Jennifer Marsh

Professor Lindenberg

ENG 102

26 June 2020

Racism and the Media

We are living in a world that is surrounded by media on all sides, and whether we know it or not, it is influencing how we think and feel about situations and people. We have “…1,400 daily newspapers, 17,000 magazines, and hundreds of channels to choose from on our cable systems” (González and Torres 1)”. Yet, many Americans still remain “….misinformed about the world around us, while the professional journalists who produce our news routinely engender fear and loathing from the mightiest politician or celebrity, as well as from the lowliest citizen (González and Torres 1)”. *New for All the People: The Epic Story of Race and American Media* by Juan González and Joseph Torres shines a light on this idea and how it has dated back to when the first forms of media began in the late 1600s. Now being in June of 2020, we as nation have seen the media’s take on this new worldwide affecting virus, the Coronavirus, as well as the justice movement for an end to racial discrimination and violence. How, I question, has media influenced this new topic of racism in our country? From its first creation, to its presence today, media heightens and perpetuates racism and discrimination in our country.

Some may question the definition of racism and its relevance to our country today? As stated in the journal article, “Do #BlackLivesMatter? Implicit Bias, Institutional Racism and Fear of the Black Body” by Reshawna L. Chapple and many others:

Racism is defined as any action, intentional or unintentional, that is based on race or skin color and subordinates a group or individual based on their skin color or race (Sue 2005). Institutional racism is defined as institutional inequality based upon race (Hardie and Tyson 2013) (Chapple 3).

While many may think it is a thing of the past, we are seeing today, racism and discrimination is just as prevalent in our world as it ever has been. Dating back to the very beginning of slavery and how it has evolved until now being in 2020, it becomes clear that it is still deeply rooted in our system and our many forms of media keep it that way.

Starting at the bare bones of media in its creation, we see racism. “In 1690, the [first colonial newspaper,](https://www.poynter.org/news/today-media-history-first-colonial-newspaper-published-1690%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) *Publick Occurrences*, portrayed Native Americans as barbarous and savage. *The Boston News-Letter* in the early 1700s said that the local Black population was “addicted to Stealing, Lying and Purloining (Torres)”. The list is endless. Newspapers started climbing and becoming more influential that, “Between 1790 and 1800 the number of U.S. papers nearly tripled, from 92 to 234; it then mushroomed to more than 1,400 by 1840. “(Gonzalez 33), however, this was not the case for people of color. It wasn’t until, “between 1824 and 1828 that three of American pioneer publications by people of color, El Habanero, Freedoms Journal and the Cherokee Phoenix, quietly came into existence (Gonzalez 140)”. The freedom journal as noted by Gonzalez, “not only expanded the boundaries of acceptable news and opinion on slavery, it also spawned an independent communications network among black freedmen that led to the historic Black Convention movement” (Gonzalez 109). But even then, they didn’t have true freedom of speech. This phrase, “freedom to publish means freedom for all and not for some” by Justice Hugo Black demonstrates the harsh reality. Although they had a platform of their own, they could not outwardly speak about racial issues, or the fight for freedom and abolition due to lash back and threats of the white supremacists. There was a group called the “Lynch Men” that broke into a post office and stole and burned all the newspapers and pamphlets that were being sent to all the church’s and clergy in the South to promote immediate abolishment of slavery from the Anti-Slavery groups. But this was only the beginning. We have been shutting down the voices of the oppressed ever since. Even when the “second generation of writers”, Fredrick Douglass, Martin Delany and Harry Highland Granet, among other former slaves, did not fear the threats and proceeded to publish papers that “clamored boldly for full emancipation and they consciously used their list of subscribers to created national network of black freedom advocates (Gonzalez 111) they were still hushed by the overpowering white voices. White newspapers would continually post headlines and papers fighting the idea of abolition, presenting stories of people of color committing crimes, and being violent and disruptive. They “frequently caricatured and parodied African Americans…and denigrated their concerns”, and ordered that they should be shipped to Liberia instead of granted freedom in the United States. The white media stations were thriving on this idea of racism (Gonzalez 111).

Exploiting racial fears became not only a reliable way to increase newspaper sales and broadcast ratings, but also served as a tool by which powerful groups in society could stir up public support for projects of territorial and imperial expansions or by which to weaken opposition among the lower classes to unpopular government policies”(González and Torres 3)

These acts of discrimination did not end with the newspapers but continued as media began to evolve to the radio broadcasts and eventually the television.

Blacks were very innovative during this era of the radio and began secretly creating small radio stations that one could only know about through the black press. However, with the Radio Act of 1927, those were shut down and taken off air, “turning the most powerful frequencies over to a handful of centralized commercial radio networks such as NBC, CBS and Mutual broadcasting” (Gonzalez 187). This continued until the 1940s when Hispanics and Blacks finally had their own channels. Then, after World War II the fight to end the “color line” continued. As Gonzalez expressed in Chapter 15 of his book, *News For All The People,* African American veterans who had returned home with a new sense of their rights as citizens of the United States, began to challenge how the media portrayed black people. Civil Rights groups began challenging local broadcasting licenses which pressured them to improve their coverage and integrate their newsrooms which ultimately led to the Kerner Commission. Blacks believed that the media was an “instrument of the white power structure (Torres)” and that the white interests guided their entire community from “journalists, friends and neighbors to city officials, police officers, and department store owners (Torres)” etc. The Kerner Commission acknowledged that the media had reflected biases and created stereotypes among the black community that were not true and had failed to report adequately on civil disorders. Additionally, as stated in the *Free Press* article by Joseph Torres, it noted that ‘Far too often, the press acts and talks about Negroes as if Negroes do not read the newspapers or watch television, give birth, marry, die, and go the PTA meetings.” And that “by failing to portray the Negro as a matter of routine and in the context of the total society,” the report noted, “the news media have, we believe, contributed to the black-white schism in this country.’(Torres)”. Yet even with this Commission and the acknowledgment that media had failed to address racial issues and needed to reform, it took until 1978, about ten years later, for the Federal Communications Commission to “adopt its first official policy to promote minority ownership of broadcast stations” (Gonzalez 288). And yet today, the media continues to misrepresent people of color and various racial diversities.

“Only by understanding the evolution of press ownership in American, and the close connection between major media companies and the nation’s political and business circles, can we begin to understand the persistency of racial segregation and bigotry in the news” (Gonzalez 3). Media, businesses, and politics have between intertwined since its creation. As mentioned above, white radio stations used their platform to promote and grow racism hindering the freedom from slavery and the fight for equal rights. The same influence is present today. The media platforms remain in the hands of white people and in part to the government and big businesses. It all comes down to money, and the media will do whatever it needs to in order to “thrive”. As Torres explains in his *Free Press* article, Fox News and the Sinclair Broadcast Group have perpetuated racist narratives to support political agendas with the most recent example being Trumps 2016 campaign:

CBS Chairman and CEO Les Moonves [said as much](https://www.democracynow.org/2016/11/9/it_might_not_be_good_for)at the Morgan Stanley Technology, Media & Telecom Conference in 2016: “Who would have thought that this circus would come to town? But, you know, it may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS ... So, what can I say? It’s — you know, the money’s rolling in, and this is ... I’ve never seen anything like this. And, you know, this is going to be a very good year for us. But — sorry, it’s a terrible thing to say, but bring it on, Donald. Go ahead. Keep going.”

As a *New York Times* article put it, “Racism was good for business (Torres)”. Someone is always making money. That is just what makes the media “world go round”. The problem is, many white people in this country are unaware of the reality with media channels and its intense political influence. As stated by Gonzalez in his book, “…the most important Washington policy debate that the average American has never heard of is the battle over “net neutrality” (346). The phrase “net neutrality” is basically the power of the over the Internet meaning that Internet service providers should be prohibited from discriminating against, degrading access to, and/or blocking content, or applications, that a consumer chooses online. This is of such importance that it is very scary what can happen when a political power steps in. For example, in December of 2017, Trump’s Federal Communications Commission voted to “eliminate its Net Neutrality rules, turning over control of the internet to big broadband companies like AT&T, Comcast and Verizon, which are determined to interfere with, slow down or censor online traffic (Torres)”. This means that these big companies can block access to or take down any political speech with which they disagree resulting in more silencing and oppression of the voices that deserve to be heard. A media fueled by click throughs, money flow, and politics does what it needs to sustain and speak to their audience who are providing the funds. As a result? They perpetuate racial stereotypes and acts of racism.

“The scariest person in the world is a masculine, strong, black man….Why? Because that is how the media portrays us “ Beyah Rasool, Defensive Assistant Coach University of Missouri Football, a person of color. This disgusting and wrongly accused stereotype has been “hardwired into our nation’s consciousness due to institutional and structural racism in the media system and in our society (Torres)”. The media tends to stereotype Latinos, African Americans, Native Americans, and Asian Americans as “hyper-sexual, violent, unintelligent, dishonest, and consistently poor (Castañeda 7)”. By presenting these ethnic groups through these negative stereotypes it ultimately raises the question, "as to whether “these people” have a right to the societal resources available to those who are part of a productive populace (Castañeda 7). They HAVE the right as American citizens, but we present them in a way that doesn’t make us want to give them that right. Does that sound familiar? White radio stations did it in the early to mid 1900s and we are doing the same thing today. We are presenting people of color in violent and negative ways to protect white privilege and sustain a fear that was created by the media since the late 1600’s. “The media system, like the educational system, criminal-justice system and many other systems that exist in our country, wasn’t created to help people of color” (Torres). Gonzalez in section 5 of his book presents a study from The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the Project for Excellence in Journalism, that shows the percentage of media references for people of color and the type of media presented:

Even though African-Americans, Latinos and Asians made up more than 32 percent of the US population, only 7.5 percent of more than 34,000 news reports made a “substantial reference” to one or another of the three minority groups. With more than half of the “Hispanic” reports centered on two storylines: the nomination and confirmation battle over Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor (39 percent) and the Mexican drug war (13 percent) (Gonzalez 351).

So what do “we”, people who watch the media, gather from the only representation of Hispanics? They are drug dealers. As Jesus Quintana a Mexican-American First-Generation Entrepreneur said when I ask how media portrays his race, “I definitely feel discriminated against because I always feel people are looking down on me because I’m Mexican and that I’m living in a country in which white individuals feel they have dominated. The media has portrayed us in a negative way especially with Trump saying that we are rapist drug dealers”. Additional research from the article “Racism and the Media: A Textual Analysis” by Kulaszewicz demonstrates how specific wording and the use of the word “black” in the media plays into our thoughts on people of color:

On average, “black” is used three times more in news reporting than "white". The over usage of the word “black” becomes a racial microaggression because it can condition the mind to associate the word with negative connotation. Patterns of criminalization and justification are exposed. Black men are often criminalized and represented as violent is the media. As contrast, in the event of a White officer as the shooter of a Black man, the officer's actions are justified or supported regardless of the criminality of the officers own actions.

One may question how impactful can simple stereotypes be? The answer is majorly influential and harmful to all society as it affects every aspect of our lives. As discussed in the journal article by Chapple, most people, if not all, posses some kind of implicit bias. As defined in the journal, implicit bias is “unintended bias that operates without our conscious awareness”….and it “relates to the attitudes and stereotypes within our subconscious that impact our understanding of our environment and our subsequent actions” (Kirwan Institute 2015) (Chapple 3). These biases remain in our subconscious therefore influencing our actions and decisions without us even noticing. According to the American Civil Liberties Union ([ACLU] n.d.), “both implicit and explicit bias can be attributed to the racial disparities observed in the criminal justice system.” (Chapple 3). The examples are endless, for instance as Chapple identifies, the majority of Americans associate black men as a whole with criminality and violence. This results in society viewing “non-violent acts performed by Black males as being violent and aggressive, while viewing violent acts performed by White males as unintentional or a result of uncontrolled consequence (i.e. mental health) (Lawson 2012; Lee 2013; Richardson and Goff 2012).“(Chapple 4). Even if people have never had a negative encounter or had personal experience with a black man or women, those thoughts and stereotypes remain. Where do they come from? The answer is: the media. “Media representations become transformed into seemingly ‘real knowledge’ (Gonzalez 8) that is the reality of it. As discussed in the article by Castañeda, studies have shown the cognitive and social impact media has on everyday people, especially our children. As she states, “Over time these children become adults whose values are in part shaped by a media system that in the U.S. is based on a capitalist, racist and sexist framework in its content and regulatory processes”(Castañeda 3). Chapple provides yet another example that proves the previous statements true. This study was published in 2015 by the UCLA Center for Behavior, Evolution and Culture on the correlation of Black-sounding names and adult perceptions of danger:

Using a sample of over 1,500 mostly White participants, the researchers found that when presented with a Black-sounding name, participants identified characters in a story as a large, aggressive, lower class, and lower educated, and when that same story used a character with a White-sounding name, participants perceived the character as much less aggressive, and thoughts of lower education or economic status were not considered (Holbrook, Fessler, and Navarrete 2015). (Chapple 7)

It’s as simple as a hearing a name that results in acts of racism, and abject and violent discrimination, (e.g. “shoot first, ask questions later”). And if this wasn’t clear enough, to put it in perspective there are “more Black Americans under the control of the criminal justice system today than were enslaved in 1850 (Alexander 2012)”(Chapple 6). I question if our country wasn’t built on racial stereotypes and implicit biases, would we have as many black Americans in our jail today? My answer is no.

Being a white woman, raised in a predominantly white city in Northern Michigan, I obviously cannot claim to know what living in the United States as a colored person is like. I was raised with two sisters from Moldova who came to this country as immigrants in search for a better life here in the U.S so I have a glimpse into their struggle, however it does not come close to seeing life through the lives of many in this country. For that reason, I have interviewed various friends and associates: Beyah Rasool, Defensive Assistant Coach at the University of Missouri and person of color; Jamal Page, African American Denver Resident and Videographer; Z.D. Sudanese-Ethiopian-American student at the University of Denver; Jesus Quintana, Mexican-American and First-Generation Entrepreneur and Marcela Marsh, Physicians Assistant at Henry Ford Hospital, American citizen from her home country of Moldova. Below are their comments when asked about the media and its portrayal of their race and how they personally feel and have been/and continue to be affected living in this country.

* "I can give you personal examples of racism every single day and every single hour – but it doesn’t really affect me – you become numb to it”. - *Beyah*
* *“*I am not only a person of color but I am a women, an immigrant and a refugee. All these different identities are impacted by racism. It is an identity that I cannot shut out because it is how I look.” - *Z.D.*
* “When I go to restaurants, I tip big at least 30% because I don’t want them to stereotype me. And when I see cops, I say hi and open the door…I don’t really trust them, but I have to do it. I grew up in the thick of it …we don’t trust the media.” – *Beyah Rasool*
* “I have always felt that there’s “regular” news and then “our” news. What I mean by that is, I have always felt the news was reported by predominantly white people, for a white audience. When I feel that the actual network reports on news without subtle racial cues, that’s when I feel like it’s “our” news. In 2018, I spent a year working at a news station as a camera operator. In my short time there I was made aware to so many unspoken issues that lie within the news media. - *Jamal Page*
* *“*It has been up to us to educate people around us that there is real shit going on in this world and this country more specifically that we can’t do nothing about because we are being oppressed, we are the ones being killed, we are the ones that are not being given the equal chances as others of ‘non-color’” - *Jesus Quintana*
* *“*When I was working in the fast-food industry in New Orleans as an immigrant who couldn’t speak English, the African American’s were the ones who were the nicest to me and gave bigger tips, not the whites” - *Marcela Marsh*
* “ The media often perpetuates racism in very subtle ways that often go unnoticed, unless of course you’re a part of the population being discriminated against. Subtle things like words used or not used when giving descriptions of suspects. The term “Black man” is used more when referring to a criminal than referring to a graduate. Photos used, tone in voice, the small little comments between anchors right before they move on to the next story. - Jamal

And so on….

“to understand the depth of racism is to understand infinity” - unknown.

While we may never fully understand the depths of racism in this country as it is rooted in its entire being, we can understand the power of the media and its influence. We’ve seen throughout history and the examples laid out in this paper, the media has the “capacity to shape civil society, its discourses, policies, and the built environment all around us (Schiller, 2014)”(Kilgo). We have seen how the past and present media outlets have “constructed a racist narrative that dehumanizes our communities in support of an agenda that promotes and protects White Supremacy” and we see it still today. As stated in the article, “Media Effects and Marginalized ideas: Relationships Among Media Consumption and Support for Black Lives Matter” by Rachel R. Mourão and Danielle Kilgo, “Mainstream media journalist marginalize protestors through the racialization of coverage (Leopold & Bell, 2017), focusing on violence and confrontation rather than the ongoing and unattended demands and agendas of the protest movement (Kilgo, Mourão & Sylvie, 2019), and excluding preferred advocacy frames (Mourão et al., 2018)”. In the past month, the majority of the news media relating to the social justice movement have been about the violent outbreaks during protests towards police, protesters burning down civilian houses, robbing stores, and destroying cities, etc. The media has not focused on the real root of the problem and the efforts the people are pushing for or the many peaceful protests that have been occurring because that isn’t in their favor. We have to remember that many large media corporations are run by let’s face it, the white people’s money, and they don’t want their lives to change. They are happy being privileged. But there is a difference today than there was in the past. The past generations only had the large media platforms to not only learn about what is happening in the country but express their opinions. Today, we have a new type of media to which every individual has access. This new media is Social Media, and it is not stopping its fight for freedom. There is hope in this generation to speak the truth on what principles our country was built on and the building blocks in which the media and its outlets were created. There is hope in this generation that we will not continue to portray racial stereotypes and biases, so that someday we can live in a world where we do not see color and discriminate.

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