

Media Coverage of the 1989 Central Park Jogger Case

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Abstract: *This article offers an analysis of journalistic coverage of the 1989 Central Park Jogger case - a case that ultimately saw five teenagers accused and wrongly convicted of attacking a woman in New York's Central Park. It is primarily concerned with the construction of racial stereotypes in mainstream media outlets, and the role of such reporting practices in shaping public discourse. Ultimately, the article considers the concept of 'associative priming' in relation to this case - i.e. the idea that when specific thoughts or beliefs are brought to mind, they shape and influence how readers interpret the information they encounter. The original version of this article was submitted as an essay for the CM391 'Race and the Media' module.*

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"The phone lines to this newspaper are busy with people screaming, "Call the case for what it is. Black savages rape white girl." No one is even making an attempt to mask their racism"
- Daily News (cited in Lichter et al, 1989, p.7)

"If you looked at a video tape of the lives of each of these kids, this wouldn't be the first time they had done something like this"
- New York Post (cited in Duru, 2004, p.1353)

Antron McCray, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam and Kharey Wise were granted a \$41m settlement from the New York Law Department in 2014 in response to the 25 years of injustice and public scrutiny they, the Central Park Five, faced following the 'Central Park Jogger Case' in 1989 (Stratton, 2015). The five men, once the five boys from East Harlem New York, were wrongfully convicted of raping and brutally attacking a white woman in Central Park in April of 1989. The boys aged fourteen through sixteen were convicted on little evidence, only that of video-taped confessions, which were found to have been coerced as a heavy amount of circumstantial evidence was forced upon them by investigators (Duru, 2004). They each served between 5-13 years in prison for a crime they did not commit, until they were exonerated in 2002 after Matias Reyes, the real assailant, confessed to the rape of the Central Park jogger. At the time, the case received extensive media coverage and the narrative was framed in a particular way by journalists. Some believe that it was the white female victim versus the black male attacker that caused the media to become so engrossed with the case (Stratton, 2015). However, an analysis of the media at the time found there was an overt effort to diffuse the racial narrative, with race mainly being discussed to deny its relevance to the crime (Lichter et al, 1989). From the quotes above, we can conclude that it was not that simple. This article provides an analysis of media coverage of the 1989 Central Park Jogger case to determine how the racial representation of the 'five' in the press played a central role in their public condemnation and wrongful conviction.

It is the responsibility of news media to cover crime and as they report on criminal incidents a mediated public narrative is created that helps establish a particular public consensus (Stratton, 2015). Public perceptions of crime are shaped by the high-profile cases that attract a surge of media attention, but this reporting of high-profile cases can create an echo-chamber that justifies the attention in the media based on the high level of public-interest. The media have the ability to shape public consciousness even before all the facts have been gathered (ibid). This is what occurred in the

Central Park Jogger case. The preference of journalists to report on certain 'shocking crimes' is purposeful, playing to public anxieties and presenting these events as part of larger social problems (Stratton, 2015). Media images do not capture the world/society in its entirety, but rather frame it in a certain way that is more "communicable to audiences" (Siapera, 2010, p.117). The representations present in the coverage of the Central Park Jogger case contained specific frames chosen by media outlets that molded public interpretation.

The media coverage in the two weeks following the attack was often excessive, emotionally intense and highly sensationalized. Lichter et al. (1989) used content analysis to examine the coverage from a total of "406 news items in New York's four daily newspapers, the weekly *Amsterdam News*, and evening newscasts of the city's six television stations" (p.1). Their study showed a sharp contrast between the coverage of different media outlets. For example, *The New York Post* had the most coverage and the most emotional language. It took an entirely tabloid approach to the case and proved the most controversial, playing to public anger and demanding severe punishment; *The New York Times'* coverage was analytical and conceptual, quoting the most "experts" with reference to the attack. It had the least coverage, steered away from sensationalism and covered the incident as a regular crime story. Meanwhile, *The Amsterdam News*, a newspaper that is mainly aimed at the city's black community, was the main outlet to focus on the crime through a "prism of racial consciousness" (Lichter et al., 1989, p.16), leading in the number of references to racial bias in the media coverage. Although these are only three examples, media across the board seemed conflicted by the desire to avoid raising social and racial issues with the desire to express their own and the public's strong opinions regarding the crime (ibid). There was a certain sensitivity when it came to discussing race. The study discovered that no media coverage was overtly racist, with 80% of coverage that mentioned race merely denying that it had any relevance to the attack. When race was mentioned, the view with the most coverage was the fear that the case would worsen relations between the white and black communities of the city. In the *Post* a black teenager was quoted: "All blacks shouldn't be painted with the same brush" (ibid, 1989, p.8). The fear of stereotyping was prominent. *The Amsterdam News* was the outlet to most commonly mention race. They constantly compared the jogger case to other interracial crimes identifying a racial bias in the coverage of a black-on-white crime in comparison to black-on-black/white-on-black crimes. However, following this point, Lichter et al. found that very few news stories mentioned the race of the suspects or victim at all. Including written words and pictures, three out of four news items contained no information of racial background. With the absence of direct racial descriptions, why does this case prove so racially controversial? Ultimately, it isn't about what was or was not said in the media, but how it was said, and how a certain image framed by the press influenced public perception. The most troubling aspect of the coverage, and what is later suggested as having contributed to the wrongful conviction of the Five, was the negative and emotionally charged language used to describe the suspects.

Before analysing the language used by the media, we must first look to where specific words and representations get their meaning. The function of representation is not the simple reproduction of problematic or racist images and discourse, but rather it has to be seen as a "condensed form of the symbolic value of cultural difference" that circulates through many channels (Siapera, 2010, p.112). To understand the media representations of those of cultural difference, in this case the 'race' of the Five, we must look to semiology. Semiology focuses on the interplay between words and meaning (ibid). In semiology, meaning emerges as a result of a cultural and historical accumulation of signs (something that stands for something other than itself). The understanding of the ideological role of signs shows the performance of systems of representation. The presence of representations always conveys something beyond what is immediately recognized (Siapera, 2010). This is the level of 'myth' which makes things appear as unquestionable truths. Media representations of cultural difference can be understood as the assemblance of signs which are then linked to certain myths surrounding this difference. Duru examines the Central Park Jogger case by contextualizing it in view

of a myth that is deeply rooted in American culture: “that black men are animalistic, sexually unrestrained, inherently criminal and ultimately bent on rape” (2004, p.1320). This is otherwise known as the ‘myth of the Bestial Black Man’ (ibid, p. 1315).

As early as the 1600’s, black people in Africa were described as animalistic by white Europeans. They were referred to as being similar to or deriving from apes, described as being “men with tails” (ibid, p.1321). In addition to this animal imagery, European observers depicted them as sexually potent creatures with deeply ingrained criminality. The institution of slavery only furthered this stereotype and reinforced bestiality. Moreover, as Duru advances, slaves existed outside of culture and were nonhuman, criminals in their very existence. To the white mind, black slaves were thought of as animals, sexually predatory, criminal and an overall ubiquitous threat. Thus, the myth of the ‘Bestial Black Man’ was born into American culture. Reality never supported the myth, and although the rape of white women by black men in the past was rare, the stereotype persisted, even after the abolishment of slavery in 1865. The Bestial Black Man and his supposed potent sexuality became the central target of the lynching phenomenon, murdered not always because of his guilt but merely because of the colour of his skin and all that it signified (ibid). Racism is deeply rooted in American history where there is a certain significance attached to one’s race. In a contemporary society, such racial discrimination is unacceptable, but the myth of the Bestial Black Man endures, although much more subtly than in the past. We can clearly identify this myth in the Central Park Jogger case. The media’s representation of race is an accumulation of the signs associated with coloured skin that has been repeated with such frequency throughout history that it takes on an inevitable truth; this truth being linked to the myth of the Bestial Black Man. This can most remarkably be observed in the language used in 1989 to describe the boys in the media.

The ‘five’ were described using negative language a total of 390 times, with 185 of these descriptions being of an animalistic nature such as “wolf-pack”, “pack”, “herd” (Lichter et al., 1989, p.1). For example, a Daily News editorial stated: “There was a full moon Wednesday night. A suitable backdrop for the howling wolves” (ibid, p.10). In folklore, the full moon prompts the mystical werewolf, a creature of complete savagery, where killing, maiming and attacking are part of his nature (Duru, 2004). The teenagers were represented as savage, sub-human individuals. The language further alluded to criminality (“thugs”, “gangs”), aggressiveness (“war party”, “wilding”) and colourful terminology (“wild-eyed teens”, “faceless tumor mass”) (Lichter et al., 1989, p.1). The sensationalist language impacted public consciousness even before all the facts of the case were gathered. There was a subsequent rush to judgment based on the very mention of a black man’s involvement. Research has shown that African American men are more likely to be shown as criminal suspects in the media than white men and are more likely to be depicted in a violent and threatening way (Oliver, 2003). The public accepts these unfounded criminal allegations with ease as a result of the racial bias that is deeply embedded within their history and culture.

An important issue is concerned with what people/audiences do with these words that perform such racist representations. Walter Lippmann spoke of the mental “pictures in our heads” and how these images are simplified versions of generalized abstractions passed down to us and repeated through our culture (cited in Siapera, 2010, p.113). Because the image of black men as animalistic and criminal has been repeated through time, it becomes so pervasive that it is resistant to change. Lippman coined the term ‘stereotype’ as a denotation of these rigid and repetitive images we have in our minds (ibid.). Media representations can then induce such racial stereotypes in the minds of audiences. When thoughts or beliefs are brought to mind, they play a role in the interpretation of information that is encountered. This is known as ‘associative priming’, a theoretical orientation that has led research into the effects of crime portrayals in the media (Oliver, 2003). This research examined how exposure to certain types of crime stories (for example, the over-representation of black men as being violent) affected the understanding and judgment of audiences

in subsequent circumstances. When audiences already have a stereotype (the violent/animalistic black male) as part of their cognitive formation, any exposure to violent crime in the media is enough to call this negative stereotype to mind (ibid.). In other words, media representations can contain specific frames that guide an individual's interpretation of what is true.

The New York media framed the story of the five teenage boys in such a way that reflected deep seeded stereotypes. One could argue that audiences are passive to racist representations even with a new active audience paradigm (Siapera, 2010). However, people will believe racist media representations that coincide with their existing beliefs. We know, from the allusions of the mythic 'Bestial Black Man' and the "pictures in our head", that the image of black men in society and in the media have a historically negative connotation (ibid, p.113). The Five fell victim to the stereotypes planted deep within the minds of journalists, editors, the public, the police and a jury. Court decisions are unavoidably influenced by the perceptions of society (Duru, 2004), and understanding the media coverage of the case before their wrongful conviction is crucial to grasping how certain myths and pervasive stereotypes impact the judicial process.

The 'five' were guilty before trial in the eyes of the media and the public. One of them, Yusef Salaam, said in an interview after his exoneration that "people of colour were culpable without giving them the benefit of assumed innocence" (cited in Shoaib and Goldblum, 2019, para. 5). The media framed the narrative around the five teenagers in such a way that their innocence was rejected on the basis of their membership to the black community. To deny the relevance of race in their wrongful conviction would, at best, be naïve.

"This is another example of the fact that in this society, the press, the police, district attorney and religious leaders consider white life at a far greater value than black life"- Father Lawrence Lucas in the Amsterdam News May 6th, 1989 (Lichter et al., 1989, p.9). It is clear that racial prejudice was prominent in the media 30 years ago, but we would be foolish to think that times have changed such that a reference like this could not be found in a newspaper today. Could such a grave injustice take place in American society today? One must only look to the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement to find an answer to this question.

Word count: 2,367 words (excluding abstract, keywords and references)

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