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News Representations of Black Men, Post Black Lives Matter

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ABSTRACT:

African-American men are overrepresented as threats or criminal suspects in society. Previous studies have found that African-American men are misrepresented in news coverage and depicted in a negative way. The Black Lives Matter Movement has gained media coverage and challenged negative stereotypes of black men. Therefore, in this study I analyze whether or not representations of black men have changed since the Black Lives Matter movement started. In my research, I analyzed the Chicago Tribune using Critical Discourse Analysis to understand the language used in articles to convey the meanings of representations of black men. In my results, I found that black men are overrepresented as criminals, which fits with preexisting patterns. The misrepresentation of black men continues to have an impact on society.

Introduction

The focus of my work is the way in which news media outlets in the United States represent African-American males in relation to criminal activity. Multiple research studies have been done analyzing whether black men are misrepresented in the news. For example, Dixon and Azocar (2007) found that “Blacks were twice as likely as Whites to be portrayed as perpetrators, six times more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than as officers, and overrepresented as criminals, representing 37% of the perpetrators depicted whereas comprising only 21% of those arrested according to crime reports.” (229) These studies suggest that in the news media black men are associated with drug-related crime, unemployment, and poverty overwhelmingly (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman, 1992, 1994; Romer, Jamieson, & Coteau, 1998). This depiction is dominant in the media, yet it is not the true image of a black man in America.

These portrayals of men in the media impact society because they often times gives people the perception that black men are associated with criminality and violence. Black Lives Matter has questioned the way in which Black men are represented in the news media (blacklivesmatter, n.d.). The constant narrative of a black man being associated with criminal behavior in the news has contributed to negative stereotypes. The Black Lives Matter movement argues that these negative stereotypes often cause police officers to treat black men differently than others. This movement is fighting to stand against the unfair treatment of black men caused by these negative perceptions. Therefore, I decided to analyze if the news has changed the way black men are represented in light of this movement. In this study, I examined articles in the Chicago Tribune newspaper using Critical Discourse Analysis. This method allowed me to

examine the descriptive words and meanings used by the author to convey a message to readers. Overall, I found that black men are misrepresented in the news and are overwhelmingly associated with criminal activity. My research is similar to previous findings. Therefore, black men continue to be misrepresented in crime news.

Literature review

Previous research studies have found that blacks are overrepresented as perpetrators of crime in news coverage (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Entman, 1992, 1994; Romer, Jamieson, & Coteau, 1998). Regarding network news, Entman (1994) analyzed the images of African Americans by videotaping news programs and reviewing transcripts from stations such as ABC, NBC, and CBS. His research found that network news tends to convey more stereotyped impressions and less positive roles for blacks compared to whites. Representation of whites is more varied and positive than of blacks. According to Entman (1994), African Americans are more likely to be shown as criminal suspects even though this portrayal is different than actual crime statistics. African American criminal suspects are depicted to insinuate that they are likely to be violent or threatening. The most frequent topics involving blacks in the news were associated with blacks committing or being victims of violent, drug, and non-violent crime. The third most common topic described blacks as victims of social misfortunes other than crime such as racial discrimination, poverty, bad schooling. However, network news does produce less negative stereotyping than local stations. Images of blacks as threats reinforce white's perceptions in a subtler way on network news programs. Entman (1994) explained that this difference is due to the genre of network news.

Network news programs have a dominant focus and concentrate more on themes. This contributes to the lack of crime news on network news programs compared to local news. In Entman's (1992) research on local news coverage in the Chicago area, crime coverage depicted blacks as more physically threatening. His research showed statistically significant differences in the average treatment of blacks and whites and some similarities as well. However, where there were differences blacks were always covered in ways that supported negative stereotypes. News stories with black suspects were more likely to show the suspect being physically held by police officers, handcuffed, and poorly dressed. These stories were more likely to include quotes that were not in defense of their guilt and the name of the suspect was not mentioned.

Two different studies on local television news in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, and Orange counties found persons of color were heavily presented in stories about crime (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Romer, Jamieson, & Coteau, 1998). In these stories, persons of color were more likely to be presented as perpetrators of crime rather than as victims or witnesses. In this analysis, actual statistics were compared to these news portrayals of blacks. The findings suggest that persons of color were overrepresented as perpetrators of violence against whites and whites were overrepresented as victims.

These previous research studies conclude that news programs in the United States often misrepresent blacks as perpetrators in crime news. All of these research studies focused on analyzing television news rather than print. I found a lack of research studies on how black men are represented in print media. The portrayals of African- American Males in the news media influence stereotypes in our society, which cause people to associate black males with criminal behavior (Dixon & Azocar, 2007). This

overrepresentation of black men and criminality are coupled with the limited positive associations of black males in the news. Dixon & Azocar (2007), found that if blacks are heavily presented in the news as criminals then this leads to repeated activation of the stereotype, which strengthens perceptions of race and crime. These exaggerated negative associations of black males as criminals effects the public's attitude in multiple different ways. Stereotypes can present general hostility and resentment towards black males and also create a lack of sympathy for them. Also, the overrepresentation of black males as criminals can reduce the attention of other structural and historical factors that black men face.

The recent Black Lives Matter movement has challenged the stereotypes and representations of black men in the news. Black Lives Matter is a national organization working for the validity of black lives and campaigning against racism toward black people (blacklivesmatter, n.d.). The movement was created in 2012 after the acquittal of George Zimmerman who was involved in the death of an unarmed African-American teen, Trayvon Martin. The use of the hashtag #blacklivesmatter on social media created the movement. This movement is a response against social issues such as racial profiling, police brutality, and racial inequality. These social issues that the Black Lives Matter movement is calling attention to led me to my research question, which is "Has the representation of African-American males as criminals in the news media changed in light of the Black Lives Matter Movement?" In order to come to a conclusion for the answer of my question, I gathered and analyzed data from a news media outlet.

Method

The method used in my study is a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Richardson (2007) explains Critical Discourse Analysis as a qualitative critical analysis of the language used by individuals and institutions. CDA identifies a social problem and critically analyses those in power (Richardson, 2007). I decided to use this method because it allows me to analyze the text by looking for details in language, such as words, descriptions, and actions used in the text (Richardson, 2007). By analyzing these different dynamics of the text, I will be able to understand how black men are represented in the articles I am examining. Also, this method will help provide an understanding of what the author is trying to communicate to an audience.

In the majority of previous research studies portrayals of black men in print news were not analyzed. Lack of research in print media is because images of black men can be seen and analyzed on television clearly, whereas in print only words can be used to describe a specific person. I decided to analyze print news because there is a lack of research on it.

I analyzed news coverage from The Chicago Tribune to get an understanding of the portrayals of black men in relation to crime. I decided to analyze the Chicago Tribune because it is a local well-known established newspaper and has a large circulation size. As I analyzed articles from the Chicago Tribune I focused on analyzing the meaning or purpose of the language and how it is linked to a context like society. I analyzed 10 articles from the Chicago Tribune that were related to criminal investigations and involved black males in order to analyze the way in which they were portrayed in these articles. Since, my research question I proposed focuses on the way black males are represented in the news in light of the Black Lives Matter Movement I decided to analyze

articles after the time period Black Lives Matter started. This time period was January 2016 till September 2016. I researched key words such as criminal investigations, crime, and black males. The 10 articles I selected fit the criteria I was looking for, which was news articles dealing with representations of black males in crime news.

In these articles, I analyzed how societal relations are established and reinforced through language. The type of language used to describe black men is one aspect I investigated in my research. I decided to study language in my analysis because language is social and central to human activity, through using language we give meaning to actions (Richardson, 2007). The study uses language to investigate the way it is used by print media to interpret news stories. For example, language that associated black men as aggressive, violent, or threatening was described in my analysis and examined in relation to how this language uncovers bias. Another aspect I analyzed was the design and structure of the article, to get an understanding of how the author wants to communicate a certain message. An author of an article has the choice to make decisions about the language they use and the quotes. The meaning will be expressed based upon what the author chooses to put in the article and what the author does not. These factors helped me to examine what the author is ultimately trying to communicate to an audience.

Analysis

The overrepresented image of young black men in the news

After analyzing different articles about the way in which news media outlets in the United States, particularly focusing on Chicago Tribune articles, represent African-American males in relation to criminal activity I found many similarities. The words “gang, thug, and drug” involvement are used to describe the image of black men in

multiple articles. In an article entitled “A Double-edged Struggle: Report: Nearly half of young black Chicago men are not in school, out of work”, the article discusses a connection between unemployment, poverty, and crime. The author states in the article that reports put into “stark focus the connection between unemployment and Chicago’s racially segregated neighborhoods that also are home to high rates of poverty and crime.” The author of the article uses the descriptive word “stark focus” to suggest a distinct or obvious connection between high crime rate and unemployment in different racial neighborhoods. Racial neighborhoods are differentiated in the article using the terms black and white. The lowest concentration of unemployment is in white neighborhoods, while the highest concentration is in black neighborhoods. The difference in unemployment in black and white neighborhoods is pointed out to indicate the high level of crime and unemployment that occurs in black neighborhoods, but not white.

Quotes used in the article perpetuated the image of young black men being unemployed and involved in criminal activity. A black teenager is interviewed who describes how he got in trouble for drug dealing and gangbanging he describes this as “same old, same old”, “everybody’s story”. Another young black teenager describes how a job helped to “redirect him when he was headed downhill – entrenched in a gang, selling drugs and expecting a child.” The quotes used by this author from these two young black teenagers, reinforce the belief of young black men’s involvement with gangs or drugs due to a lack of unemployment.

The article “Why isn’t city’s violence treated with urgency of suburban crisis” discusses how we are “accustomed” to seeing mother’s grieving over their sons. The author states, “After the crime scene is cleared and the details of the shooting come out,

the story is often the same. A young black male was shot by a young black male, likely in retaliation for the shooting of another young black male.” The language in this article supports the stereotype of young black men being the criminal suspect and being involved in violence by using language such as “the story is often the same” or “likely in retaliation”. The article indicates young black men’s involvement with drugs by stating, “we cringe at the thought of a promising young kid with prosperity at his fingertips throwing it away with drugs, but increasingly we are hearing that story” and “In Chicago, violence has become an epidemic, with gangs as the drug of choice.” The descriptive words such as “increasingly” or “epidemic” give readers the idea that young black men are participating in violence at an overwhelming rate.

Another article analyzed associates black men with unemployment. The lead of an article entitled “Want to curb violence? Give black men a job”, insinuates the only way to “curb” or deter violence is to give black men a job. This title gives the audience the impression that the only reason violence occurs is due specifically to black men not having a job. The lead of the article also makes a connection between black men and violence by stating “it would be difficult for anyone to make a sensible argument against this: if young black men went to work every day, they wouldn’t be out in the streets killing each other.” The rests of the article discussed how young black men need jobs in order to decrease the violence in the Chicago area. The author states, “a young man without a job gets to hang out on the corner day and night...and gets to dodge bullets every time he takes a step outside.” This gives the audience the perception that young black men solely contribute to violence in neighborhoods because of lack of unemployment.

An article I analyzed described a situation where a young black man was not involved in criminal activity, yet the way in which the author decided to use specific quotes in the text associated negative images with black men. The article called, “Iowa student beating a possible hate crime” discussed an attack on a 19-year old black male by three white men who shouted racial slurs at him. The article uses a quote from the teenager’s uncle to describe the attack being “unprovoked.” The author first mentions the teenage boy only going out that Saturday night of the attack, after “finishing term papers and preparing for finals.” A quote is used by his uncle in the article saying, “African-American kids are often portrayed as thugs with their pants hanging down. That is not this kid” and after this quote it is said that the teenager was “wearing a suit and tie” Saturday night. In deciding to use the quotes, the author presents the image that African-American males are often times involved in gang activity and dress poorly, but this specific example is a unique exception to that belief.

Articles such as the few discussed above, overwhelmingly represent young black men with gangs, drugs, violence, or unemployment. The constant negative associations of young black men reinforce stereotypes to audiences. The audience is left with an image that does not represent young black men as a group.

The black male criminal suspect in news stories

Along with associating the use of the words “gang, thug, drugs, or violence” with black men. Multiple articles describe a violent perpetrator to be a young black male between the ages of 17 and 25. This was mentioned in several articles analyzed. The article, “Homicide rates soar for Blacks in Chicago” headline is a type of witty headline

that uses a pun, such as the word “soars”. A pun can be a word that is used to convey a positive or negative meaning. In this case, “soars” can be used to describe something that is negatively increasing. The tone of the article in the headline gives the impression that homicide rates soar only for blacks because the author is referring to homicide rates going up specifically for blacks in Chicago. This article discusses the high homicide rates in the African-American community. The crime figures are described as “stubbornly” high in many large black neighborhoods. The author uses the word stubbornly to convey the idea that this course of action of violence in the African-American community refuses to change. The article continues to discuss how people ages 20 to 24 have the highest homicide rate. The article cites a study that says homicide rates for whites have decreased, but men and boys “account for nearly all the city’s homicides.” The article does not specifically state that young black men are the cause of homicide rates. However, the reference to the study of homicide rates decreasing for whites, yet remaining high for African-Americans, men, and young people creates a logical link to the high homicide rates in the African-American community being committed by young black men. Another article called, “Chicago gangs no longer know or fear the police”, discusses homicide rates increasing in the city of Chicago. In the article it is mentioned that the mayor assigned a detective to analyze the murders for him. The detective found that the majority of the murders were caused over drugs and occurred in the same neighborhoods. The neighborhoods had the same crime rate since the 1950s, therefore “it wasn’t all over the city.” In the article, it states “Daley (the mayor) was happy to have real data to calm nervous white neighborhoods.” This suggests to readers that black neighborhoods only have high murder rates and white neighborhoods are not dangerous.

Also the use of words such as, “happy” implies that although there is a constant crime rate in black neighborhoods, it is acceptable because white neighborhoods remain safe. A quote is used by the detective researching the data in the article saying “the shooter was typically a male black between the ages of 17 and 23” and “the victim was typically a male black between the ages of 17 and 23. So what’s changed since the 90s? not much, the same social pathology and the police are expected to clean it up.” This quote reinforces the idea that young black men are criminal suspects and involved in violence. Black men are represented in this article as the main perpetrators and victims of crime. The article communicates the idea that young black men have been associated with crime not only in the present, but also in the past. The author suggests that race and location is the cause for violence as the author of the article uses a quote stating “there are plenty of guns in the suburbs and suburbanites aren’t slaughtering each other. It’s the “gang wars” and “gang members.”

Descriptions of Black men in the news

In one article I analyzed different words were used to describe the image of a black man. This article describes an incident with two black men, one of the men is a veteran police officer and the other was a patient at a hospital. The officer handcuffed and beat the patient after the patient punched the officer in the face. The article described the officers size by using “6-foot 6 and 235 pounds” and “burly officer.” A variety of violent language is used to explain the incident. For example, “the officer shoved the patient and then struck him several times. The man appears to bounce off the wall before turning to face the officer. The officer then hits him with a sweeping right hand, knocking him onto his right side on a bed. The officer then leans over the man and takes two more swipes at

him with his left hand.” Interestingly, the article waits till the middle of the paragraph to reveal that both of the individuals involved in the incident are black. This information is revealed in an ironic way after mentioning the shooting of an unarmed black teenager, Laquan McDonald, by a white Chicago police officer. After mentioning this, the next sentence says, “One element missing in the charge against Gause was a racial one. Both the officer and the alleged victim are black.” The article goes on to say the judge let the officer off believing he is not a danger to anyone and it would not serve any purpose to put him in jail. The article states that the officer’s attorney says “he has served the police department honorably”, but the author seems to question whether the police officer served the police department in an honorable way by discussing in the next paragraphs the 11 complaints the officer has had in his years on the police force. The author references an incident in which he was identified as one of the officers in a lawsuit who beat an individual “with brass knuckles and hurled racial epithets at him.”

Other articles I analyzed blamed an increase in violence on police officer’s reluctance to do their jobs because of the recent shootings of unarmed black men. The article, “Is this rise in crime a Ferguson effect”, describes a theory called the “Ferguson effect.” The article states, “as police face grater scrutiny, in the aftermath of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown in 2014, they are more hesitant about doing their jobs.” After discussing the shootings of unarmed black men, the author states “it’s hardly implausible to think” cops would stay away from “some confrontations” and give “bad guys” leeway. The author suggests to the audience that these confrontations and “bad guys” the author is referring to are black men. This communicates a picture of black men as criminals and the cause of increasing crime. The language used in the article conveys the idea that the

police are having a difficult time trying to stop the crime caused by black men because their job can not be done correctly. This point is also made in the article “Holiday ends in sting of shootings: Johnson blames too many guns, maybe not enough cops on the street”, which discusses the violence over the fourth of July weekend in Chicago. According to the article, “the Tribune reported a precipitous drop in morale among Chicago police, citing interviews with numerous officers. They told the newspaper the McDonald shooting had made them less aggressive on the street out of fear that doing even basic police work would get them into trouble. Criminals were also taking advantage of the passive approach, they said.”

Oppositional view point

A different approach about who is to blame for the violence in America is argued in the article, “It’s men: One group deserves the blame for America’s culture of violence and it isn’t cops, blacks, Muslims or rednecks.” The author leads the article by grabbing the reader’s attention with a small personal story or incident. Then it discusses America’s fear of violence and who society tends to blame for it. The author points out different people’s views on who the blame goes too, such as black men. The opinion of the author is conveyed when talking about black on black violence. The article says “others use the term “black on black violence” to refer to the killing of poor black Americans in their communities, playing into what author Ta-Nehishi Coates has labeled the enduring myth of black criminality.” The use of the word “poor” and “playing into the myth of black criminality” suggests that the author does not agree with the term black on black crime. “Poor” seems to be used to give background on what circumstances cause this violence and “playing into” suggest that the author thinks that the term is a

myth of black criminality. The article then discusses how gender, not race, is the greatest predictor of violence. The author believes that it does not matter what race or religion a person is, but if someone is more likely to commit crime then it is a male. This is evident by the sentence “the image of shooter that flashed through my mind wasn’t identifiably white, black, Christian, or Muslim. But there was no question in my mind that person was male.”

Discussion

Previous analyses conducted on the representation of African-American men suggest that there is a strong connection between black male characters and crime. Entman’s (1994) research on news programs such as ABC, CBS, and NBC examined the prevalence and nature of portrayals of African American men in relation to criminal activity. This analysis is similar to the results I found in my research. In all of the 10 articles I analyzed African-American men were included in negative stories involving violence, drugs, crime, or racial discrimination. If African-American males were not portrayed as criminal suspects than they were victims of the violence that surrounded them. In a few of the stories I analyzed, black-on-black crime was a subject matter mentioned. The author identifies the “same old story” of a black offender and a black victim.

More than half of the stories I analyzed could be included in the “statistics” category, Entman referred to. In Entman’s (1994) results, he found that almost half of the coverage depicted blacks as threats or non-contributing victims of society.” The “statistics” category, found news stories in this bracket included stories on crime-related

facts about the decrease in black colleges enrollment or the high-number of drug related murders and deaths. The articles I examined focused on the high homicide rates, gangs, and drug activity in black Chicago neighborhoods. Perpetuating the idea to readers that young black men are threats to society or seen as non-contributing. The exaggeration of black men associated with crime distorts the image of a black man. Although, this may be the case for some black male individuals it is not representative of a whole group

Entman's (1992) study also analyzed the images of African Americans that suggest black suspects are threatening or dangerous. This research is similar to the results I found because in the stories involving statistics, names of suspects were not mentioned, which implies greater standardized association of African American men as criminals, rather than specific individuals. Some news stories I analyzed did give a reason or defense to the narrative of the crime involving African-American men. In these stories it was reported that African-American men are subject to a very high rate of unemployment. However, although the articles reported unemployment as an underlying problems the authors failed to mention the causes of unemployment as well such as, discrimination, ineffective schooling, environments, and other experiences. Failing to explain why unemployment contributes to the criminality of African-American males gives the audience the impression that it is easy for black men to get a job, yet they refuse to do so. Therefore, this is not an adequate defense for the criminality of black men. Many important historical economic disadvantages and biases affect black male's inability to find employment. News articles that pay little attention to the social and economic disparity between blacks and whites are only increasing a misrepresentation of black men.

Another similar research study found viewers of local news were more likely to see white actors presented as victims and non-white actors as perpetrators (Romer, Jamieson, Coteau, 1998; Dixon & Linz, 2000). In my research, I also found that whites tended to be portrayed as victims of criminal activity rather than as perpetrators. I found this to be the case when the author of the article compared white neighborhoods and black neighborhoods. In the article, the black neighborhoods had the highest crime rates and more criminal suspects than white neighborhoods. The tone of the article conveyed a fear that the white neighborhoods would fall victim to the violent crime if it spread into their area. These unbalanced portrayals are misrepresentative of blacks and whites as perpetrators and victims of crime. These perspectives in news media only worsen cultural division by shaping inaccurate ideas and attitudes. Future research could revisit the issue of victim versus perpetrator in relation to BLM.

Overall, the results of my analysis of the representation of black men in relation to crime news is similar to previous studies. Since the Black Lives Matter movement began, black men continue to be consistently associated with crime and violent behavior in news coverage. The repeated negative stereotypes of black men in the news remain an issue in our society. The exaggerated misrepresentations of black men as hostile or aggressive not only impact black men, but also the public.

Limitations

Before discussing future research opportunities, it is important to note some of the limitations of this research. In my research, I only analyzed one news outlet rather than multiple. This has an impact on my research because it only focuses on representations of black men in one local area and one news media outlet. Other news media outlets might

not portray black men in their articles in the same way The Chicago Tribune does.

Another limitation to my research is the amount of articles I used. Ten articles are a small sample of articles that present representations about black men in relation to crime news.

The Chicago Tribune has a number of other articles that deal with representations of black males in crime news.

In the future, more articles need to be analyzed and more media outlets to reach a solid conclusion about the way in which black males are represented in the news media.

Also, in addition to analyzing articles broadcast news networks can be analyzed in order to see the images and videos used on television to represent black males. Still, the

Chicago Tribune is an important paper serving an area that has seen an increase in crime.

Overall, the patterns of black men being heavily represented as criminals and in a negative light do fit into preexisting patterns.

Conclusion

African-American males are overrepresented in the news media as criminal suspects, unemployed, and seen as having involvement with drugs or gangs. While previous research shows this is true I decided to analyze this topic in light of the Black Lives Matter movement to see if this has changed over time. My results from analyzing 10 articles in the Chicago Tribune showed that African-American males are still portrayed in the media as violent and are associated with criminal activity. This misrepresentation of African- American males in the media gives the public a false view of African-American men. Previous research has shown that misrepresentations of black men in them media can be harmful to society and to the lives of black men (Dixon &

Azocar, 2007). It effects the way others perceive them and could negatively affect their life. BLM has gained media coverage, but the media coverage itself initially has not changed. Therefore, the media should focus on more accurate reporting of black men. If the media accurately represented black males in the news media, then it would give the public a true picture of black males and help the public to function better in a democratic society.

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