

## **I've Heard this Story Before: A Narrative Criticism of News Coverage of *Ferguson***

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### **ABSTRACT**

On August 9, 2014, White police officer Darren Wilson fatally shot unarmed, Black teenager Michael Brown in the St. Louis, MO suburb of Ferguson. The shooting sparked a national debate regarding the role of law enforcement and the dependability of the justice system in the United States. Throughout history, narratives have placed Whiteness at the center of society has portrayed our justice system as fair and unbiased whilst criticizing and demeaning those who call it into question. This narrative seeks to maintain a social order that perpetuates stereotypes and oppresses people of color in the United States. I argue that CBS news coverage repeats this narrative in order to make sense of the shooting, the grand jury decision not to indict Wilson on August 24, 2014, and the protests which ensued following each of those events. Despite sparking national protests calling for justice for Brown, law enforcement reform, and a discussion which legitimizes institutional and aversive racism, news stories constructed a narrative which did the exact opposite.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Communication literature reveals that news media's use of Walter Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm overtly and covertly guides public perception of race in the United States. Many narratives which characterize Black males have emerged throughout history and perpetuated media (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). One of these narratives which has remained through its continuous retelling is that of the Blackness representing the antitheses of all that is culturally good and correct, or Whiteness (Lee, 2013).

News and non-news media represent key societal institutions as the majority of the public participates in them (Besley, 2008). Therefore, these sources of information have a powerful effect on audience members' perceptions of their environments and judgments of values (Besley, 2008). This fact and "the extensive literature on human values, communication scholars have rarely integrated this work into their research" (p. 314) exposes the relationship between dominant perceptions of race and the portrayals of race depicted through narratives in the news.

The news proves subjective to those writing it through the process of framing, meaning that the reporters, producers, and owners of news media project their own beliefs and perceptions in how and what they report. This was especially evident in observing the use of narrative in coverage of Rodney King's 1991 beating (Maurantonio, 2014). This process in itself, however, is subjective to the social context of present day and the different media outlets (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). The case of Trayvon Martin, who was fatally shot by neighborhood vigilante George Zimmerman in 2009, demonstrates this phenomenon through social media's impact on how mainstream media reported on Martin's death (Graeff, Stempeck, & Zuckerman, 2014). Just as the medium used by the media has adapted to an ever-changing environment, its narrative has done so as well. The narrative paradigm, although constantly repeated, has adapted itself to fit popular racial ideology (Johnson & Johnson, 2014). Today, that racial ideology reflects a subconscious viewing of the world through a racial lens (Lee, 2013).

Comparing similar case studies, like Hurricane Katrina, and past social science literature supports the argument that news coverage of Ferguson used and continues to use racialized narratives to characterize Michael Brown, Darren Wilson, and the protests which followed the shooting and trial. The term Ferguson represents the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, MO on August 9, 2014 (Healy, 2014). While modern society rejects explicit racism, previous literature outlines the implicit ways it has embedded itself in everyday life and certainly in Ferguson.

Media, throughout history, has reflected the universality of Whiteness (Nakayama & Krisik, 1995) and consciously and subconsciously served to marginalize and oppress those whom are not White or do not assimilate to its culture. Past communication literature examines the subjective nature of media and its susceptibility to those who both produce it and those who consume it. Qualitative, quantitative, and rhetorical studies have identified racist bias

in the media and its manifestation in public perception. These findings provided grounds for the application of Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm to the recent and relevant *Ferguson*. The current study seeks to critically analyze the discourse in order to expose the recycled narrative, which have historically oppressed minorities and prove that it continues to be told, negatively impacting the lives of people of color in the U.S.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of literature traces this narrative back to the conception of communication itself. It provides historical context and past case studies to guide the application of a narrative criticism on Ferguson news coverage. Furthermore, the review of literature identifies the greater implications of this narrative, making it especially relevant for the current study.

### *Race, Strategic Rhetoric, and Mass Communication*

Before understanding how race operates in today's society one must understand its historical context. As Winston (1982) argued, "From its inception, the United States has been a society shaped by racial conflict" (p. 171). A variety of factors have contributed to this conflict, and continue to do so, many of which operate through discursive patterns. Examining the motive of a rhetor is critical to understanding the message, which in many cases reflects the dominant values of the given society. As identified by Lasswell (2007), that post-industrial revolution civilization ranks "power, wealth, respect, well-being, and enlightenment" (p. 221) amongst its key values. It is important to note that these may not necessarily be evenly distributed; a small concentration of a population often holds a disproportionate share of power and wealth (Lasswell, 2007). This most often occurs through the passing down of ownership through generations, causing a society to develop a hierarchical structure not conducive to social mobility (Lasswell, 2007). This, arguably, has occurred in the United States due to the centered nature of communication (Nakayama & Krizik, 1995). The birth of rhetoric emerged from a place of privilege, as its fathers, Plato and Aristotle, came from an elite class, unconcerned with discursive patterns of outsiders (Nakayama & Krizik, 1995). At its core, rhetoric favors whiteness, granting it "the position of an uninterrogated space" (p. 295). The authors use the spatial metaphor in order to demonstrate whiteness as a social construction which only operates according to its social location within the center (Nakayama & Krizik, 1995). Its central location also establishes its universality, where its invisibility manifests (Nakayama & Krizik, 1995). Whiteness hides within social institutions like the church, the school, the home, and the media, where its invisibility allows it to "influence everyday life" while "eluding analysis" (p. 293).

Past research identifies the crucial role of communication in the maintenance, and more importantly, destruction, of whiteness' occupation of the center. Winston (1982) focused on mass communication as an institution which perpetuates racial ideology. An older but landmark study, Winston's findings regarding our history of racial conflict and how we communicate about it in the public screen remains relevant today, as exemplified by Ferguson. Certain narratives had been constructed and reproduced in order to justify the blatant contradiction between slavery's presence and Whites' "incessant demand of freedom for themselves" (p. 171) and at the center of these narratives is normalized whiteness. Winston considered this the cause of what he refers to as a "double-consciousness" in which White America largely ignores the presence of Black people, while simultaneously confronting the issue of race through strategic denial. The production of mass media, especially of the visual nature, has coded how the public understands the world in a way which inaccurately reflects social reality (Winston, 1982) and instead a social reality defined by whiteness. It provides a "false sense of authenticity" (p. 173) evident in news coverage of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

While the events of Ferguson and Hurricane Katrina differ in content and context, the narrative which emerged and the nature of the news coverage share clear similarities. In drawing upon Winston's (1982) theory of the "double-consciousness" and loaded and coded imagery of visual media, reports surrounding Hurricane Katrina provide a platform to examine Ferguson. In coding for stereotypical portraits of Blacks in coverage of the natural disaster, Khale, Yu, and Whiteside (2007) examined photos printed in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *The Wall St. Journal* as they were publications with large audiences. Using two levels of coding schema, (the image itself and the individual depicted in the image) researchers looked for stereotypes of the violent Black male and the passive or lazy Black individual, as guided by previous literature (Khale, Yu, & Whiteside, 2007). Khale, Yu, and Whiteside described "the over-whelming disparity in which African-Americans were portrayed in active and passive activities and identified in active and passive roles is disturbing and only reinforces old racist stereotypes" (p. 86). The study found that Whites were consistently and overwhelmingly portrayed as savior or helper through extensive representation of White aid workers, volunteers, and military, supporting the belief that Black people are lazy and lack autonomy (Khale, Yu, & Whiteside, 2007). This stereotype also appeared in the portrayal of Blacks as looters and Whites as resisting the looters further reinforces the stereotype of Whites as

heroes and, in this case, Blacks as violent. This study provides grounds for my research by identifying and exposing the stereotypes perpetuated by the news media through analyzing the visual element of reporting a racialized event. The portrayal of Black people as looters is especially relevant in examining the coverage of the protests which followed the grand jury's failure to indict Wilson, as the events which ensued largely mirrored those in New Orleans despite differing in reason.

Khale, Yu, and Whiteside's (2007) findings prove even more disturbing when viewed in conjunction with the conclusions drawn in the literature surrounding the influence media has over public opinion and perception. Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987) found news commentary to have the most impact on changes in public opinion in their quantitative study, followed by experts and then presidents. Their study, however, measured effect of such factors on public opinion and left researchers to speculate why this proved to be the case. The researchers presented the idea that "broader influences", like bias and unanimity amongst the "U.S. media or elites generally" cause the influence (p. 39). Similarly, Winston (1982) identified a persuasive relationship between institutions (like the media), the messages they communicate to the public, and dominant ideology. But while Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey (1987) briefly touch on the possible role of bias and power in news influence, Winston argued that those on top of the hierarchical structure of the U.S. (or I should say at the center of communication) play a critical role in guiding media influence. Throughout the process of news production then, the portrayal of a topic and theme is susceptible to the bias of the producer, his or her boss, then his or her boss, and so on and so forth along each step of the way. Awareness of the subjectivity of news causes one to view coverage of sensitive topics of race and events like Hurricane Katrina and Ferguson from a critical perspective. A better understanding of the production process aids this critical perspective and also identifies the role communication plays in news influence.

### *The Process of News Production*

Over time, mass media paradigms have adjusted to social context and evolved from message transmission to legitimate communication between sender and receiver of a message (Scheufele, 1999). The interaction between the audience and the producers inhibits the effect that media messages have on public opinion as public opinion itself helps to construct the social reality in which we live and give meaning (Scheufele, 1999). Not to say that mass media does not also contribute to the construction of reality, but rather that "people's information processing and interpretation are influenced by preexisting meaning structures or schemas" (p. 105). While those meaning "structures and schemas" arguably "preexist" due to the central location of Whiteness, deciding which came first proves relatively unimportant. Currently, they share a reciprocal interaction illustrated through the process of framing as divided into two parts: the media frame and the individual frame (Scheufele, 1999).

**Framing.** Robert Entman (2007) defines framing as "the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation" (p. 164). Scheufele (1999) would categorize Entman's definition as media framing because it outlines how the producers of media organize and present social reality in a way that makes sense of inexplicable events. This phenomenon, inherent in the news process, functions to define the issue at hand, speculate on its origins, judge its morality, and propose solutions (Entman, 2007). This type of framing operates through priming, or the introduction of a topic and the establishment of its relative importance to the audience (Entman, 2007). Before this step in the framing process comes agenda setting or the determining of topics worthy of coverage: it highlights an issue, affecting judgments in the viewer and providing him or her with solutions to the issue (Entman, 2007). This process creates opportunity for bias through telling audiences what to think about. Entman (2007) explained:

Although the distinction between 'what to think' and 'what to think about' is not entirely clear, the former seems to mean what people decide, favor, or accept, whereas the latter refers to the considerations they 'think about' in coming to such conclusions. The distinction misleads because, short of physical coercion, all influence over 'what people think' derives from telling them 'what to think about'. If the media really are stunningly successful in telling people what to think about, they must also exert significant influence over what they think (p. 165).

His explanation of the interplay between framing, its elements, and bias support the notion that news media shapes the public's perceptions of reality. Just as media framing organizes fragments of an event into a logical narrative in order to make sense of those fragments, the individual frame represents the way the consumer organizes and understands that narrative against previously held beliefs or past experiences (Scheufele, 1999). The two frames blur the line between perception and reality, especially when taking into consideration the United States' history of holding racist ideology. Maurantonio (2014) examined how that interplay allowed for narratives which operated on stereotypes to become mythic in the news coverage of Rodney King's beating. This event showcases the reciprocal relationship between the media and individual frames as the narratives which emerged operated in an un-interrogated space.

**Development of narratives.** Like framing, the cultivation of a narrative depends on journalist's interpretations of the series of events (Maurantonio, 2014). Maurantonio uses the narratives about victim and hero which emerged surrounding Rodney King upon his death in 1992. Her findings suggest that the narratives about King constructed him as "hapless, helpless victim" of circumstance (p. 3). On the opposite end, narratives surrounding George Holliday's amateur video, which brought King's infamous 1991 beating to public attention, painted the citizen journalist as a hero (Maurantonio, 2014). These dynamics function to explain the confusing and inexplicable. She wrote, "It is the telling and retelling of stories that myths acquire their significance, allowing values and beliefs central to society to persist" (p. 4). Instead of attributing King's beating to institutional racism in the United States, journalists utilized circumstance and audience members accepted it as a logical explanation; King was simply at the wrong place at the wrong time (Maurantonio, 2014). The exact opposite occurred for Holliday and the role of journalism. The narrative served to legitimize journalism's place in history as savior, as opposed to Holliday simply being in the right place at the right time (Maurantonio, 2014). She explains that the two paradoxical narratives allowed for journalists to locate "King's life within existing narratives of civil rights history that largely strip black people of agency, placing the power to enact change within white hands" (p. 2). Similar reporting transpired in coverage of Hurricane Katrina, as previously stated, in examining the narratives, which emerged from photographic coverage.

In focusing on textual reports of Hurricane Katrina aftermath, the same narratives surface: White people as heroes and Black people as incompetent and violent. Lacy and Haspel (2011), however, delved into the meaning embedded in these narratives; their arguments echo Winston's (1982) idea of America's "double consciousness" and Nakayama and Krizik's (1995) theory of strategic rhetoric. They explained that the U.S. media news' portrayal of New Orleans as a "primitive swamp" taken over by "dangerous black brutes" that needed salvation from "large militaristic forces, harnessed by white paternalistic heroes" (p. 21) created perception ignorant of a reality that reflects "deep cultural fears" (p. 21). The fears mentioned by Lacy and Haspel (that our democratic government fail us when needed most and the nonexistence of the white savior) demonstrate the way in which media and individual framing often function: willful ignorance. In regards to this current analysis, willful ignorance adapts to the cultural climate in the denial and fear of race's influence on modern society and in the case of *Ferguson*. That denial and fear exists in modern racial ideology: that as a society, race no longer affects the different experiences we have.

#### *"Post-Race" U.S.*

There currently exists a belief within this country declaring that the United States "has already become a true color-blind nation" (Gallagher, 2003, p. 23). Past research has revealed that this especially true for White Americans who believe opportunity structure is open to all, regardless of their racial identification (Gallagher, 2003). This perspective, however, largely ignores the effects of history on today's present state. Race neutral, or the color blind idea, discourse, law, and solutions disregard the institutional power relations which have historically and consistently oppressed Black people in the United States (Briscoe, 2014) This paradigm utilizes traditional American values of individualism, universalism, egalitarianism, and meritocracy (Briscoe, 2014). Each of these values, however, serve to maintain the dominant narrative paradigm in which Whiteness represents the superlative in our culture (Briscoe, 2014).

This narrative, subject to time, space, and history, has changed to remain socially acceptable; discourses have changed but the imagery remains the same: "Negro as beast" (Brown & Johnson, 2014, p. 13). In our not so distant past, explicit and overt racism and the complete transparency of whiteness acted as the social norm. In fact, constructions of right versus wrong were studied based off of a binary framework in which the dominant class constructed Blackness "as the antithesis to the logical and rational citizen of the post-Enlightenment Europe" (p. 12). The repetition of this narrative, first through religion, and then through science, continues to be told through news coverage of crime (Brown & Johnson, 2014). Brown and Johnson explained that so much repetition confuses science and popular belief, normalizing "the racial hierarchies as a natural aspect of society" (p. 16).

In present day, "post-race" America, this narrative has taken the form of the Black male as dangerous, violent, and degenerate through overrepresentation of Blacks as criminals in the media. In the case of Trayvon Martin, "Racialized narratives are crucial to constructing and seeing the physicality of the Black male body... As one that conjures up the imaginings of terror, hatred, and 'Otherness'" (Johnson & Johnson, 2014, p. 26). Johnson and Johnson (2014) argued that, "the categories ascribed to Trayvon Martin, as someone who was a criminal, thug-like deviant teenager, are seldom used in social science research to represent White teens" (p. 29). Aside from the double standard in mediated discourse surrounding Black individuals, past research reveals statistical discrepancies in the quantity and nature of news reports versus reality.

In fact, the majority of crime news today over-represents Blacks as perpetrators and Whites as police officers (Dixon & Linz, 2000). This discourse emphasizes the deviant behavior of Black criminals as having harmful effects

on the dominant group (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Dixon and Linz's (2000) study found Blacks more likely than Whites to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime in the news and four times more likely not to be portrayed as officers. Their analysis of news coverage revealed that 37 percent of perpetrators on television were Black as compared to 18 percent White when in reality, crime statistics provided by the Los Angeles Police Department revealed that Blacks only commit 21 percent of those crimes and that Whites actually account for 28 percent of arrests. This discrepancy can be attributed to news gatherers' agenda setting strategies in focusing on crimes committed by minorities, specifically Black males and on media framing through production's choice to highlight that detail. As a counter to "post-race" America, scholars have identified a more accurate ideology inclusive of the many euphemisms which allow for stereotypes to persist: the more covert strategy labeled aversive racism.

### *Aversive Racism*

Aversive racism operates underneath the surface of a "post-race" society. The agenda setting bias towards the over-representation of Blacks as criminals can have detrimental, but hidden, effects on news shows' audiences. According to Gilliam and Iyengar (2000), crime reports follow a specific pattern or "script" and those witnessing the racialized script become more inclined to support capital punishment, mandatory sentencing, and other harsh solutions; as well as negative attitudes toward minorities. Their study presented three different "scripts" or narratives, in which they controlled the variable of race (one with a Black perpetrator, one with a White perpetrator, and one with no perpetrator), to three separate focus groups. After viewing the narrative, the participant was asked to recall the race of the perpetrator. Researchers found that participants were 70 percent more likely to recall the race of the Black perpetrator as compared to 64 percent who watched the script with the White perpetrator. Participants who watched the narrative with the White perpetrator were 50 percent less likely to recall having seen a subject at all. Lastly, those who watched the narrative with no perpetrator reported the non-existent perpetrator as Black 70 percent of the time (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). They conclude that, "Overall, the recall data validate the notion that the crime script is no mere journalistic device; instead, it is a powerful filter for observing daily events" (p. 564). This exemplifies the subconscious level by which we exhibit racism.

This study represents an example of aversive racism as identified by Cynthia Lee (2013) as implicit bias. She writes, "Implicit racial bias is unintended bias that operates without our conscious awareness" (p. 105). Specifically, parties involved in self-defense cases often don't realize how implicit racial bias influences their perception of reasonable fear and the actions that ensue as a result (Lee, 2013). The "post-race" ideology which dominates discourse about race in the United States allows for this bias to work its way into these cases discreetly and unknowingly (Lee, 2013).

Due to the assumption (whether conscious or subconscious) made by many in the U.S., judge, jury, and the public are more likely to deem a fatal act of self-defense against a Black male as justified and rational (Lee, 2013). Studies have shown that this tendency towards egalitarian principles favors White defendants over Black defendants, whereas acknowledging race as a factor influencing our behaviors establishes a more even playing field (Lee, 2013). This is exemplified by the attention paid to race by media activists and their success in achieving their goal of the arrest of Zimmerman. Implicit bias essentially sealed Trayvon Martin's fate the night as "it is unlikely that Zimmerman would have thought Martin was 'real suspicious', 'up to no good', and 'on drugs or something' if Martin had been White" (p. 111). The racial divide present in the debate regarding what took place the night Zimmerman fatally shot Martin in it of itself represents evidence that we have not yet transcended race as a society (Lee, 2013). While many claim that stereotypes do not alter their behavior or interactions, one cannot completely eliminate them from their knowledge structure. As racism has transitioned from explicit to implicit, it has become insidious and even more complex. A new debate regarding its existence has emerged and serves to legitimize those single-sided stories that uphold racist stereotypes.

## **METHODS**

Walter Fisher's (1984) narrative paradigm, as he described, "can be considered a dialectical synthesis of two traditional strands in the history of rhetoric: the argumentative, persuasive theme and the literary, aesthetic theme" (p. 2). Both aspects of the paradigm prove highly useful in the development and coverage of news stories. It acts less like a theory and more of a way in which one views the world (Fisher, 1984). He explained that we experience and understand the world as a series of narratives and base our beliefs in those stories rather than logic (Fisher, 1984). Therefore, narratives act as a powerful tool of persuasion for news programs. They can be used to highlight, support, and perpetuate a certain perspective. Scholars have applied this paradigm to news coverage of Trayvon Martin, Rodney King, and numerous other miscarriages of justice involving interracial conflict. Using this previous research, I argue that news coverage of *Ferguson* makes sense of the events following Brown's death and the grand

jury's decision to allow Wilson to walk free by constructing a narrative which utilizes and perpetuates stereotypes about Black people in the United States.

The events which make up the narrative of *Ferguson* have complicated the way we perceive the U.S. justice system and how we understand race in modern society. The death of Michael Brown acted as a catalyst for what should be mediated discourse about institutional racism, implicit bias, and police procedure reform in the public screen. News outlets, however, have developed a narrative which shifts public attention away from such a progressive, but complicated discussion, to one which coheres to a White social reality.

Fisher (1984) identifies the narrative paradigm as "a representation designed to formalize the structure of a component of experience and to direct understanding and inquiry into the nature and function of that experience – in this case, human communication" (p. 2). The reporting of news stories attempts to construct this representation whilst maintaining a certain level of sensationalism within the allotted time. From a rhetorical perspective then, these narratives "formalize the structure" strategically, through highlighting or trivializing certain details, the description and propositional framing of characters, and the development of the persona of the narrator. Through strategy, narratives gain persuasive appeal which proves less combative than traditional methods of persuasion, and in the case of *Ferguson*, more covert.

Foss (2009) identifies four characteristics which constitute a text as a narrative. First, there must be two events: active, or expressing action, and stative, expressing a state or condition. Second, the events must follow an order organized by time. This does not necessarily mean chronologically, as narratives often include flashbacks and flash-forwards, but rather that it acknowledges a sequence in which the events have a temporal relationship (Sellnow, 2014). Third, a contributing or causal relationship must exist between earlier and later events. An earlier event may act as a precursor necessary for a later event to have occurred or an earlier event may cause a later event as effect (Sellnow, 2014). Lastly, the text must unify events under one subject, constructing a beginning and end which makes sense. As opposed to listing events and characters, "the setting, the characters, and their actions must be connected in ways that together tell the story" (Sellnow, 2014, p. 53). These characteristics should function to provide a better understanding of an underlying issue or make an argument about the particular culture to which they belong. The mainstream news' construction of the *Ferguson* narrative fails to expose underlying issues of police brutality and aversive racism and makes an argument which undermines Black issues in U.S. culture. In possessing the four required characteristics identified by Foss (2009), the *Ferguson* narrative exemplifies the strategic nature of the narrative paradigm.

In this essay, a textual evaluation of CBS news coverage of *Ferguson* following the shooting of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson and then, also, following the Federal Grand Jury's dismissal of Wilson's indictment first constructs a narrative and then reveals its implications. CBS provided the largest quantity of archived shows which reported on *Ferguson* in the week following the shooting (August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014) and the week following the Grand Jury decision (November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014 – November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014). These transcripts include accounts from key characters of the narrative, including but not limited to: the Chief of Police in Ferguson Tom Jackson, Missouri Highway State Patrol officer Ron Johnson, friend of Brown and eye witness to the shooting Dorian Johnson, Brown's parents, members of the Ferguson community, and protestors. This essay examines the strategies used by CBS in highlighting certain events over others, the language used to describe said events, and the portrayal and agency of the main characters and how these strategies interact to construct a narrative which perpetuates racist stereotypes in the U.S.

## RESULTS

The CBS news coverage of *Ferguson* constructed a narrative which contains the four characteristics as identified by Foss (2009). Two components comprised the narrative: the actual shooting of Brown by Wilson on August 9, 2014 and the events which transpired upon the shooting becoming public knowledge. The narrative mainly formalized the latter of the two components, placing the shooting itself as a pretext. CBS journalists described active and stative events, organized the events in a manner which acknowledges and makes sense in the given time frame, identified causal and contributory relationships between events, and remained consistent with one unified subject. The results of the examination of the text at hand, however, revealed subjectivity in what CBS News chooses to include or exclude in each of the four characteristics, granting the narrative persuasive appeal. Purposefully and strategically, the narrative attempted to maintain a social order which, inadvertently, privileges White communities by trivializing Black issues. Through demographic information, selective interviews and quotes, and the creation of fear CBS placed trust and principle in the U.S. justice system while portraying those calling it into question as destructive, disruptive, and violent.

### *Protester Demographics*

Of all the news programs on CBS included in the transcripts, not one explicitly stated the race of the majority of the protesters. Instead, journalists implied that mostly Black people protested through discourse about demographics of the local area, social media use, and Black Friday sales. This granted journalists freedom in developing the persona of the protesters in a way that draws from stereotypes without coming across as overtly racist. The association made the terms protester, looter, shooter, and arsonist synonymous with Black protester, Black looter, Black shooter, or Black arsonist. This not only perpetuated negative stereotypes of Blacks but also made the issue one solely important to Black people.

**Ferguson demographics.** Reporters first introduced this association in describing the demographics of the community in which the shooting took place: the St. Louis, MO suburb of Ferguson. Reporter Marlie Hall described the neighborhood as “predominantly black” (2014, August 11, para. 10). This developed the setting of where the shooting took place and where many of the protests were to begin taking place in the days that followed. CBS reporters even further developed the setting for the narrative by revealing the demographics of Ferguson’s police force. Reporter Dean Reynolds claims that the relationship between “the almost all-white police force in this largely black community” had not been a concern prior to Brown’s death (Pelley & Reynolds, 2014, August 12, para. 9). Reporter Mark Strassmann explained that the Ferguson Mayor James Knowles III had never believed a racial divide existed in the community but that recruiting more police officers of color may improve the tensions; as of the 2010 census, “about two-thirds of Ferguson’s population is black, but just three of the fifty-three members of the town’s police department are black” (Strassmann, 2014, August 13, para. 9). Acknowledging the fact that diversifying the police force might improve the so-called “new” racial divide allowed for the Mayor to save face in wake of the current controversy. Furthermore, it deflected the issue at hand by portraying it as purely emotional; the shooting of Brown, in this way, represented the sole cause of anger and frustration amongst protesters.

These statistics, in accordance with precursors made by reporters that there had not previously been contempt between community members and the police force, operate on two levels. First, it manipulates the cause the community protests. By emphasizing the fact that before Wilson killed Brown, the relationship between police and the community had been functional portrays protester’s actions as impulsive while condoning the actions of Wilson. In denying an already present racial divide, Wilson appears more credible and his decision to use deadly force as justified and not a civil rights violation.

**Social media demographics.** On a second level, it further develops the setting and characters in the narrative. Emphasizing the racial demographics of the community and the police force presents the story as a Black versus White conflict to the audience. This setting remains consistent throughout coverage as the reporters use demographics of social media usage and Black Friday sales to maintain the parallel between Black people and protesters. As the protests began to increase following the shooting, *CBS Evening News* invited a specialist to discuss the impact of social media on protests. The discourse focused on the disparity in social media usage in which, “Six percent more African-Americans aged eighteen to twenty-nine use social media than whites, twelve percent more with Twitter alone” (Pelley & Axelrod, 2014, August 14, para. 7). This segment expanded the physical setting while maintaining the racial divide.

**Consumer demographics.** As the narrative progressed, CBS news seized another opportunity to utilize demographics following the grand jury decision not to indict Wilson. When supporters focused their attention to boycotting corporate businesses on Black Friday, reporters cited that “the buying power of African-Americans is estimated to be about one trillion dollars a year” (Duthiers, 2014, November 28, para. 11). This news segment discussed the logic behind organizers’ plan but concluded with the negative impact it might have on the nation’s economy and White businesses, placing the blame on the Black activists. In the same segment, reporter Vladimir Duthiers states, “Activists took to social media and urged people to use the power of their pocket books to direct their holiday shopping exclusively to black owned businesses” (para. 9). In this statement, the news further polarizes the issue at hand by placing blame on activists for the damage this may cause the nation’s economy and disregarding any purpose behind it.

On one hand, presenting the issue as one only affecting the Black community could potentially contribute to activists’ cause through illustrating a social reality distinct from that of most White people. The problem preventing such an effect, however, lies in the rest of the narrative constructed by CBS. Equating Black with protests and protesters through the use of demographics granted journalists a freedom in their depictions of the characters and events that perpetuates a narrative as old as the country; which depicts Blacks as dangerous and destructive and Whites as protectors and saviors.

#### *Interviews and Quotations*

After establishing the lines of color to illustrate the narrative, CBS perpetuated stereotypes about Black people through granting certain individuals more speaking power, interview segues, and recycled quotations from Brown’s

parents. Ideally, interviews and quotations provide the audience with more perspectives to interpret the narrative. The reporters' influence on this development, however, focused on a relationship where protests caused the destruction of the city rather than one which connects Brown's death to uncivil treatment of Black citizens and the purpose behind the movement.

**Protester interviews.** CBS's coverage of *Ferguson* included more in-depth interviews with government officials, police officers, business owners, and non-participating residents than with those participating in the protests. These interviews rarely touched on the cause of the protests and almost exclusively revolved around the nature of protests themselves. The interviews with protesters often consisted of a single comment made by a nameless individual. For those who received more air-time, preludes before and conclusions following their comments, along with the actual interview content, compromised their accounts in referencing violence and destruction the protests had caused. The *CBS Morning News* segment on August 14, 2014 included the most interviews with protesters exemplifies this strategy. Reporter Julian Johnson narrated, "The march meant to show support for eighteen-year-old Mike Brown and the ongoing push for justice in his case. But with some protesters there peacefully and others focused on disruption by blocking traffic and sitting in the road" (para. 16). He asks a protester, "Do you think some of those protesters go out there with the intent and they're trying to provoke police?" (para. 18), to which the protester responds, "Absolutely" (Man #2, para. 19). Despite acknowledging the intent of the march, attention immediately shifted to agitators whom seemingly have an empty goal of pure chaos and blatant subversion of the law.

**Brown's Parents.** Reporters consistently shifted the focus of the news covering *Ferguson* to these types of protests not only through their framing of interviews with protestors, but also through the quotes they provided from Brown's parents. Brown's parents inadvertently acted as the face of a largely leaderless movement, yet the quotes included in the news broadcast rarely focused on justice for their son. Instead, they highlighted those calling for peaceful protests. On August 12, 2014, after a night of "unrest", "despite calls for calm from Brown's parents" (Green & Villafranca, 2014, para. 2), *CBS Morning News* quoted Michael Brown Sr, "I don't want no violence. We don't want no violence" (para. 3), followed by Brown's mother Leslie McSpadden, "Because Michael wouldn't want no violence" (para. 4). Villafranca described these quotes as "The Brown's plea" (para. 5). The same day, *CBS Evening News* included an interview with McSpadden discussing Brown's death but concludes it with, "Michael Brown's mother also told us she is deeply concerned about the violence that has come after her son's death, saying she feels caught between the protesters and the police" (Pelley & Reynolds, 2014, August 12, para. 18). During these news segments, reporters focused on the protests and the damage they've caused, rather than discussing their purpose.

**Authority figures.** Instead of providing protesters a platform to share their side of the story to construct a well-rounded narrative, CBS reporters granted speaking power to individuals in positions of authority like Ferguson's Mayor, the Missouri Police Chief and the Ferguson Police Chief.

Tom Jackson, Chief of the Ferguson Police Department, controlled the story that the public heard and did so in a way that protected the persona of Officer Wilson. He often used passive voice in describing the altercation between Wilson and Brown, "There was a struggle inside the officer's car and then there was an additional struggle outside of the car" (Jackson, 2014, August 12, para. 11). This description allowed for the audience to draw its own conclusions about who initiated and continued the "struggle". Jackson's access to the press provided more opportunity to influence audience perception of how to interpret that struggle. Upon the release of Wilson's identity to the public on August 15, 2014, Scott Pelley reported that "The Ferguson Police Chief described him today as a gentle, quiet man, and excellent officer" (para. 7). In the same segment, Jackson himself told reporters, "It's devastating, absolutely devastating. He-- he never intended for any of this to happen" (para. 20) in reference to Officer Wilson. Here, he victimized Wilson, guiding the audience even more towards the conclusion that Brown instigated the struggle and gave Wilson reason to use deadly force. Similar to the majority of the interviews with protesters, interviews with authority figures also focused on the "looting", "shooting", and "rioting" which symbolized the protests.

"He told me that he was going to try and urge the community to not take out their frustrations on community businesses, on the establishments that service the neighborhoods here, but clearly that has gone unheeded as far as last night was concerned" (Duthiers, 2014, August 16, para. 4). In reference to Missouri Highway State Patrol officer Captain Ron Johnson, this quote exemplifies the many from law enforcement and government officials used by CBS and denigrating the protesters. Further characterizing protesters as destructive and violent are more frequent, more detailed interviews with business owners and residents who choose not to participate in the protests. These interview strategies not only shift focus away from the cause which activists protested, but simultaneously strips them of validity in the news program's construction of stative and active events. They developed a state of



fear in Ferguson caused by the actions of the protesters by disregarding the stories of protesters and highlighting stories of innocent business owners and heroic police officers.

### *The Creation of Fear*

Aside from interviews focusing on the damage caused by protests and granted speaking power only to authority figures and business owners, reporters used a variety of other factors to establish the stative and active events previously mentioned. The news granted precedence to the most sensational, violent protests over peaceful ones, highlighted the damage and disruption caused by protests, and characterized the actions of government officials and police officers as, not only provoked and justified, but heroic. This contributed to the construction of a narrative that completely undermines the purpose of the protests it describes, and instead, attempts to maintain trust in the justice system and order in the streets.

**A volcano ready to erupt.** Reporters describe the streets of Ferguson as anarchic and dangerous, straddling “a thin line between peaceful protests and chaos” (Johnson, 2014, August 14, para. 22). The news either introduces reports of peaceful demonstrations with scenes of citizens, business owners and authority figures preparing for violent protests which inevitably await; or follow reports of peaceful demonstrations with imagery and statistics of protests which resulted in arrests, shooting, looting, vandalism, or arson. Journalists consistently avoid discussion of the catalysts for these types of actions by focusing more on the damage that remained in their wake. Particularly evident in the first coverage of *Ferguson* following the original protest after Brown’s death, “The St. Louis suburb erupted in violence overnight following a vigil for an unarmed black teenager who was shot and killed by police” (Hall, 2014, August 11, para. 7); and following grand jury decision on November 25, 2014: “Well, violence erupted in Ferguson, Missouri, overnight. The trouble began soon after it was announced a grand jury did not indict white police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of black teenager Michael Brown”, Green continued, “At least a dozen buildings and cars were set on fire. There was gunfire and looting” (para. 11). The use of the word “erupted” compares the protesters to a volcano, stripping their cause of salience by portraying their actions as impulsive, emotional, and inevitable, regardless of the outcome.

Much of the news coverage focused on steps taken to mitigate the “eruption” of the volcano. In a segment on August 13, 2014, reporter Mark Strassmann visits the Metro Shooting store to discuss increased gun sales with its owner, Steve King. He reportedly sells five guns a day, but sold thirty the day before the interview. King explained, “One hundred percent of the people purchasing firearms in the last two days have been buying them for defensive purposes,” (para. 3). He continued, “They’re afraid of the rioting. They’re afraid of the looting. They’re afraid of personal injury to themselves or their family. They’re afraid that something’s going to happen” (para. 5). This segment reported looting, rioting, and violence that had not even occurred. Furthermore, when protests did not “erupt” into violence, reporters maintained the metaphor through statements like, “The tension could be felt during a peaceful demonstration of Ferguson’s streets earlier on Wednesday” (Green, 2014, August 14, para. 8). Instead of taking the opportunity to highlight a demonstration that resulted in no violence, reporters perpetuated the fear in the community and the audience members.

Coverage of the wake of an “eruption” typically provided highly sensational details that left blanks for audience members to fill in. For example, “Local officials report widespread property damage” (Hall, 2014, August 11, para. 7), “Looting, burning, and thirty-two arrests” (Reynolds, 2014, August 11, para. 11), “At least a dozen buildings and cars were set on fire. There was gunfire and looting” (Green, 2014, November 25, para. 11), “A squad car was set on fire. And pepper spray was deployed to stop the vandalism” (Duthiers, 2014, November 26, para. 3), and numerous other instances in which reporters passively describe events in a way which does not hold police officers accountable for their actions during the “eruptions”. This metaphor further develops the setting and characterizes the protesters as senseless, violent, and dangerous. Protesters represent a group from which the public needs protection, therefore making law enforcement and the government the saviors in the narrative.

**Government and law enforcement as savior.** The CBS news narrative of *Ferguson* establishes the police officers, the Ferguson mayor, and the Missouri governor as characters protecting and uplifting the community. The chaos caused by protesters required the control and security of law enforcement. This characterization completely undermines the purpose of the protests: re-evaluation and reform of the U.S. justice system. Besides their passive role in the description of consequences of unruly demonstrations, reporters use a variety of other methods to further advance this portrait in implicit and explicit ways.

The extensive reports victimize business owners in the location of the protests and opened a window for the government to display its ability to protect and serve the community.

Just before a press conference in which he assured the community that order would remain, Missouri Governor Jay Nixon met with local business owners along West Florissant Avenue, the location “of some of the most violent clashes in early days after Michael Brown’s death” (Miller, 2014, November 24, para. 2). After visiting Charles

Davis' burger shop, Davis told the reporter, "I just took that he was being concerned. He came by to make sure we were okay" (2014, November 24, para. 8). This coverage depicted Governor Nixon as caring for the people of his community despite no reports of him interacting with protesters. While no news coverage reported Nixon taking action to meet the requests of protestors, CBS programs did identify the actions he took to rescue the business owners who lost their stores to looting and arson. After interviewing a business owner who "lost her life savings when her antique store was burned to the ground" (2014, November 28, para. 7), Duthiers reported that the governor "announced more than six hundred thousand dollars in zero-interest loans will be made available to businesses to help them get back on their feet" (para. 11). This report expanded the depiction of the governor as savior by identifying and praising the specific actions taken to help the innocent and uninvolved members of the community. By making business owners victims, the government their savior from the blindly violent protesters, they remained consistent in their characterization by rendering law enforcement as protector.

In more descriptive accounts of violent protests, reporters described the activists as instigators wreaking havoc on the city using words like looting, vandalism, arson, and shooting to give reason for police presence and justification for the use of military style tactics.

The protests represented the cause for excessive force and violence; police officers' actions being justified reactions to provocation. For example, "Young people through rocks and police responded with rubber bullets and tear gas" (Reynolds, 2014, August 12, para. 3). In fact, the only time in which a CBS program acknowledged police force as excessive, unnecessary, and unjustified, is after two journalists from different news sources (*The Huffington Post* and *The Washington Post*) experienced and videotaped their own arrests which took place in a local McDonald's (Green & Johnson, 2014, August 14). While Ryan Reily described the altercation as, "antagonistic and unnecessary" and that it "escalated the situation more than protected anyone" (2014, August 14, para. 31) and both alternative news source statements followed similar sentiment, CBS reporters failed to comment on any foul play on behalf of the officers. Had those journalists been protesting, they likely would not have received airtime. In all but that one description of the behaviors of the police force, reporters identified protesters behavior justifying police response. This made the officers the protectors of the community from the hostile and ruinous protesters.

The narrative constructed by this the CBS news network used strategic demographic information, selective interviews and quotes, and the development of fear through the setting, characters, and causal relationship between protests and police presence in order shift focus away from flaws in the United States justice system. This narrative trivialized and distracted from the purpose of protests through the negative stereotypes which it simultaneously utilized and perpetuated.

## DISCUSSION

Past research shows that the news media largely dictates our perceptions of the world (Besley, 2008) and that this institution has perpetuated racist ideology since the conception of the nation (Winston, 1982). Whiteness exists at the center of this rhetoric, making it invisible and therefore universal (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). The superlative placement of Whiteness causes institutions to use a variety of strategies in order to maintain that social order, one of which being a narrative which largely oppresses Black people in the U.S. while simultaneously confronting the issue of race through strategic denial. News media used this tactic in coverage of numerous racially divided issues, beginning with slavery and then Jim Crow laws and has adjusted itself to fit contemporary standards in coverage of Hurricane Katrina, the beating of Rodney King, local news crime reports, and the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, as outlined in the literature review. In regards to the text at hand, the narrative has remained true to its pattern.

CBS news coverage of the fatal shooting of Black, unarmed teenager Michael Brown by White police officer Darren Wilson and the protests which ensued following his death and the grand jury decision not to indict his killer attempts to make sense of these events through the construction of a narrative. This narrative employs stereotypes about Black people in order to dismiss the issues which threaten the social order that places Whiteness at the center.

By using demographic statistics to make the numerous titles given to those who object the shooting of Brown and the grand jury decision (protester, activist, demonstrator, organizer, looter, shooter, etc.) synonymous with Black, the news programs had great leeway in their descriptions. Reporters could portray them free from the risk of coming across as racist. Furthermore, it also divided the issue in presenting it as only important to the Black community and therefore allowing reporters to rank it as less important.

Reporters crafted the narrative through the setting, characters, and the relationship between earlier and later events, each aspect contributing to the other. CBS provided limited airtime and granted little speaking power to protesters to explore the cause what motivates and unites them. Instead, reporters allowed every other character a platform to explore the protestor's cause, making it more about sheer destruction than police reform or institutional racism. In regards to developing the setting and characters, the protesters and their movement are being developed

by non-protesting characters like business owners, local residents, and authority figures. Their depiction of the movement and those involved draws from stereotypes which villainize Blacks as violent and destructive. This strips their protest and them of credibility, especially important in their fight for justice and the telling of their side of the story. Instead, CBS grants credibility to figures of authority. Interviews with the police chief, Tom Jackson, allow for him to speak on what transpired between Brown and Wilson as well as granting him uninterrupted access to develop the innocent and even “gentle” persona of Wilson. His description, using passive language, leaves room for audience members to attach actions to either Brown or Wilson and presents the opportunity for implicit bias. Given the characterization of Black people in this news story alone, audience members are more inclined to assume Brown to be guilty and Wilson to be justified in his fear for his life and subsequent killing of a young Black man.

The narrative of *Ferguson* made the shooting a pretext for understanding the events which followed. While a necessary event, the causal relationships existed primarily between events which took place after Brown’s death. The organization of these events contributed to defaming the protests and protesters. In CBS news reports, the protests caused devastation in the city; they destroyed properties, disrupted everyday life in Ferguson, and provoked officers to take extreme measures to keep the rioting, looting, shooting, vandalism, and arson under control. Instead of detailing the cause for the frustration and anger felt by protesters by questioning the role of police and government in the lives of Black citizens in the U.S., CBS programs constructed a state of fear in Ferguson which did the exact opposite: placed police officers and the government as the protectors and saviors of the community.

By focusing viewer attention on negative depictions of protests and protesters, the media deprived the movement of any influence or credibility. CBS exploited adverse stereotypes of Black people in order to support the narrative it presented in attempts to make sense of an event which challenged what traditionally goes unquestioned. CBS’s narrative sent messages that contradicted and devalued the goal and purpose of the movement in order to restore the trust and credence the public has in its law enforcement and justice system.

## LIMITATIONS

Textual news transcripts proved to be the most consistently accessible and available medium of news coverage. This artifact, however, lacked one revealing and insightful component: vision. The major limitation to this study was the absence of the visual component to go along with the textual. Kahle, Yu, and Whiteside’s (2007) study proved that images selected by media sources contribute as much as verbal discourse does in the construction of a narrative. Without the visual element, the researcher could not judge the nonverbal aspects of communication displayed by reporters, the images of the Ferguson community and the protests used in accordance with reporter descriptions, or the races of those not participating in protests. This would have been valuable information for the purpose of this study as it would have further contributed to the development of the setting and characters in the CBS news narrative of *Ferguson*. In conjunction with this limitation, future research could perform a narrative criticism of the images that the current study’s artifact lacks. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the narrative presented by CBS.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would not have been possible without the support and help of Dr. Kate Lavelle. I would like to thank Dr. Lavelle for her guidance and patience in every step of the process. I would also like to thank my friends and family who encouraged me and believed in my capabilities even when I did not.

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