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Race Prominent Feature in Coverage of Trayvon Martin

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Race Prominent Feature in Coverage of Trayvon Martin

Abstract

This textual analysis examines news framing of the shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman. After studying coverage from *The Sanford Herald* (North Carolina), *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Denver Post*, the authors conclude national media perpetuated racial stereotypes, thus heightening the issue of race and making the case more emotional than factual.

Readers outside of Sanford, N.C., had few details about the physical altercation, the heart of Zimmerman's self-defense claim.

Disciplines

African American Studies | American Politics | Communication | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Social Influence and Political Communication

Comments

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NOT ON MY WATCH: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF LOCAL AND NATIONAL NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF THE MARTIN-ZIMMERMAN CASE

Abstract: The shooting of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman made national newspaper headlines. Textual analysis was used to examine news framing of race and crime in news coverage. Five themes are discussed: (1) changing news values to make news, (2) defining the problem, (3) Zimmerman's changing race, (4) using uneven descriptors, and (5) Shooting as platform for political and social debate.

Keywords: Trayvon Martin, news framing, race and crime, textual analysis, newsgathering

Introduction

Many facts of the Trayvon Martin-George Zimmerman shooting are unknown, and even more are disputed. However, some are known. On Feb. 26, 2012, Martin, 17, was visiting his father's fiancé in The Retreat at Twin Lakes neighborhood of Sanford, Fla., and left her home to buy Skittles and an iced tea at a nearby 7-Eleven. Zimmerman, 28, saw Martin, whom he later said looked suspicious, return to the neighborhood around 7:15 p.m., called the police, and then confronted Martin. Before police could arrive, several neighbors called 911 to report a fight and a gunshot. Police found Martin's dead body behind a building at 1231 Twin Trees Lane. Zimmerman immediately surrendered to police but was not initially charged with a crime because he claimed he acted in self-defense.

Much of what the public knew about the incident came from coverage by newspapers and other media outlets. Walter Lippmann wrote that news media are powerful forces in shaping the "pictures in our heads" because "the world that we have to deal with politically is out of reach, out of sight, out of mind. It has to be explored, reported, and imagined."¹ Lippmann² argued that news media are the principal conduit of images of the outside world because that world is too big, complex, and fleeting for any one person to get an accurate and total view of reality. While Lippmann largely was writing about the political pictures in our heads, the news media also explore the day-to-day happenings in citizens' lives—including the Martin-Zimmerman shooting. The purpose of this study was to examine how newspapers framed race and crime in the shooting. The researchers also analyzed similarities and differences between the local

Sanford Herald and national newspapers *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Denver Post*.

Literature Review

Most Americans receive their news about crime and violence from local media outlets, and more adults rely on newspapers than any other form of media for crime reporting.³ Crime is one of the most prevalent issues in the news,⁴ and the media's constant reporting of crime cultivates widespread fear and concern.⁵ Americans rely on the news media to inform and explain social and political issues;⁶ therefore, the way crime news is reported is of great importance.

The media's reporting of crime influences audience's attitudes about race and ethnicity.⁷ Crime reporting perpetuates racial stereotypes and biases.⁸ For example, Americans most often associate blacks with crime.⁹ Crime is a preferred television news topic because of the dramatic effect it has on audiences.¹⁰ Most news stories feature whites, and audiences thus tend to associate whites with a variety of topics such as business, technology, and science;¹¹ however, blacks most frequently are seen depicted as criminals, victims, or dependents of society.¹² Traditionally, there is little explanation of circumstances such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other social determinants that may explain why these crimes are committed.¹³ Thus, audiences tend to think about crime in terms of race.

News Framing

Some scholars suggest that crime is socially constructed,¹⁴ often by rhetorical storytelling.¹⁵ Framing theorists contend that the way a story is framed effects the audience's opinion of the issue. Frames create a tone for the news story that increases the

salience of a message;¹⁶ as salience increases, so does the likelihood that audiences will remember a message.¹⁷ As a result, the selection of topics covered (or omitted) in a news story can change the tone of the message.¹⁸ Frames are “the lenses through which social reality is viewed.”¹⁹ Elements in the story are said to be in the frame; elements not included are said to be out of frame and are considered less significant.²⁰

Because journalists receive event-specific details about crime from local police, their crime reporting tends to repeat details such as time, date, location, and offense. This type of reporting usually results in episodic framing, which looks like snapshots of events or specific instances.²¹ News media report most stories without context, leading audiences to focus on and attribute responsibility to the individual(s) within the story.²²

In contrast, thematic news frames “place public issues in some more general or abstract context and takes the form of a ‘takeout,’ or ‘backgrounder,’ report directed at general outcomes or conditions.”²³ Such frames provide audiences with context such as background and consequences. News that includes social determinants cultivates shared responsibility and encourages action.²⁴ The difference between episodic and thematic framing is that “episodic framing depicts concrete events that illustrate issues, while thematic framing presents collective or general evidence.”²⁵

Framing Race and Crime

Journalists frequently use exemplars to present a story or personify an issue, and these exemplars are remembered more than the actual details of the story.²⁶ Researchers have long held that local news tends to over-represent black criminals and under-represent black victims,²⁷ while under-representing Latino and white criminals when

compared to crime reports.²⁸ Inflated crime rates on local news influence audiences to think about crime in terms of “blackness.”²⁹

Researchers also have examined race and crime frames used in television news. Blacks are often shown in handcuffs,³⁰ and television news show four times more black mug shots than white mug shots.³¹ Often, white criminals’ names were included with their mug shot but black criminals’ names were not; consequently, audiences may categorize blacks as criminals instead of noticing characteristics of the individual.³² Stereotypical language such as “inner city” or “ghetto” may influence audiences’ attitudes toward race and crime because news accentuates “otherness” especially among groups that already are marginalized.³³ For example, scholars found the media framed the 2007 Virginia Tech shooter by his Korean ethnicity. The shooter was also an immigrant and, thus, his race and ethnicity became a focal point for the media. That focus is in contrast with the Columbine shooting in 1999, where race was virtually absent in the news media.³⁴ Scholars found that media did not make mention of the shooters’ race or that there were 12 other school shootings by white males who self-identified as part of the “trenchcoat mafia.”³⁵

The use of exemplars to engage audience’s emotions³⁶ is especially effective when aligned with racial stereotypes perpetuated by the media. The portrayal of blacks and crime reinforces societal stereotypes of this minority group,³⁷ and audiences use this information to evaluate minorities, especially when they do not engage with blacks regularly. Information consistent with stereotypes is more likely to be noticed and remembered than information contradicting accepted stereotypes.³⁸

Local crime news often has followed “a standard script” that features violence and a specific criminal. The violence typically includes homicides or home invasions, and the specific perpetrator typically is someone who is black.³⁹ However, the current researchers examined a news script that did not conform to the stereotype; instead, a Hispanic was the perpetrator and the victim was black.

RQ1: How did newspapers frame race and crime in the Martin-Zimmerman shooting case?

RQ2: How were the news framing similar and/or different in the local newspaper and three national newspapers?

Methodology

To probe the question of how race and crime were portrayed in print newspaper articles covering the Martin-Zimmerman shooting, a textual analysis was conducted. The units of analysis were the headlines and body text of 429 articles published in four newspapers: *Sanford Herald*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Denver Post*.⁴⁰ All articles including the keyword “Trayvon Martin” were included in the six-month sample⁴¹ from Feb. 27 through Aug. 31, 2012. The shooting occurred February 26, Zimmerman surrendered to authorities June 3, and he was released on bond July 6.

Textual analysis “is a means of trying to learn something about people by examining what they write.”⁴² Meanings from manifest content are a construction of reality culled and crafted from the virtually limitless amount of possible informational items found in any given news cycle.⁴³ Textual analysis goes beyond the manifest content of messages, allowing researchers to discern “implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text.”⁴⁴ In the current study, the researchers examined texts several times:

themes emerged during initial readings, and more readings were done to explore those themes.⁴⁵ While coding themes and patterns, the researchers isolated something “(a) that happen[ed] a number of times and (b) that consistently happen[ed] in a specific way.”⁴⁶

The researchers discussed reoccurring themes together in the context of the literature, and returned to the texts in order to glean “thick description”⁴⁷ in regard to the research questions. For increased validity, two researchers compared notes and discussed themes after analyzing one, 10, 25, and 50 percent of the sample.

Findings

Five themes emerged from the data: (1) changing news values to make news, (2) defining the problem, (3) Zimmerman’s changing race, (4) using uneven descriptors, and (5) shooting as platform for political and social debate.

Changing news values to make news

Because the shooting took place in Sanford, Fla., it makes sense that the *Sanford Herald* reported timely, local news, e.g., events, politics, in contrast to national newspapers that covered broader social issues, e.g., race, gun legislation. The *Sanford Herald* first reported the shooting February 29 but did not include any further news coverage until March 12. At this time, Zimmerman had not yet been arrested for shooting Martin; Sanford Police Chief Bill Lee said there were no grounds to charge Zimmerman with the shooting. On March 13, homicide detective Christopher Serino recommended Zimmerman be charged with manslaughter; following, coverage was frequent—a news story approximately every other day. During the month of March, authorities released the 911 calls from the night of the shooting, the U.S. Justice Department and the FBI launched an investigation, President Barack Obama spoke out publicly about the

controversy, and the New Black Panther Party offered a reward for the “capture” of Zimmerman. However, the news coverage in the *Sanford Herald* included more local-interest; for example, residents questioned the police department’s investigation into the shooting (March 21), Rev. Al Sharpton held a rally at a local church (March 26), and the location of a memorial was debated (July 10).

The *Denver Post* initially reported the story using content from wire services and continued to do so as new information became available. The original news coverage in the *Denver Post* called for “justice” only days after the newspaper first reported on the case.⁴⁸ Similarly, opinion pieces on March 29, and April 4, 6, 8, 18, and 22 used words such as “hoodies,” “young minority men are under siege,” “racial politics,” and “Did hate kill Trayvon Martin?” in headlines, framing Martin as a victim of racial bias and Zimmerman as the guilty perpetrator. This newspaper’s coverage of the case (and related issues) ebbed after April.

The *Los Angeles Times* first published an opinion column on Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” law (March 10), followed by commentary (March 23) and another opinion column (March 26). Both were about race and its importance in the Martin-Zimmerman case. This newspaper did not publish any wire content; all of the stories were original to the *Los Angeles Times*. The first news ran March 16. Much of the news reported on the case and its impact on political discourse, local rallies, protests in support of “justice,” town hall meetings, and other similar cases in other states. As newsworthy events slowed during the summer months, the *Los Angeles Times* kept Trayvon Martin’s case in the headlines.⁴⁹ The Houston bureau chief wrote an article about “racially charged” comments by a radio show host in regard to the Trayvon Martin shooting (June 1; news).

Another article reported on the Trayvon Martin memorial in Sanford, Fla., asserting the best memorial is “an educational exhibit on race and violence” (July 10).

The New York Times initially reported on the shooting March 17 with both a news story and an op-ed column.⁵⁰ Much of the early opinion/editorial used accusatory language such as the following headlines: “Shoot first, claim self-defense later,” “Guns, race and a killing in Florida,” and “Florida’s disastrous self-defense law.” Journalists wrote that laws such as “Stand Your Ground” made “it easy for shooters who kill to claim self-defense” and referred to “the gated community mentality” as if to explain Zimmerman’s motives. News coverage followed steadily, reporting scrutiny of the Florida self-defense law (March 21; news), investigation details (March 22; news), “hashtag activism” (March 26; news), the “gunman’s account” (March 27; news), and profits of the manufacturer of Skittles (March 29; news). News in the months that followed reported investigation findings, police missteps, and other similar cases across the country. Many of the articles in the summer months were not directly related to the case but referenced it.⁵¹

Defining the problem

The shooting of Trayvon Martin attracted national media attention about three weeks after the *Sanford Herald* first reported the story. Each newspaper in the sample took a different approach to defining the problem in this case. The *Sanford Herald*’s first news coverage reported facts from a press release issued by the Sanford Police Department. The *Denver Post* reported the story March 13 with content from *The Associated Press*. The *Los Angeles Times* first published an opinion column by Beth

Kassab (March 10), and *The New York Times* ran a news story by Miami bureau chief Lizette Alvarez (March 17).

Because the (supposed) criminal (Zimmerman) and the (supposed) victim (Martin) do not fit the “standard script”⁵² in crime reporting, journalists had to construct a new frame to report this particular incident. Zimmerman claimed he shot Martin in an act of self-defense, while Martin’s family and supporters argued it was murder and that Zimmerman acted in hate. Not all of the newspapers used only facts confirmed by the Sanford Police Department; those unreported details are the most disputed facts in the case. The following illustrates how newspapers reported (and defined) the actual act of the shooting.

The *Sanford Herald* first reported a “shooting” that police were calling an “altercation” (Feb. 29; news). The *Sanford Herald* did not describe the altercation, rather reported “a fight and a gunshot” and police “found Trayvon dead” (March 12; news). The Sanford Police Department released the 911 calls 19 days after the shooting (March 16), and it wasn’t until this time that the *Sanford Herald* reported more details of the incident. Other callers had confirmed that they saw “men wrestling, and then heard a gunshot” (March 17; news). This report is the only reference in the *Sanford Herald* of the physical altercation that occurred between Zimmerman and Martin.

The *Denver Post* was found to be similar to the *Sanford Herald* in that few details were reported on the physical altercation. On March 13, the *Denver Post* first ran a story by *The Associated Press* that reported “the shooting death” of Trayvon Martin, stating “there is no evidence to dispute the shooter’s claim to self-defense.” A March 27 news story used “confrontation” to refer to the incident but no other details were reported.

The first reference made to the incident in the *Los Angeles Times* was in an opinion piece March 23, reporting that a “sketchy confrontation” occurred. Later, the newspaper used Zimmerman’s account to tell the story.⁵³ The *Los Angeles Times* then used phrasing similar to Zimmerman’s personal account: “banging [Zimmerman’s] head repeatedly into concrete” (June 21; news).

The New York Times introduced the story on March 17 reporting “the two got into a struggle that was partly overheard by a few neighbors. Mr. Zimmerman wound up with a bloody nose and a cut to the back of his head. Trayvon was shot in the chest.” This newspaper reported: “the two got into a fight and Mr. Zimmerman wound up on the ground” (March 19; news) and “a confrontation occurred” (March 22; editorial). Zimmerman’s account is reported again March 27 and 29.⁵⁴ When reporting the altercation, *The New York Times* framed Zimmerman’s actions in terms of self-defense, using phrases such as “claiming self-defense,” “he had shot Trayvon in self-defense,” “who has claimed self-defense,” and “he shot Mr. Martin in self-defense.” Wording varied with some noting that Zimmerman merely claimed self-defense while others seemed to accept self-defense as a fact of the case.

Zimmerman’s changing race

Initially, none of the newspaper articles sampled reported race in the coverage of the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin. However, the race of both the victim and the shooter were reported in March, across all four newspapers, and became part of the narrative. There is no significant event that can explain why race was not initially reported. It was common across the four newspapers for Martin’s race to be reported but Zimmerman’s race not to be reported. The four newspapers first reported Zimmerman’s

race as “white.” However, Zimmerman’s race changed during the news cycle. Some news stories called Zimmerman “white,” while others identified him as “half-white, half-Hispanic”; finally, news stories confirmed that he is “Hispanic” after learning his mother is Peruvian. Zimmerman’s race not only changes in the news coverage, but it also sometimes disappears. In contrast, Martin’s race was more often reported than not and was reported even if Zimmerman’s race was not.

The *Sanford Herald* first reported the incident three days following the Sunday shooting; neither Martin’s or Zimmerman’s race was mentioned in the initial article. Martin is identified as being a “boy,” “17,” and “of Miami” (Feb. 29; news). The article described Zimmerman as a “25-year-old man in the subdivision,” and a “neighborhood watch member” (Feb. 29; news). Several weeks later, Zimmerman’s race was reported as “white” (March 12). Zimmerman turned out to be 28-years-old and Hispanic. His correct age was reported in a March 21 news story; however, Zimmerman’s race was never reported again after the March 12 article, and the newspaper’s editor made no correction.

Nineteen of the 74 *Sanford Herald* articles included Martin’s race, and two included Zimmerman’s race. This newspaper mentioned race in approximately 26 percent of the articles covering the shooting. Of the news coverage containing racial identification, Martin is labeled as “black” and Zimmerman “white.” When the race of either Martin or Zimmerman is mentioned, it is usually at least three paragraphs into the news story—not in the lead or headline.

The *Denver Post* first published an Associated Press article March 13. This article did not make mention of race. On March 17, the *Post* reported Martin’s race as “black” and Zimmerman’s race as “white.” Here, Martin was also described as a “teenager” and

Zimmerman a “neighborhood watch volunteer.” Zimmerman’s race was correctly identified later as being “Hispanic” (March 22; news). Ten of the 35 articles mentioned race (approximately 29 percent); Martin’s race was included in 10 of the articles while Zimmerman’s race was included in five. Race rarely was included in the lead of these articles.

The *Los Angeles Times* first reported the incident March 19, and the article did not include the race of either Martin or Zimmerman. Martin’s race is first mentioned March 25, and Zimmerman’s race is not reported until April 26. He is then labeled as Hispanic. A May 3 news article confirms Zimmerman’s identity: “Mr. Zimmerman’s mother is from Peru and he identifies himself as Hispanic. Mr. Martin was black.” However, the *Los Angeles Times* later uses labels such as “white and Latino” (June 4) and “half-white, half-Hispanic” (July 12) to identify Zimmerman. The majority of news articles from the *Los Angeles Times* contain reference to race—43 of the 64 articles sampled (67 percent). Martin’s race was reported much more frequently than Zimmerman’s race. For instance, 43 articles labeled Martin as either “black” or “African American,” while Zimmerman’s race was reported four times. It was common for race to be in the lead paragraphs, or at least in the first half of the news article.

The New York Times reported the shooting March 17 and included race in the lead of that news story: “the teenager, who was black” and “neighborhood crime watch volunteer...is white and Hispanic.” Both Martin’s and Zimmerman’s races are again mentioned March 22, with Martin described as a “young black man” and Zimmerman as “white and Hispanic.” Martin also is described as “African American” in some news stories. Zimmerman is labeled “Hispanic” (April 26) and then “white Hispanic” (May 1).

Martin's race is more frequently reported than Zimmerman's race in *The New York Times*. For example, of the 254 articles collected, 71 mentioned race (approximately 28 percent). Martin's race was mentioned in 71 articles, compared to 30 articles that mentioned Zimmerman's race. The *Times* included "race" in headlines.

Across all four newspapers, race was included in at least one-third of the news coverage. When race was reported, Martin's race always was included, but not so for Zimmerman's race, which was reported 41 times (approximately 29 percent) in the sample. When Zimmerman's race was reported, it was rarely reported accurately and often changed in the news coverage. In contrast, Martin was usually identified as "black," but also as "African American."

Using uneven descriptors

Journalists chose different ways to describe Martin and Zimmerman to readers. As mentioned earlier, race often was used to describe Martin but not Zimmerman. Common terms used to describe Martin included "black teenager in a hoodie," "unarmed," "African American," "17-year-old," "Florida high school student," "black and from Tennessee," and "schoolboy." Martin's race and age were common descriptors.

In contrast, Zimmerman's race often was not reported, but he instead was identified with terms such as "volunteer" and "neighborhood watch captain." Terms used to describe Zimmerman included "Florida neighborhood watch volunteer," "vigilante," "crime watch volunteer," "former neighborhood watch volunteer," and "armed watch volunteer." Zimmerman's race was reported in 29 percent of the news articles, and his age was included in almost all of the news coverage.

To illustrate this theme further, excerpts from news articles from each newspaper are presented for comparison in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1]

Shooting as platform for political and social debate

This case quickly garnered national media attention and became a hot topic of discussion. However, the news coverage of the shooting often focused on broader implications and social issues. The *Sanford Herald* was the only newspaper that did not use Martin's case to discuss social topics such as racial profiling and gun control legislation. The other newspapers included articles that made comparisons between Martin's death and other black teenage homicides, questioned Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law, and rallied for new gun legislation.

The *Denver Post's* March 25 article was the first in this newspaper to use the shooting as foundation for debating racial profiling. Subtle racial overtones in news headlines were seen in this paper: "Solidarity over shooting" (March 22), and "Rally for respect" (March 26). This newspaper readily discussed the issue of race in accordance with this shooting and other similar incidents in the state of Colorado. In the *Los Angeles Times*, the Martin shooting was likened to the Rodney King beating (April 11), and headlines also contained hostile racial references: "We're weary of 'being Trayvon'" (April 5), and "George Zimmerman not racist, FBI was told" (July 12). *The New York Times* also reported on this incident in relation to race issues.

The news coverage also included "Stand Your Ground" law discussion. For example, a March 30 article in the *Denver Post* discussed the law by using the shooting as a reference for debate. "Stand Your Ground" also is questioned in one of the first *Los*

Angeles Times articles about the shooting (March 19). The law is mentioned in approximately half of the news articles from *The New York Times*. Much of the news coverage in *The New York Times* was reported in terms of social issues.⁵⁵

Both *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* commonly used the term “hoodie” when describing Martin or as a symbol for the shooting and the social implications of the incident. For example, the term “hoodie” is used metaphorically in a May 14 *New York Times* article: “Trayvon’s hoodie is a reminder that neither Wall Street or Silicon Valley are terribly representative of our country.” The rhetoric of Martin’s “hoodie” focused on political issues such as racism and gun control. The “hoodie” was reported to be a symbol of empathy for Martin’s family. For example, a mayoral candidate “donned a hoodie to express her concern about the killing of teenager, Trayvon Martin” (June 15, *The New York Times*). Vigils were reported from New York to Los Angeles with supporters wearing hoodies “in memory of Trayvon Martin” (March 29, *Los Angeles Times*).

The hoodie also was reported as pun, dubbed “Hoodie-gate” by *The New York Times* (May 14) and more obvious “hoodie-control legislation” by the *Los Angeles Times* (March 27). Newspapers reported that late-night talk show hosts poked fun at the hoodie and lawmakers’ blatant disregard for justice in this case. Martin’s “hoodie” became part of his identity. Zimmerman told police Martin looked “real suspicious” and that he was “black” and “wearing a hoodie” (May 14, *The New York Times*). The terms were not used synonymously, but “hoodie” was a further descriptor of Martin’s “blackness” (March 23, *Los Angeles Times*).⁵⁶

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how newspapers framed race and crime in the Martin-Zimmerman shooting. Further, the researchers analyzed similarities and differences between the local *Sanford Herald*, and national newspapers *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Denver Post*.

RQ1 focused on how newspapers framed race and crime in the Martin-Zimmerman case. The shooting occurred February 26, and, once each newspaper reported the story, coverage was frequent during the months of March and April. As newsworthy events happened less frequently, the focus of the story moved from Martin and Zimmerman to social and political topics such as race and gun control. Each newspaper defined the problem differently and communicated different solutions to readers. The *Sanford Herald*, a community newspaper published twice each week, reported only facts disseminated by the local police department with no opinion/editorial. National newspapers reported the happenings of the case in a timely manner, but each framed the problem in terms of a solution. The *Denver Post* and *Los Angeles Times* both agreed that the shooting was racially motivated, while *The New York Times* insisted Florida's gun law was to blame.

Across all four newspapers, race was included in at least one-third of the news coverage. When race was reported, Martin's race was always included, but not so for Zimmerman's race, which was reported 41 times (9.5 percent) in the sample. While in some instances Martin was identified as "African American," he was mostly labeled "black." Zimmerman's race changed in all four newspapers and was under-reported in comparison to Martin's race. The shooting defied the "standard script" of crime and, thus, journalists focused on the fact that a black teenager was shot. Each newspaper took its

own approach to telling the story of the shooting, but all newspapers valued Martin's race as an important detail worth reporting.

The Associated Press Stylebook states that identification by race is only pertinent under certain conditions. Namely, race is pertinent in significant or historical biographical announcements, for at-large criminal suspects or missing-person cases, and when reporting a demonstration or disturbance involving race.⁵⁷ However, *The Associated Press* does add that journalists could use news judgment "in other situations with racial overtones."⁵⁸ The journalists at these four newspapers clearly believed that the inclusion of the victim's race was more important than the inclusion of the perpetrator's race.⁵⁹ Alerting readers to Martin's race may play a role in debunking stereotypes regarding African Americans and crime.

The use of an uneven identification is troubling because of the corresponding use of language. Racial language such as "inner city" may influence audience's attitudes toward race and crime, which is important because media framing primes racial attitudes.⁶⁰ Martin was described as a black teenager in a hoodie, which news audiences have been primed to regard as dangerous.⁶¹ Further, he was described as "black and from Tennessee" or "of Miami," signaling to readers that he was an outsider to the community. The racial descriptors used to describe Zimmerman also could influence audience attitudes. Words such as "racist" and "vigilante" connotes much differently than "Florida neighborhood watch volunteer," "crime watch volunteer," or "armed watch volunteer." The journalists' word choices when describing both Martin and Zimmerman could prime certain racial attitudes.

The national media perpetuated racial stereotypes, thus heightening the issue of race and making the case more emotional (i.e. race) than factual (i.e. Stand Your Ground). Readers outside of Sanford had few details about the physical altercation, the very heart of Zimmerman's claims of self-defense. If the media had reported on the details of the physical altercation, would the trial verdict have been received as such a surprise nationally?

RQ2 focused on how framing was similar and/or different in the local *Sanford Herald*, and the national *Denver Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New York Times*. The *Sanford Herald* (19 of 74 articles, 26 percent) used racial descriptors slightly less than *The New York Times* (71 of 254 articles, 28 percent) and *Denver Post* (10 of 35 articles, 29 percent). All three used racial descriptors much less often than the *Los Angeles Times* (43 of 64 articles, 67 percent). In comparison to the other cities represented by the sampled newspapers, Hispanics (58 percent) and African Americans (10 percent) make up a large percentage of the racial composition of Los Angeles.⁶² Across all newspapers, Martin's race always was mentioned if a racial descriptor was used. However, Zimmerman's race was mentioned to varying degrees depending on the paper. The *Sanford Herald* only used Zimmerman's race in two of 19 articles (11 percent) that included a racial descriptor, the *Los Angeles Times* in four of 43 articles (9 percent), *The New York Times* in 30 of 71 articles (42 percent), and the *Denver Post* in five of 10 articles (50 percent). The implication is that the journalists at these newspapers believed the inclusion of the victim's race was more important than the inclusion of the perpetrator's race. Interestingly, this uneven use of descriptors also is true of Los Angeles, where there is a large percentage of Hispanic residents. Finally, the placement

of a racial descriptor was much different in the *Sanford Herald*. That paper rarely included race in the lead, and typically mentioned it later than the third paragraph, if at all.

Because the circumstances of the Martin shooting did not follow a typical crime “script,” journalists may have used race to frame the story in order to initiate public discourse and eliminate stereotypes regarding blacks and crime. The *Sanford Herald*’s coverage remained neutral, only reporting facts received from the Sanford Police Department. In contrast, the national newspapers seemed to carry an agenda and reported stories on social and political issues using Trayvon Martin as an example.

Limitations and Future Research

There are two limitations to this study. First, the sample included only four publications. A broader and larger sample size would be necessary to determine if the results could be generalized to all newspapers. Second, the study was limited to print newspapers. It cannot shed light on how journalists working for magazines, broadcast television, or radio framed race and crime in the Martin-Zimmerman case. Future researchers should expand the scope to include more newspapers from more regions, or to include different media in the news ecology.

Conclusion

Most Americans receive their news about crime and violence from local media outlets and follow such local news closely.⁶³ News media are important in shaping the “pictures in our heads” of an otherwise unknown or little known world that is “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind.”⁶⁴ Once a stereotype has been established, it might “influence judgments and actions,” although this influence might be subtle enough that a

person will be unaware that a racial stereotype has been activated.⁶⁵ Stereotypes were common in the Martin-Zimmerman coverage, especially at the national level, and the inconsistent use of racial descriptors might have influenced readers into thinking that this was a larger racial story instead of a simple crime story.

The *Sanford Herald's* coverage focused almost exclusively on the shooting and subsequent investigation. This coverage was a contrast to the other papers, which used the Martin-Zimmerman case to discuss social topics such as racial profiling and gun control legislation. The other newspapers included articles that made comparisons between Martin's death and other black teenage homicides, questioned Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law, and rallied for new gun legislation. New York, Los Angeles, and Denver each have dozens, if not hundreds, of shootings each year. The Martin-Zimmerman case most likely was of interest to a national audience only because of the broader social context. Giving context to a story, especially to illuminate larger social issues, is one of the goals of good journalism. However, by focusing so much on tangential issues instead of the core story of the physical altercation, the national media largely failed to inform the public about the issues upon which the verdict ultimately would be decided.

Framing theorists have argued that the way a story is framed is very important to the audience's opinion of the issue.⁶⁶ In the national press, the Martin-Zimmerman story lost its human center. Instead, Martin and Zimmerman were used to discuss a variety of larger topics; the shooting was used to illustrate social ills with little or no reporting on the actual case. Iyengar⁶⁷ suggests that the news media report stories without context, while Dorfman, et al.⁶⁸ argue that episodic frames provide audiences with little insight

into the larger social and political circumstances contributing to the particular problem. Here, journalists, at least on the national level, focused on larger social and political circumstances but lost touch with the human core story.

<i>Sanford Herald</i>
<p>“Trayvon, who is black, had every right to be in the neighborhood, ... and Zimmerman, who is white, had no legal authority to confront, detain and kill him” (March 12).</p> <p>“On Feb. 26 Trayvon Martin, 17, of Miami, was returning to The Retreat at Twin Lakes when a neighborhood watch captain, George Zimmerman, 28, shot and killed him” (March 17).</p>
<i>Denver Post</i>
<p>“... the 17-year-old Martin was a black teenager shot to death by a Hispanic neighborhood-watch captain in Florida. The teenager was unarmed and was wearing a hoodie...” (March 22).</p> <p>“Martin was killed Feb. 26 in Sanford, Fla., by the neighborhood-watch captain, 28-year-old George Zimmerman, as he walked home from the store with a bag of Skittles and some iced tea, wearing a hoodie” (March 26).</p>
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
<p>“... an unarmed black teenager shot to death by a community watch captain in Florida...” (March 27).</p> <p>“Martin, an unarmed black 17-year-old who was wearing a hoodie, was shot Feb. 26 in Sanford, Fla., by neighborhood watch captain George Zimmerman, 28...” (April 8).</p>
<i>The New York Times</i>
<p>“...Trayvon Martin, the unarmed black teenager slain at the hands of an overzealous neighborhood watch captain, who is the son of a white father and a Peruvian mother” (April 1).</p> <p>“Mr. Zimmerman, who is white and Hispanic, has said he shot Trayvon, who was black...” (April 10).</p>

Table 1: Use of uneven descriptors by newspapers in regards to Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman.

Notes

- 1 Walter Lippmann, *Public opinion*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc, 1922.
- 2 Ibid, 18.
- 3 Pew Research Center, *State of the media*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2005; Pew Research Center, *How people learn about their local community*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2011.
- 4 Shanto Iyengar, *Is anyone responsible?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- 5 Kimberly Gross and Sean Aday, "The scary world in your living room and neighborhood: Using local broadcast news, neighborhood crime rates, and personal experience to test agenda setting and cultivation," *Journal of Communication* 53, no. 3 (2003), 411-426; Dennis T. Lowry, Tarn Ching Josephine Nio, and Dennis W. Leitner, "Setting the public fear agenda: A longitudinal analysis of network TV crime reporting, public perceptions of crime, and FBI crime statistics," *Journal of Communication* 53, no. 1 (2003), 61-73; Daniel Romer, Kathleen H. Jamieson, and Sean Aday, "Television news and the cultivation of fear and crime," *Journal of Communication* 53 (2003), 88-104.
- 6 Iyengar, 1991
- 7 Robert Entman, "Blacks in the news: Television, modern racism and cultural change," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (1992), 341-361; Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. and Shanto Iyengar, "Prime suspects: The influence of local television news on the viewing public," *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (2000), 560-573; Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., Nicholas A. Valentino, and Matthew N. Beckmann, "Where you live and what you watch: The impact of racial proximity and local television news on attitudes about race and crime," *Political Research Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (2002), 755-780.

Race refers to a group of people who share biological characteristics; ethnicity refers to a group of people who share commonalities such as culture, language, religion, or social norms.

8 Glenn Leshner, “The effects of dehumanizing depictions of race in TV news stories,” in Amy Reynolds and Brooke Burnett (Eds.), *Communication and law: Multidisciplinary approaches in research* (233-252). Mahwah, New Jersey: Taylor and Francis, 2006; Travis Dixon and Daniel Linz, “Overrepresentation and underrepresentation of Blacks and Latinos as lawbreakers on television news,” *Journal of Communication* 50, no. 2 (2000), 131-154.

9 Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. and Shanto Iyengar, “Super-predators or victims of societal neglect?” in Karen J. Callaghan and Frauke Schnell (Eds.), *Framing American politics* (148-166). Pittsburg, PA: University of Pittsburg Press, 2005.

10 Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr. and Shanto Iyengar, “Prime suspects: The influence of local television news on the viewing public,” *American Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (2000), 560-573.

11 Dixon and Linz, 140; Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The black image in the white mind: Media and race in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

12 Entman and Rojecki, 84; Dixon and Linz, 142; Leshner, 248.

13 Entman & Rojecki, 2000.

14 Moira Peelo, Brian Francis, Keith Soothill, Jayn Pearson, and Elizabeth Ackerley, “Newspaper reporting and the public construction of homicide,” *British Journal of Criminology* 44, no. 2 (2004), 256-275.

- 15** Katherine A. Beckett and Theodore Sasson, *The politics of injustice: Crime and punishment in America*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc, 2003.
- 16** Entman, 1993.
- 17** Susan Fiske and Shelley E. Taylor, *Social cognition* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1991.
- 18** Entman, 1993.
- 19** James P. Dillard, Denise H. Solomon, and Jennifer A. Samp, "Framing social reality: The relevance of relational judgments," *Communication Research* 23, no. 6 (1996), 703-723.
- 20** Lori Dorman, Lawrence Wallach, and Katie Woodruff, "More than a message: Framing public health advocacy to change corporate practices," *Health Education and Behavior* 32, no. 3 (2005), 320-336.
- 21** Iyengar, 1991, p. 3.
- 22** Dorfman et al., 2005; Iyengar, 1991.
- 23** Iyengar, 1991, p. 14.
- 24** Dorfman, et al., 2005.
- 25** Iyengar, 1991, p. 14.
- 26** Hans-Bernd Brosius, "Exemplars in the news: A theory of the effects of political communication," in Jennings Bryant, David Roskos-Ewoldsen, and Joanne Cantor (Eds.), *Communication and emotion: Essays in honor of Dolf Zillman (179-196)*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003.
- 27** Entman & Rojecki, 2000.
- 28** Dixon & Linz, 2000.

29 Franklin D. Gilliam, Jr., Shanto Iyengar, Adam Simon, and Oliver Wright, "Crime in black and white: The violent, scary world of local news," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1 (1996), 6-23.

30 Leshner, 2006; Entman & Rojecki, 2000.

31 Entman & Rojecki, 2000.

32 Ibid.

33 Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley, "Playing the race card in the post-Willie Horton era," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2005), 99-112.

34 Sung-Yeon Park, Kyle J. Holody, and Xiaoqun Zhang, "Race in media coverage of school shootings: A parallel application of framing theory and attribute agenda setting," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 89, no. 3 (2012), 475-494.

35 Dolf Zillman, "Exemplification theory: Judging the whole by some of its parts," *Media Psychology* 1 (1999), 69-94.

36 Ibid.

37 Srividya Ramasubramanian, "Media-based strategies to reduce racial stereotypes activated by news stories," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2007), 249-264.

38 Mary Beth Oliver and Dana Fonash, "Race and crime in the news: Whites' identification and misidentification of violent and nonviolent criminal suspects," *Media Psychology* 4, no. 2 (2002), 137-156; Lincoln Quillian and Devah Pager, "Black neighbors, higher crime? The role of racial stereotypes in evaluations of neighborhood crime," *American Journal of Sociology* 107, no. 3 (2001), 717-767.

39 Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000.

40 *Sanford Herald* (N=76; all local; 0 opinion/editorial), *The New York Times* (N=254; 9 wire service; 50 opinion/editorial), *The Los Angeles Times* (N=64; all local; 10 opinion/editorial), and *Denver Post* (N=35; 5 wire service; 7 opinion/editorial). The *Sanford Herald* was chosen because it is the local newspaper where the shooting occurred. It is a bi-weekly paper, published on Wednesdays and Sundays, and has a circulation of 6,500. The other newspapers in the sample were chosen based on their circulation and geographic region. *The New York Times* is the third-largest daily newspaper in the U.S. and has a circulation of 1.87 million. *The Los Angeles Times* was once the largest metropolitan daily newspaper in the U.S. but has declined to a circulation just over 600,000. The city of Los Angeles is racially and ethnically diverse, and is home to previous racially charged incidents. The *Denver Post* ranks 12th among daily newspapers and has a circulation of approximately 417,000.

41 Daniel Riffe, Stephen Lacy, and Frederick Fico, *Analyzing media messages: quantitative content analysis*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: Mahwah, New Jersey, 1998.

42 Arthur Asa Berger, *Media research techniques (2nd edition)*. London: Sage Publications, Inc, 1998.

43 Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, *Mediating the message: Theories of influences on mass media content*. White Plains, N.Y.: Longman, 1996; Pamela J. Shoemaker and Timothy Vos, *Gatekeeping theory*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

44 Elfriede Fürsich, "In defense of textual analysis," *Journalism Studies* 10, no. 2 (2009), 238-252.

45 Alan McKee, *Textual analysis: A beginner's guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003.

46 Matthew Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative data analysis: A sourcebook of new methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1984.

47 Clifford Geertz, "Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture," *Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), 3-30.

48 For example, an original article published March 25 by sports journalist Benjamin Hochman reported on athletes' use of social media to raise awareness of the case (i.e., pictures of athletes wearing hoodies, #IAmTrayvonMartin, #Justice). Another article reported that Zimmerman could be charged with a "hate crime" due to his use of a "racial slur" (March 26; news).

49 For example, Richard Faussett wrote about the Retreat at Twin Lakes:

The Retreat, like many suburban planned communities, comes across as a place of quotidian pleasures, with announcements of soapbox races and nearby farmers markets. It was also a place of strict rules, with an Architectural Review Committee that regulated the residents' aesthetic whims (May 18; news).

50 Columnist Charles M. Blow wrote:

This case has reignited a furor about vigilante justice, racial-profiling and equitable treatment under the law, and it has stirred the pot of racial strife (March 17; opinion).

51 For example, on June 15, David W. Chen wrote about New York mayoral candidate Christine C. Quinn campaigning in a hoodie "to express her concern" about the shooting. Another article in June reported on the increase in neighborhood watch programs and referenced the case (June 23; news).

52 Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000.

53 Zimmerman, 28, told police that Martin was acting suspiciously and was possibly on drugs. Ignoring the advice of the police dispatcher, Zimmerman followed Martin. He later told police that he shot the youth in self-defense after Martin struck him, knocked him down and pounded his head into the ground (April 11; news).

54 In an account given to the Sanford police that was passed on the state attorney's office, George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch volunteer who shot 17-year-old Trayvon Martin on Feb. 26, said that Trayvon had punched him and then repeatedly slammed his head into the sidewalk in the moments leading up to the shooting.

Again we see evidence of Zimmerman's account in the news:

Mr. Zimmerman, 28, said he shot the 17-year-old student, Trayvon Martin, in self-defense after an altercation in which Trayvon punched him in the nose, knocked him over and slammed his head into the sidewalk (March 29; news).

55 Topics such as lobbyists (March 26), polarizing media coverage (April 2), racism (April 10), Emmett Till (April 14), the Second Amendment (April 17), racial profiling (May 1), neighborhood watch programs (June 23), gun control and "Stand Your Ground" laws (July 10), and conceal and carry permits (July 26), were included in the *Times*' reporting.

56 There are two limitations to this study. First, the sample included only four publications. A broader and larger sample size would be necessary to determine if the results could be generalized to all newspapers. Second, the study was limited to daily print newspapers. It cannot shed light on how non-daily print journalists working for magazines, broadcast television, broadcast radio, newsweeklies, or citizen journalists framed race and crime in the Martin-Zimmerman case.

57 Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996.

58 Associated Press, *The Associated Press stylebook and briefing on media law*. New York: Associated Press, 2012.

59 Martin labeled as “black” or “African American” in at least one-third of the news coverage; Zimmerman labeled as “white,” “Hispanic,” or “white Hispanic” in 9.5 percent of the news coverage.

60 Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005.

61 Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996; Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Leshner, 2006; Hurwitz and Peffley, 2005; Ramasubramanian, 2007.

62 U.S. Census, Demographic profiles, 2010. Available <http://www.census.gov/2010census/news/press-kits/demographic-profiles.html>.

63 Pew Research Center, 2005.

64 Lippmann, 1922, p. 18.

65 Quillian & Pager, 2001, p. 722.

66 Dorfman et al., 2005; Entman, 1993; Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Iyengar, 1991.

67 Iyengar, 1991.

68 Dorfman, et al., 2005.