*waiter* versus *waitress*), tense (*walk* versus *walked*), et cetera. However, the idea of markedness has been extended to cultural systems to refer to a

“nonfocused...nonspecialized” (i.e., normal and dominant) entity and its oppositional counterpart; for example, *white (person)* versus *black (person)* or *heterosexuality* versus *homosexuality* (Waugh 309).

Constructions of markedness/otherness, reproduce social inequalities, because “if such ‘polarized’ models are consistent with negative attitudes or

**Figure 3: Frequency of Race-Related Modifiers by Publication**



ideologies, they may be used to sustain existing attitudes or form new negative attitudes” (van Dijk, 1991, 263).

In order to analyze markers of identity, I coded for all race-related adjectives. Then I categorized them based on whether they modified citizens, police officers, or other entities. This coding includes article headlines but not other paratext.

A race-related adjective was used to modify the citizen nearly twice as often than to modify the police officer. There were 106 mentions of the citizens’ race (e.g., “Gray was black,” US08) compared to only 58 mentions of the race of police officers involved (e.g., “a white South Carolina police officer,” FX08). When broken down by publication, The New York Times (NYT) articles contained the most tokens of race-related modifiers for both citizens and police officers (17 and 10 respectively; see Figure 3). ABC News used race-related modifiers most infrequently with two race-related adjectives that modified a police office and two that modified a citizen, making it the only publication to

use race-related adjectives to modify both citizens and police officers equally.

Additionally, race-related modifiers of citizens were also found more frequently in headlines and for first references. This overall incongruence marks the citizens at a much greater rate than the police officers. There are at least two likely reasons for this pattern.

One possibility is that whiteness is treated as the default or unmarked racial status. That is, the race of the citizens is referenced more frequently to signify departure from the racial standard. This is supported by the fact that race is mentioned only once in all twenty articles concerning white citizens; the opening sentence of a Washington Post article about the killing of David Kassick reads, “A Pennsylvania jury on Thursday acquitted police officer Lisa Mearkle of murder charges in the Feb. 2 shooting of David Kassick, an unarmed white man—one of just five fatal police shootings of the 834 to date this year that have resulted in charges” (WP001). As Domke points out, this is also supported by Gray (1987), offering “discourse about race in media content...often suggests to citizens a ‘normal, even desirable social and racial order’ with Whites at the top, even though scholarship suggests journalists often are not aware of their role in these processes” (Domke 318).

In line with this, Park et al. (2012) found the media employed frames of race in reports about school shootings of which the shooter is nonwhite but not in reports about school shootings of which the shooter is white. Park et al. suggest,

To protect collective self-image...the mainstream media tend to construct an “outsider” status for perpetrators of exceptional offenses. The otherness of perpetrators of egregious crimes can be even more accentuated if they happen to belong to a group that is already marginalized or viewed as inherently criminal, such as immigrants. (477)

Because blacks are also marginalized and commonly perceived as inherently criminal (Weitzer and Tuch, 2004; Chaney and Robertson, 2014), it is unsurprising that they would receive similar linguistic treatment to immigrants. However, the similarity here is disconcerting due to the distinction between perpetrators of mass shootings (“exceptional offenses,” Park et al. 477) and the citizens in this study; some are at worst perpetrators of petty crimes or *suspects* of petty crimes, some are guilty only of shopping at Walmart or playing in a park. This would mean the privileging of whiteness as the norm effectively supersedes the difference between guilt and innocence.

Another possibility for the incongruence could be consonance, “the extent to which aspects of a story fit in with stereotypes that people may hold about the events and people portrayed in it” (Bednarek and Caple, 2012, 43). As previously mentioned, media effect is primarily based on the reinforcement of pre-existing beliefs. For example, Bednarek and Caple mention a study by Glasgow Media Group that revealed news coverage about developing countries “focused on negative events such as war, terrorism, disaster and conflict,” which is in line with a tendency of news to focus on negativity but is possibly “interpreted more critically as presenting a narrow preconceived view of these countries” (2012, 43). Thus, the disproportionate use of race-related adjectives to modify black citizens could be either an effort to reinforce ideas people have about black citizens or the by-product of (media producers’) existing beliefs about black citizens.

Regardless of the motive, this pattern frames the issue of police killings as a matter between black citizens and (all) police officers, as opposed to black citizens and white police officers. In fact, this is bolstered by the dozens of assertions about “police violence against African Americans” (CN05), “police dealings with African Americans”

(FX11), and the “strained relationship between police and African Americans” (US11), which explicitly identify the issue as one between black people and law enforcement. While the framing might be accurate—it is statistically supported (Swain et al.)—it is problematic when coupled with the solution commonly championed in public discourse: law enforcement officers should look like the communities they serve.

This solution is promising with respect to the stereotype of black bodies as dangerous; the construction of *black person as threat* is present in the data. In the articles analyzed, black citizens’ body types are repeatedly referenced to indicate that they were a danger, perhaps deserving of excessive force. For example, Eric Garner’s height and weight are mentioned by over half of the news outlets (WP01, FX01, US01, CN01, AB01, NY01) and Tamir Rice’s height, weight, and even pants and jacket sizes are mentioned multiples times (WP05, CN14, NB15, CB15). Compare this to cases with white citizens, in which body type is *only* referenced to indicate the citizen was harmless; “with two officers restraining the 90-pound Vidal” (NB001) or “had just turned 18 and weighed about 90 pounds” (HP001; see also NB002 and FX001).

It makes sense that black officers would be less likely to perceive black bodies as aggressive in the way that white officers might; blackness is familiar to them and therefore less threatening if not unthreatening. However, if the issue is between black men and all officers, the color of officers is rendered irrelevant such that “matching” law enforcement to communities solves nothing. Either we must stop employing race-related modifiers disproportionately, effectively framing the issue as a matter of black men and all police officers, or we must develop and promote new solutions that can actually solve the matter at hand.

Moreover, references to race were still greatly disproportional, with 77 references made concerning *blackness* (the race of the citizens) and only 11 references to *whiteness* (the police officers' race). For example, reports mention “mostly African American protesters” (CN06), “the predominantly-black suburb” (NB01), and “the black community” (WP01). References to whiteness include “a white government and a white mayor” (NY02) and “mostly white protesters” (NY04). This is likely due to one or both of the same reason(s) previously discussed (whiteness as default or consonance). Additionally, many of these are what Alexiadou and Stavrou (2011) term “ethnic adjectives.” Take, for example, the adjective-noun pairing “black community” (WP01). They are considered pseudo-adjectives because they “manifest a hybrid nature, sharing properties with both adjectives and nouns” (118). According to Alexiadou and Stavrou, “a prominent characteristic of this set of adjectives is that the animate members of the groups they denote seem as a rule to absorb the external (agent) role of the parental verb” (117-118).

Park et al. (2012) poses the question: “Should the media discuss race at all when reporting crimes? Without pre-existing sociopolitical conditions and the undue influence of stereotyping, racial identification of a criminal could simply be part of comprehensive news reporting” (488). I do not argue that discussion of race in these reports is unwarranted. However, the findings here are not due to comprehensive reporting as evidenced by the disproportionate modification of black entities in comparison to white entities. *Truly* comprehensive reporting, including equal use of race-related modifiers, could mitigate “pre-existing sociopolitical conditions and the undue influence of stereotyping” (488). Furthermore, the problem identified in the articles—a problem

between black citizens and all police officers—is not being sufficiently addressed by popularly proposed solutions. Comprehensive reporting, or at least balanced reporting, of race would allow for readers to better determine if, in fact, police killings are a matter between black citizens and all police officers, black citizens and white police officers, or all citizens and all police officers. Then we can begin to determine appropriate solutions.

### **Passivization: Constructing Roles**

In order to analyze the media’s construction of roles, I focused on sentence structure, specifically passivization. The primary variable of this transformation is the thematic role of *agent*. In *Linguistic Semantics*, Frawley defines agent as “the deliberate, potent, active instigator of the predicate: the primary, involved doer” (203). On the other hand, Duranti argues that defining agency is difficult because of issues associated with “the role of intentionality and the ontological status of the semantic (or thematic) role of Agent and other related notions (e.g., Patient, Instrument).” He wonders whether these issues should be treated as “basic or primitive notions (e.g., Fillmore 1968) or as derived concepts to be defined in terms of entailments associated with certain types of events (e.g., Chierchia 1989; Dowty 1989)” (Duranti 453). This is interesting because Frawley suggests that the definition of agency *is* its intentionality and ontological status as a thematic role. Duranti ultimately defines agency based on three interconnected properties:

Agency is...the property of those entities (i) that have some degree of control over their own behavior, (ii) whose actions in the world affect other entities’ (and sometimes their own), (iii) whose actions are the object of evaluation (e.g. in terms of their responsibility for given outcome).  
(453)



This definition seems to be a less committal version of Frawley’s hard-and-fast “doer” definition; this is because Duranti has some caveats regarding intentionality. Though he agrees that the primary characteristic of agents is that they “‘affect’ themselves or some other entities,” he views “the extent to which such actions are performed willfully and with specific goals in mind” as necessarily qualifying an entity’s status as an agent (545). However, though both cite Jackendoff, Frawley does not concern himself with the “*degree of agency*” written of by Duranti. Frawley states that agents are typically animate—more specifically, typically human. It is this humanness, he says, that connects agency with volition, will, intentionality, and responsibility. In fact, these qualities play such a crucial role, Frawley argues, that an entity is an agent even in a situation where the action is forced, where the agent acts involuntarily, “because agency is concerned with the *execution of the predicate*, not with the circumstances that give rise to the predicate or the argument” (203; emphasis added). That is, so long as the agent carries out an act with primary involvement, regardless of the factors contributing to that involvement, they are an agent. In relation to police killings—or killings in general, for that matter—it seems reasonable to privilege Frawley’s rationale here; due to the weight of killing and death, even justifiable killings warrant acknowledgement of responsibility.

So how does agency come into play when we talk about *passivization*?

Passivization involves the re-structuring (transformation) of a sentence whereby the thematic role of agent is mapped onto the subject, creating a passive sentence in which the agent is attached to a subject-predicate structure via a prepositional phrase or omitted altogether. There are two ways of crafting the passive form in English: (1) with the auxiliary verb *be* followed by the passive participle of the main verb (by-phrase), or (2)

with the auxiliary verb *get* followed by the passive participle of the main verb (agent omission). Finnegan notes, “the choice of a passive sentence over its active counterpart is regulated by information structure” (286). More specifically, he says agentless passives are employed when the agent is obvious or insignificant and agent passives (by-phrases) are employed “when a noun phrase other than the agent is more prominent as given information than the agent itself” (286). It’s reasonable in the communicative context of media reports, by-phrase usage can be an attempt to foreground someone or something, in this case, the victim of a killing. However, in the same vein, agent omission is—at best—likely an attempt to mitigate responsibility. On the other hand, Van Dijk (2008) reveals, “the use of active and passive sentences, and the agent or subject position of news actors in sentences, reveal[s] much about the newspaper’s implicit stance toward...news actors” (81).

This is significant to the study at hand because, as Van Dijk (1988) states,

Much like other discourse types, news leaves many things unsaid. These must either be inferred for full comprehension or are routinely presupposed as general or more particular taken-for-granted information. Several types of the unsaid semantic implications, presuppositions, suggestions and associations...may be inferred from single lexical items...or from propositions and proposition sequences.” (69)

There are certainly some semantic implications of passivization, which can yield several interpretations depending on form and context. Baker and Ellece (2011) explain some of these implications specifically, stating:

Social actors can be represented as “doing” things (as actors/agents) or as having things done to them or for them (as goals or beneficiaries of other social actors’ actions). The latter type of social actors are said to be passivated while the former are activated. Activated social actors make things happen and can therefore influence their environment. On the other hand, passivation of social actors can be interpreted as a linguistic trace of *disempowering* discourse that constructs such actors as inactive and

therefore *not having any meaningful influence on their environment.*” (88; emphasis added)

In summary, active sentences identify and empower the actor, and passive sentences mask and devalue the actor.

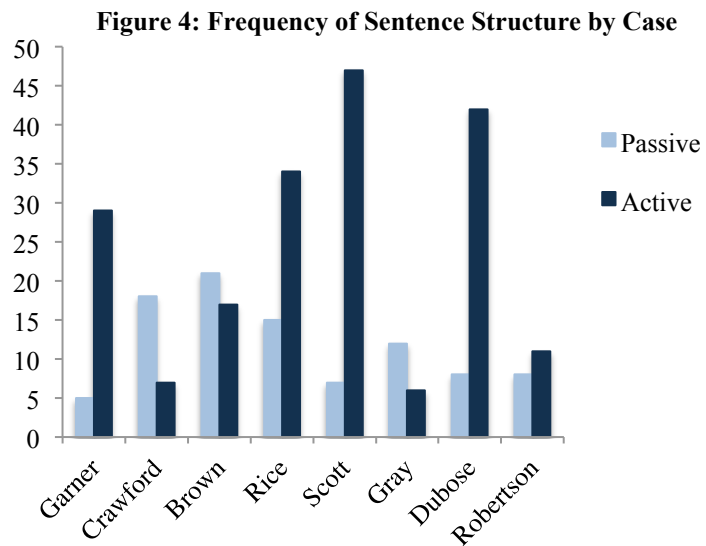
Johnstone (2008) identifies more specific strategies of passive voice to be “to portray the agents of an action as unknown (‘I’ve been robbed’), obvious (‘The suspect was arrested’), or unimportant (‘Several experiments were conducted’)...to hide an agent who is unknown, or downplay the fact that an agent was involved” (55). All of these strategies are structurally mirrored in the reports analyzed; and the consequences of them are significant, because downplaying or masking an agent/actor of killing effectively downplays the death and masks responsibility. Fausey and Boroditsky (2010) note people’s sensitivity to agentive and nonagentive frames, stating, “people are more likely to remember the agent of an event when primed with agentive language” (644). Furthermore, from a series of three studies they find, “agentive descriptions of events invite more blame and more severe punishment than do nonagentive descriptions...even when people have knowledge and visual information about events, linguistic framing can significantly shape how they construe and reason about what happened” (649). So, constructing fatal events in the passive form can have real world consequences that manifest in our streets and courtrooms due to the influence on public perception.

To analyze passivization, I isolated the portrayal of events immediately surrounding the killings—the encounters between the police officers and the citizens killed—from each article. This did not include headlines or other paratext. I coded each excerpt for sentence structure, identifying the use of either active or passive voice to encode the events, and categorized the structures based on information structure (e.g., by-

phrases, agent deletion). In the reports analyzed, citizens’ actions are almost exclusively reported in active structure. For example, “Garner raised both hands in the air” (CN06) and “Scott ran from his car” (US09). In these examples, the citizen is the activated agent, the *doer* of the action. Overall, in cases involving black citizens, 48% of sentences with the police officer as agent are active. For example, “officers stopped Gray” (CB09) and “Cleveland police shot and killed a 12-year-old boy” (NB05). Both of these examples are active, so it is clear to the reader who the agent responsible for the action is—the police officers. While this percentage seems promising—it is almost half—in cases involving white citizens, 77% of sentences with police officers as agent are active.

When broken down by case (see Figure 4), the majority of cases are treated with more frequent use of active sentence structure than passive sentence structure. The exceptions are the cases of John Crawford III, Michael Brown, and Freddie Gray. With these cases, passive voice occurs 120-257% more frequently than active voice. Sentences like “Ten shots were fired after Brown fled, and Brown was hit seven or eight times” (WP06) are common,

containing no agent and concealing who fired the shots. This signals to reader that the agent is irrelevant. Interestingly, the cases of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray are the only cases in the



main data set that do not include video footage of the killing. So, it is possible that these cases are more susceptible to mitigation practices for this reason. There is no indication why John Crawford III suffers from the same pattern. The cases of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray also have the highest occurrence of agent deletion; in these cases agent deletion occurs 200% and 550% more frequently than by-phrases, respectively.

These methods of passivization contribute to readers' perceptions of not only involvement but also accountability. This is especially true for sentences in which events preceding the fatal events contain the police as activated agents but which are coupled with passivization of the fatal event. Consider: "Rice, 12, was shot and killed in a public park in November 2014 after two Cleveland police officers...mistook his toy gun for a real weapon" (BF13). Here, the fatal event (the shooting) is passivized with no agent; however, the police officer who shot Tamir Rice is an activated agent in the event that (chronologically) preceded the fatality ("mistook his toy gun"). Likewise, "Officers gave verbal commands...[Crawford] was shot" (NB03). The officers are activated agents of a nonfatal event but disappear from the fatal event. In instances like this, readers might infer that the police are responsible only in the actions leading to death but not in the death itself. The question of agency—who shot and killed Tamir Rice, who shot John Crawford III—is omitted, signaling its relative unimportance.

This is not an argument about writer *intentionality*. There is no evidence that these writers use this language in order to intentionally manipulate readers' perception of the events. Van Dijk (2008) points out that passivization is common in articles reporting negative actions of institutional authorities; "If authorities, such as police, are agents of negative acts, they tend to occur less in [activated] agent position" (81). What I do argue

is that, intentional or not, writers' language *does* contribute to readers' perception of events. Duranti says, "whether or not speakers are conscious of how they are framing a given event we know that all languages allow for the choice between mentioning or not mentioning who is responsible for a given event or for a causal chain of events" (465). Likewise, Johnstone notes, "in passive structures there is no place for the semantic role of agent, which means that a reader/hearer might not notice the absence of the filler or that slot" (55). That is, regardless of whether a writer employs this construction to intentionally manipulate readers, the reader might—and likely will—assume these ideas associated with passivization (e.g., the agent as unimportant). Additionally, unintentional agency assignment and/or passivization might also reveal implicit beliefs of the writer. In summary, the semantic concern of passivization has real pragmatic consequences.<sup>10</sup>

As well, during conference presentations of the pilot study, audience members suggested that media outlets might encourage their writers to employ passivization—either by style guide or unspoken rule—when reporting about controversial matters, like police killings, in order to avoid potential libel or to establish a sense of objectivity. If this is ever the case, it is important to make explicit to writers and readers alike that passive sentence structure is not *neutral* language—it merely encodes the event differently, containing its own set of interpretations.

In email correspondence, Washington Post journalist Wesley Lowery stated that he is not aware of written or unwritten rules stipulating language in reports about police killings. He speculated, based on his experiences, that much of the language in news reports of police killings is the result of the influence of law enforcement. He cited the

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<sup>10</sup> For additional examples, see Bell, McGlone, and Dragojevic 2014 and Conley 2013.

“parroting back” of “police speak” (e.g., writer’s adoption of phrases like “officer-involved shooting”) as well as the development of relationships between the writers who typically cover such topics and police departments. So, it is possible that these structures are appearing as echoes of police officer’s statements, press conferences, and reports.

However, there is evidence that some journalists are aware of the likely interpretations of passivization. In July 2014, *The Washington Post* published an article titled “The Curious Grammar of Police Shootings,” in which the writer criticizes the use of passive sentence structure in police officers’ communication of police shootings. The writer likens this use of passive to “the weaselly way politicians tend to apologize when they’ve been caught red-handed” and notes that it is “a way of describing a shooting without assigning responsibility. Most police departments do this” (Balko). He also compares LAPD communications about a shooting that did not involve a police officer to communications about a police shooting. The former is rife with activated agents while the latter examples employ “an officer-involved shooting occurred” in lieu of officers as activated agents when expressing the fatal events. It is disconcerting that with this critical knowledge the same structural patterns are still transferred into media reports. Even with the privileging of “official” sources, a reporter could employ different methods of reported speech—partial/mixed quotes, indirect quotes, paraphrasing, et cetera—in order to reclaim sentence structure while still maintaining a certain status of sources (Bednarek and Caple, 2012, 92).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For more examples of types of reported speech, see Table 4.2 in Bednarek and Caple (2012), 92.

## Evaluation: Situating Perspective

In order to analyze the media's construction of perspective, I focused on parameters of evaluation.<sup>12</sup> Bednarek and Caple (2012) explicitly address the value of focusing on parameters of evaluation, saying:

One of the reasons why it is worthwhile to focus on evaluation when analyzing new discourse from a linguistic perspective is its multifunctionality...evaluations in the news can express the evaluative stance, ideological or political position of the principal;<sup>13</sup> they can construe news values, they can establish relationships with readers/audiences; and they can be used to structure or organize news stories. (138-139)

They go on to identify ten parameters: un/importance, in/comprehensibility, im/possibility, un/necessity, emotivity, in/authenticity, reliability, un/expectedness, evidentiality, and mental state (139). Here I will attend specifically to the parameters of evidentiality and expectedness. I chose to analyze these two parameters, because they are particularly pertinent to media discourse on police killings and its influence on public opinion at this point in time; evidentiality sheds light on the voices that are being heard on this matter while expectedness can provide insight into the matter over time.

First, originating with Americanists like Boas and Sapir, evidentiality is a “verbal category that indicates the basis of the information on which a speaker's/writer's statement is based” or, more simply, “the linguistic marking of evidence” (Bednarek 365-636). The parameter of evidentiality concerns sources such that “expressions of Evidentiality give information about the bases (or ‘evidence’) of statements and information... ‘Evidential’ expressions answer questions such as... ‘What kind of

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<sup>12</sup> From Thompson and Hunter, *Evaluation in Text: Authorial Stance and the Construction of Discourse*, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> “Principals are the ‘originator whose position or stance is expressed...’” (Bednarek and Caple, 22).



evidence do we have for this?” (Bednarek and Caple, 2012, 148-149). Though evidentiality has primarily been applied to languages other than English, I think this parameter is especially relevant to study of media discourse on police killings because the controversial nature of police killings is due largely to issues of proof and justification (Bednarek 635-636). Assuming a narrow view, I will focus specifically on attribution. Attribution, as opposed to averral, occurs when “a piece of language [...] is attributed, it is presented as deriving from someone other than the writer” (642).

I hypothesized that news sources would most often cite police and local/federal officials, because they are privileged due to their governmental role. My expectations of this became even greater after my communication with Wesley Lowery, who noted a “structural bias in the media,”: “News outlets are often [biased], unknowingly in the favor of ‘the system,’ and of institutions.” This bias manifests, in part, in the privileging of “official” sources—“the word of a police officer almost always outweigh[s] the word of a bystander” (Lowery). Van Dijk’s (1988) analysis of media reports and their sources supports Lowery’s suggestion, as Van Dijk ultimately concludes:

News agency dispatches, when used, tend to be followed rather closely, if not literally, especially when no other information is available... statements or press releases of state or city officials, agencies, or of national institutions tend to be given more, and more prominent, attention than the reports or statements of groups or organizations of ordinary people involved....” (132)

This aligns with what Bednarek and Caple (2012) note as “codes of practice, some of which are...set by the industry themselves as a form of self-regulation” (36). Similarly, Van Dijk addresses these codes, finding though “the news production process is largely organized by effective routines of source text processing (selection, summarization, deletion, etc. of available printed materials and interviews),” these practices are not

necessarily the result of practicality but rather “choices and transformations appear to have an ideological basis, as for instance when less powerful groups are given less or less prominent coverage” (1988, 133).

To analyze the parameter of evidentiality, I coded the articles for explicit identification of information sources. I categorized each token of such as a police source, official source, a witness, video source, tweet, or other. Police sources included statements from the individual police officers involved in a case, police department statements, police reports, statements from the Fraternal Order of Police (FOP), et cetera. Official sources included statements by mayors, governors, prosecutors, or other local/federal spokespersons.

Ultimately, my hypothesis was correct. Police and other official sources were the most cited information sources across both publications and cases, making up 63% of total tokens. Witnesses were cited most often in the case of Michael Brown. This is likely because there was no video source available in this case. Video was cited most often in the cases of Eric Garner and Walter Scott. BuzzFeed had the most variable collection of information sources—citing witnesses, videos, and tweets most often. And BuzzFeed cited tweets most often by a large margin, with 21 tokens compared to the New York Times and USA Today who tied as second highest with 3 tokens each. This is not surprising, since BuzzFeed is known for being stylistically dynamic, noteworthy for its listicles, interactive quizzes, videos, and community contributions.

Though I treated tweets as paratext with respect to analysis of adjectives and passivization, I thought it was important to include them in analysis of evidentiality, because social media—especially Twitter—became a critical information source for

those engaged in activism and conversations surrounding police killings. Particularly during the latter half of 2014, hashtags, subscription lists of tweeters, and live tweeting provided 24/7, real time cyber-engagement with folks all over the country. The role of Twitter as a networking and news-breaking tool, specifically with respect to police killings, makes it noteworthy in the case of this evaluative parameter.

Tweets were cited as information sources most often in the cases of Michael Brown, followed by Freddie Gray and Sam Dubose. The hashtag utilized for Twitter coverage and commentary related to the death of Michael Brown, #Ferguson, was recently ranked the most influential social issues hashtag by The Washington Post, “more than doubling the usage of the second-most popular social-issues hashtag.” At the time of the ranking, it has been tweeted 27,200,000 times (Sichynsky). Thus, it is no surprise that reports of Michael Brown’s death incorporate Twitter as an information source most often. Overall, most of the tweets cited in reports were from the accounts of news outlets and reporters. BuzzFeed articles and articles about the case of Freddie Gray utilized the most tweets from accounts of (unverified, non-reporter) citizens.

The “other” category of explicitly cited information sources included relatives, community members, experts, local media and other news outlets, and organizations. After reviewing the pool of “other” sources, I organized them into subcategories. The most mentioned of the “other” categories were family members, affiliated news outlets, and activist organizations (NAACP, Center for Constitutional Rights, National Action Network, et cetera) in descending frequency.

These findings support what I had anticipated as well as what Wesley Lowery guessed based on his experiences as a journalist. In these articles, the media has

privileged the voices of police officers and police organizations, which is problematic, in part, because the police are the very figures of concern. Not only is this privilege reflected in sentence structure but it is also reflected in the explicit use of police officers and organizations as primary information sources. As a “power-relevant discourse structure,” this enacts power through control of context, because “some opinions are not heard, some perspectives ignored” (van Dijk, 1993, 260).

However, the sheer variety of information sources present in the data—though disproportionate in rate—shows a movement toward the valuing of other sources, particularly social media. Only in recent years have social media posts, like tweets, become a valid information source for “hard news.” However, social media has proven itself valuable in cases of police killings and is giving a voice to people who have a variety of connections to the individuals, institutions, and locations involved in cases of police killings and who otherwise would not be heard due to practicality. This is an example of how consumers can effectively engage with media discourse.

Second, “notions of expectedness and unexpectedness imply a cognitive process whereby a past or current situation is revisited and elaborated on with respect to an expectation” (Sekali and Trévis 101). The parameter of expectedness involves “evaluations of the world (including statements) as more or less expected or unexpected” (Bednarek and Caple, 2012, 147). Included in this parameter is

the notion of contrast expressed by conjunctions, adverbs (e.g., *but, while, still, although, though, even*) and negation (e.g., *no, not, only*). In fact, much linguistic research has shown that negated statements...are connected to notion of counter expectation and are used to refer to deviations from what we would expect to be the case. (147)

Newsworthiness is a consideration of this evaluative parameter, because unexpected events tend to have greater news value than expected events. As Bednarek and Caple (2012) note, associated functions of the parameter of un/expectedness include “increasing the newsworthiness of what is reported by appealing to the news value of Unexpectedness (*an unexpected development; believe it or not*), providing logical structure to the news story (*despite, but, though*) and contributing to negative evaluation (*nothing has been taken away since the middle of last month*)” (148; original emphasis).

The parameter of expectedness is germane to media discourse on police killings due to the duration of the issue, its ongoing nature, and the persistence of related policies and institutional structures that contribute to the problem; it would reason that linguistic indicators of unexpectedness would decrease as relevant events persisted over time. In order to analyze the parameter of expectedness, I coded for key contrasting conjunctions: *however, but, al/though, and yet*. Coding for contrasting conjunctions is practical because, as Sekali and Trévisé point out, the unexpected is relatively easy to define since “when one represents an event, a state of affairs, or a situation as unexpected, one also construes (or points at) another (expected) state of affairs taken as a benchmark relative to which it is qualified as concordant or discordant” (101). Because “negation works to state that something (unexpectedly) did not happen or does not exist, which can then be evaluated by readers negatively or positively, depending on their reading positions, beliefs and values,” it would be valuable to consider as it relates to the subject of police killings (148). However, I did not code for negation, because only audience studies can determine whether interpretation is negative or positive (148). I hypothesized that linguistic signals of expectedness would increase overtime. Particularly that expectedness

cues would be much more prevalent in the 2015 cases, as the latter half of 2014 encouraged greater public awareness of police killings and boosted media attention while 2015 continued to see a steady occurrence of police killings (a total of 1,145).

Overall my hypothesis was not supported; there is no discernable pattern concerning contrasting conjunctions. Contrasting conjunctions appear at a relatively stable rate across the data set. However, there are a couple of noteworthy functions of contrasting conjunctions present in the data.

One notable function of contrasting conjunctions is their frequent employment to contrast witnesses' statements or video footage from police statements. For example, an excerpt from a BuzzFeed article about Walter Scott reads,

In a statement carried by WFLA, Aylor said Scott “confronted Officer Slager, reached for his Taser, as trained by the department, and then a struggle ensued as the driver tried to overpower Officer Slager in an effort to take his Taser who then felt threatened and reached for his department issued firearm and fired his weapon.”

But footage of the incident shot by a bystander—and first obtained by the New York Times and the Post and Courier—appears to show a different set events. (BF06)

This construction appears with relative frequency. Here, the statement of Michael Slager's attorney, likely based on Slager's account, is contrasted with video proof of the shooting. (David Aylor withdrew himself as Slager's attorney shortly after the video was released to the public.) The idea of inherent virtue and credibility is used to rationalize the privilege of police statements as “official sources;” however, this counter-orientation demonstrates that police statements are not inherently credible, making such privilege even more unjustifiable.

Another notable function is related to consonance. The conjunction “but” is employed multiple times to contrast expectations of protests and protestors with actual events. For example, “People gathered across the city to protest the decision, but they remained largely peaceful.” (AB12). Here, the use of *but* signals a contrast between “they remained largely peaceful” and what is expected of protest gatherings (non-peace, or violence). There were instances of looting and burning during some protest gatherings, like after the death of Michael Brown and after the funeral of Freddie Gray. However, this is problematic for a couple of reasons. One reason is that the looting and violence that has taken place is generally separate from the protest gatherings. In fact, in some cases, particularly in Ferguson, protestors physically protected city businesses and reprimanded looters. Additionally, this use reinforces negative and generalized expectations of protestors. Reinforcing negative views of those who speak up against police violence implies there is something wrong with opposing police violence, even if it is simply a matter of thinking the cause unnecessary.

## **Conclusion: Changes**

Bednarek and Caple (2014) state, “only through close analysis of texts can we find out what values are emphasized (foregrounded), rare or absent (backgrounded)” (140). This is exactly what I have attempted to begin here: close analysis of a set of media reports in order to find out how the media’s language foreground and background, in the minds of the masses, the identities and roles of those who effect and who are effected by police violence. I have shown that these articles contain disproportionate use of race-related adjectives to modify black entities (as compared to white entities) and how this disproportionate use constructs the issue of police killings in a way that is incompatible with frequently proposed solutions. I have also shown these articles demonstrate a tendency to passivize fatal events and to do so more often when concerning black citizens than when concerning white citizens, patterns that contribute to readers’ perception of accountability. I have discussed the frequency of police officers and other (government) officials as information sources in these articles but noted the promising trend of inclusion of other voices and types of evidence—videos, witnesses, family members, tweets, et cetera. And finally, I have highlighted some patterns of expectedness that re-emphasize the privileging of police officers as sources regardless of conflicting information as well as the reinforcement of negative beliefs about protests against police violence. Journalists are tasked with informing the public; as a result, and due to the effects of language, they impact the public’s perception of the world.

The media is powerful in large part because language is powerful. As Gee states, “Language has a magical property: when we speak or write we craft what we have to say to fit the situation or context in which we are communicating. But, at the same time, how



we speak or write *creates* that very situation or context” (8; original emphasis). Particularly with an issue as politically, socially, and racially divisive as police violence, we must consider the ways in which language influences how people identify the issue in relation to themselves but also how they identify themselves in relation to one another. The way events are framed linguistically influences whether we agree or disagree, support or attack; it influences whether we stand together on a matter or whether it is “us” versus “them.” Gee identified the primary functions of language to be “to scaffold the performance of social activities...and to scaffold human affiliation within cultures and social groups and institutions” (1). I see this as the two primary consequences of media texts like those at hand: these reports shape readers’ thoughts about police killings as well as impact the role they choose to take in society with regard to institutional affiliation, activism, social justice, and community engagement. Because these patterns persisted relatively consistently from the initial report of Eric Garner’s death in July 2014 to the grand jury decision on the case of Tamir Rice in December 2015, we can assume that the many national events between the two—the killings and the protests alike—did little to alter the media’s approach to reporting police killings and thus did little to alter the media’s effect on public perception.

For this reason, I conclude with a call for journalists to assume greater responsibility with respect to their craft. The shift toward digital media has encouraged fast and easy news consumption, fostering sensationalism and clickbait. However, when lives are being lost at an alarming rate, it is not too much to appeal that more consideration go into the processes and, in effect, the products that influence our understanding of these events.

This call to action is *not* an attack on journalists or journalism. This is not an issue of journalistic ethics or even quality.<sup>14</sup> Rather, this is a desire for media producers to reconsider how current journalistic practices and values conflict with the civic responsibility of media to facilitate well-informed social engagement. In essence, this is a promotion of media literacy for journalists.

Borrowing from The Center for Advanced Technology,

Media literacy is concerned with helping students develop an informal and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques. More specifically, it is education that aims to increase the students' understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality. (Mihailidis 418)

While journalists may be skilled in the techniques and practices customary to their field, the data here brings doubt that many fully understand their impact, the ways in which they construct reality. Mihailidis states, "if this teaching experience can help students enjoy how the media work, produce meaning, and construct reality, students stand a better chance of understanding the larger and deeper societal role played by local, national, and international media outlets." Media literacy is a promising means of increasing journalists' awareness of their language and its influence on public perception.

Media literacy is primarily limited to K-12 education (416). However, Strate (2014) asks:

Can there be media ethics without media literacy? That is to say, can media professionals truly function in an ethical manner unless they have taken steps to promote and encourage media literacy? I would suggest that there is a moral obligation on the part of media organizations to ensure that media audiences can decode their messages accurately, interpret them appropriately, and most important of all, evaluate them critically. (101)

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<sup>14</sup> Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics: <http://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>

That is, media literacy cannot be limited to those in a middle school computer lab; it is also necessary for those in the newsroom. For example, the distinction between active and passive sentence structures is not a matter of more accurate or objective reporting. It is important for journalists to understand the implications of these structures. If writers are conscious of what they are conveying about importance and accountability when they employ passivization in the aforementioned ways, these articles might read differently and therefore contribute differently to public perception and the greater public discourse.

A 2009 assessment of the state of the American media and its role in democracy aimed to “integrate digital and media literacy as critical elements of education at all levels through collaboration among federal, state, and local education officials” (Beyerstein). Howard Schneider, the creator of Stony Brook University’s media literacy program, reported his purpose to be to help students become “consumers who could differentiate between raw, unmediated information coursing through the Internet and independent, verified journalism” (Schneider). In order to facilitate this, he taught a course focused primarily on “deconstructing the news,” which involved students critically examining a variety of news formats, focusing on things like evaluation of reliability and identification of bias, “including their own” (Schneider). However, Mihailidis notes that while “some programs and initiatives do exist and function successfully...in journalism/mass communication education, these initiatives are somewhat unrealized to date” (425).

Media literacy begins with journalists’ awareness of language and the influence their use of language has on readers. Journalists must both understand and respect their power to influence public perception. Mihailidis warns, “In such a large country with

such large media enterprises, media literacy is one initiative that can no longer afford to be avoided” (425). I believe the call for improved media literacy education and professional development for journalists is supported by the data and findings here and is necessary for more effective public discourse about police killings.

## Appendices

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**Appendix II: Coding sheet**

Article: \_\_\_\_\_

Garner	Crawford	Brown	Rice
Gray	Scott	Dubose	Robertson
Vidal	Winkler	Kassick	Herrell

**I. Modifiers**

Officer

[tallies]
-----------

Citizen

[tallies]
-----------

Other

[tallies]
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Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**II. Passivization**

**A. Active**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**B. Passive**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

### III. Evaluation

#### A. Un/expectedness:

	ABC	Buzz	CBS	CNN	Fox	Huff	NBC	NYT	USA	WaPo
al/though										
but										
however										
yet										

#### B. Evidentiality:

	ABC	Buzz	CBS	CNN	Fox	Huff	NBC	NYT	USA	WaPo
police										
officials										
witness										
video										
tweet										
other										

### **Appendix III: Case Background Information**

Brown, Michael: On August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, police officer Darren Wilson shot and killed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown. Though the events leading up to the killing are uncertain, it is believed the killing was the result of a confrontation over Brown having shoplifted cigarillos or jaywalking. Witness accounts and police statements varied.

Crawford, John: On August 5, 2014, in Beavercreek, Ohio, John Crawford III was at Walmart, where he picked up an air rifle from one of the store's shelves and proceeded to walk around the store while talking on his cell phone. After another customer called 911, reporting that Crawford was pointing a gun at other patrons, police officers shot and killed Crawford on sight. Surveillance video shows that Crawford never pointed the weapon at anyone.

Dubose, Sam: On July 19, 2015, in Cincinnati, Ohio, police officer Ray Tensing pulled Sam Dubose over because Dubose's vehicle was missing the front license plate. After a dispute about Dubose's driver's license, Tensing fired once into Dubose's car, killing him. Tensing initially reported that he was forced to fire because Dubose began to drive away, dragging him. However, body cam footage shows that Tensing was never dragged.

Garner, Eric: On July 17, 2014, in Staten Island, New York, officers confronted Eric Garner with suspicion that he was unlawfully selling loose cigarettes. As Garner protested, officer Daniel Pantaleo placed Garner in an illegal chokehold, killing him. The confrontation and the subsequent killing were captured on a bystander's cell phone camera.

Gray, Freddie: On April 12, 2015, in Baltimore, Maryland, police officers pursued Freddie Gray when he fled after making eye contact with them on the street. Once stopped, the officers arrested Gray for possession of a knife clipped to his pocket, which they believed to be an illegal switchblade. Video from bystanders' cell phones show Gray's arrest, and witnesses reported police assault. Upon arrival to the police station, paramedics treated Gray before he was sent to the Shock and Trauma Center in a coma. Gray died a week later. Many have suggested that a "rough ride" may have led to Gray's injuries and eventual death.

Kassick, David: On February 2, 2015, in Hummelstown, Pennsylvania, police officer Lisa Mearkle pulled David Kassick over for an expired auto inspection sticker. Kassick fled his vehicle, and Mearkle pursued him. Officer Mearkle shot Kassick with her Taser, demanded he keep his hands in sight, then shot him twice in the back as he lay face-down

on the ground. There is footage of the shooting from the camera attached to Mearkle's stun gun.

Rice, Tamir: On November 23, 2014, in Cleveland, Ohio, twelve-year-old Tamir Rice was playing in a park with an Airsoft gun that was missing the orange safety marker. A citizen called 911, reporting that Rice was pointing the gun at people. The dispatcher did not relay the caller's assertion that Rice was probably a juvenile and that the gun was probably fake to the police officers. Surveillance video shows police officer Timothy Loehmann shooting Rice within 2 seconds of pulling up to the scene. Neither Loehmann nor his partner administered first aid.

Robertson, Nicholas: On December 12, 2015, in Lynnwood, California two police officers responded to reports of Nicholas Robertson firing shots into the air. The officers confronted Robertson at a gas station, ordering him to drop his weapon. Video from a bystander's cell phone shows the officers firing at Robertson a total of thirty-three shots, even after he is struck to the ground and attempts to crawl away.

Vidal, Keith: On January 5, 2014, in Boiling Springs Lakes, North Carolina, eighteen-year-old Keith Vidal's family called 911 for help managing their son's schizophrenic episode. According to family, two police officers arrived and almost resolved the situation. Then, a third officer shot Vidal within seventy seconds of arriving.

Winkler, John: On April 7, 2014 in West Hollywood, Alexander McDonald was holding John Winkler and two friends hostage at knifepoint in his apartment. As Winkler and one of the other hostages fled the apartment, officers responding to the incident shot and killed him, immediately mistaking him for the attacker.

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