

THE LESSONS LEARNED FROM MEDIA COVERAGE  
OF RACIAL UNREST IN FERGUSON, MISSOURI

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## ABSTRACT

The idea of media representation of ethnic minorities has been an issue that journalists face for centuries. There has been a recent demand for more representative journalism and more diversity in the newsroom to increase the amount of perspectives shown. This paper investigates the Ferguson riots, how journalists covered the event and what they can do to improve coverage of racial riots (a public outbreak of violence between two different ethnic groups, whether the violence be to physical property or to other people) to create a more nuanced and representative picture.

Through the analyses of online news articles reporting on the riots in Ferguson and a series of interviews conducted with reporters who were on the ground in Ferguson, some common themes to improve the representation of ethnic minorities emerge: Simply do not “parachute” in to the scene, but rather get to know the community you are reporting on. Do not rely on only government officials to tell the story. Lastly, do not take the riots at face value; gather information and data to create some context surrounding the events.

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## INTRODUCTION

*It started as a St. Louis story but it quickly became an international news story.*

*(Omar Villafranca of CBS News, telephone conversation with author, December 14, 2016.)*

Most people rely on media to help make sense of their personal world.<sup>1</sup> How does this event affect me? What does it mean for this event to be happening now, rather than later?

The way news media is structured allows for frames to take hold that tell the audience what is important, whom to listen to and how to react to stories.<sup>2</sup> The structure of media is critical in producing and distributing stereotypes that simplify people's environment, preserve the status quo, and maintain the distinctiveness of groups, to name a few.<sup>3</sup> Some argue that the way racial stereotypes are represented in the media has caused the public to understand there is a black-white confrontation in our world.<sup>4</sup>

The attempt to come up with a solution for lack of media representation, though, leads to other questions:

- How does media coverage of racial unrest impact the event itself?
- Do media unwillingly and unknowingly influence the riots simply by being there?
- What can journalists learn for future coverage of racial tension events?

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Harris. *A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication*. (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associated, 1989), 48.

<sup>2</sup> Dietram Scheufele and David Tewksbury. "Framing, Agenda Setting and Priming: The Evolution of Three Media Effects Models." *Journal of Communication* 57 (2007): 11, accessed March 29, 2017, DOI: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2006.00326.x

<sup>3</sup> Eugenia Siapera. *Cultural Diversity and the Global Media: The Mediation of Difference*. (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 118

<sup>4</sup> National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. *Report on the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*. (Washington, D.C.: 1967), accessed March 29, 2017. <http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kenner.pdf>

Journalists like to believe that events would have occurred in the way they did, whether or not reporters were there to cover them. But media theorists, like Harris, Siapera, Scheufele and Tewksbury, have examined the ways that news coverage has helped to shape the news event themselves. There are several different approaches to these questions coming from many different perspectives. However, one thing most people can agree on is the fact that journalists need to find a solution to improve media representation so media coverage tells the story of civil unrest in a more proportional, accurate manner.

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*I always tell people that one of the most dangerous places I've ever covered is suburban St. Louis. (Tim Pool of Timcast (independent media), telephone conversation with author, November 14, 2016.)*

A race riot is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as, “A public outbreak of violence due to racial antagonism.”<sup>5</sup> For this paper, a race riot is defined as violence between African American and law enforcement officers in a predominantly African American community that ends in destruction of property or bodily injuries. Most racial riots start with a perceived transgression of a representative of one racial group directed against a person

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<sup>5</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “Race riot,” accessed March 31, 2017, [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/race\\_riot](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/race_riot)

or persons in another.<sup>6</sup> Stanley Lieberson and Arnold Silverman conducted a study that found the cause of racial riots is often an interracial fight without lethal weapons. The next most cited incident that causes race riots is the killing, arrest, assault or unlawful search of an African American man by a Caucasian police officer.<sup>7</sup> The authors go on to argue that it is still necessary to question why these events turn into riots in some places and not others.<sup>8</sup> Lieberson and Silverman found that riots are randomly distributed in cities that tend to have a recent influx of African American residents move into the cities.<sup>9</sup> They also found the work situations, housing situations and government interactions are more strained for African Americans in communities that experience a racial riot.<sup>10</sup>

Leading up to the “final” incident, however, are three levels of intensity that can predict a riot, according to the Kerner Commission. These are “deeply held grievances” from residents in the community.<sup>11</sup> The first level of intensity deals with police practices and inadequate working and housing conditions. The second level is inadequate education which considers the ineffectiveness of social programs and government structures. The third level is mainly about discriminatory attitudes from whites toward blacks.<sup>12</sup> Lack of infrastructure and discriminatory attitudes and policies in African American communities are causing the residents to take drastic actions. Segregation,

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<sup>6</sup> Stanley Lieberson and Arnold Silverman. “The Precipitants and Underlying Conditions of Race Riots.” *American Sociological Review* 30.6 (1965): 887. Accessed August 25, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2090967>

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 889

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 890

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Report on the National Advisory Commission*, <http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

poverty, black ghettos, welfare dependency, and feelings of powerlessness push African American communities to the point they believe the only way to be heard is to take to the streets with demonstrations that can turn violent.

## BRIEF HISTORY OF RACE RIOTS PRIOR TO FERGUSON

Racial unrest is nothing new. There are several examples seen throughout history that illustrate racial tensions. However, the focus will remain on tensions between blacks and whites that result in property damage or bodily damage. One of the first riots that fits this description is the Watts Riot of 1965. On August 11, 1965, a white police officer completed a routine traffic stop in a Los Angeles residential neighborhood called Watts. The driver was a 21-year-old black male, Marquette Frye, who had his older brother in the passenger seat. When the driver was stopped, the residents of the neighborhood began to gather to watch the proceedings. Everything was under control until the mother arrived to take Frye's car home; then, the crowd began to interject themselves into the situation once they heard the arresting officer had beaten a pregnant bystander.<sup>13</sup> This information turned out to be false, but TV reporters aired it. Robert Conot, a local journalist who wrote a book on the Watts Riot, noticed reporters were staging scenes. There was no specific instance of this happening in Ferguson. However, some of the interviewed journalists recounted events very similar to the one described by Conot.

On the following morning, Conot described a similar scene where one television reporter encouraged two ten-year-old black boys to stick their heads through a broken window because it made interesting

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<sup>13</sup> Hyusein Cinoglu. "An Analysis of Major American Riots: Issues in Riots and Riot Control." (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 2001): 18-26. Accessed November 15, 2016. <http://ezproxy.tcu.edu/docview/304714327?accountid=7090>

footage. Another cameraman encouraged youngsters to take off their shirts and put on bandanas so they looked “bare-chested, piratical and sinister.”<sup>14</sup>

Hrach goes on to argue that the Watts Riot was one of the beginning moments that community members began to question the media’s role in the violence. He writes, “The nation was making a connection between all rioting events and suggesting there was a link between the saturation coverage of the news media and subsequent rioting.”<sup>15</sup>

The Detroit Riot of 1967 soon followed the Watts Riot. On July 23, there was a police raid of an unlicensed bar. Officers were expecting a few drunk people who needed to be taken home but instead found a group of African Americans celebrating the return of two soldiers from the Vietnam War. The police arrested everyone while a crowd gathered on the street. A bystander threw a glass bottle at the arresting officers and looting began in the streets shortly after the police left with those arrested. The violence broke out across the city and then-President Lyndon B. Johnson reluctantly sent in the National Guard to break up the rioting.<sup>16</sup>

The next riot to be looked at is seen in 1979 in Miami, Florida. Arthur McDuffie was an African American insurance agent who was killed by a group of white police officers on December 17. The police reports said McDuffie turned a corner too sharply on his motorcycle and hit his head on the curb. However, after the doctor who examined McDuffie questioned the cause of death, one of the sergeants confessed he hit McDuffie

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Hrach. “The News Media and Disorders: The Kerner Commission’s Examination of Race Riots and Civil Disturbances, 1967-1968.” (PhD diss., Ohio University, 2008): 26-27. Accessed November 15, 2016.

<http://ezproxy.tcu.edu/docview/89208061?accountid=7090>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 32

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin Singer. “Mass Media and Communication Processes in the Detroit Riot of 1967.” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 34.2 (1970), accessed August 25, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2747421>

with a police flashlight. The police officers were eventually tried for manslaughter – instead of murder – and then later had found enough evidence to be tried as second-degree murder. Three of the four officers were granted immunity in exchange for testimonies. All four officers were then found not guilty. The riots in Miami began after the acquittal because residents thought they were acquitted simply because of the police officer's skin color.<sup>17</sup>

Lastly, the Los Angeles Riot of 1992 is one of the more well-known incidents of racial unrest in American history. A video had been released of a group of white police officers beating a black resident named Rodney King. After the trial, there was a delay in reading the verdicts to help the media cover the event more thoroughly. The verdicts of not guilty were then broadcast simultaneously across the country and sparked outrage and protests. Stores were looted. The Los Angeles Police Department headquarters was vandalized. Chaos ensued. Then-President George Bush had then issued an executive order to send the National Guard into LA.<sup>18</sup>

While all these riots had questions about media influence on the events themselves, the one that received the most coverage was the Detroit Riots. Then-President Johnson created a subcommittee to consider the reasoning behind the Detroit Riot of 1967.

## THE KERNER COMMISSION

The Kerner Commission dates back to 1968, when the nation was rocked by a series of riots in predominantly black neighborhoods. The report addressed media coverage and set

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<sup>17</sup> Cinoglu, "An Analysis of Major Race Riots": 40-49.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 51-56.

forth challenges for news media. These included more inclusive coverage and more diverse staffs. Minorities currently represent 17 percent of the journalism workforce.<sup>19</sup> The same survey found that 28 percent of news organizations have at least one minority journalist among their top three editors.<sup>20</sup> The Commission warned the U.S. could be developing what it called a “system of apartheid” in major cities.<sup>21</sup> The commission found that racism is “essentially responsible for the explosive mixture” through pervasive discrimination and segregation, black in-migrations and white exodus from inner cities, and the poverty that enforces failures in the ghetto.<sup>22</sup> The commissioners go on to say that there are other factors – such as frustrated hopes, a climate that approves violence, feelings of powerlessness, and the police as symbolism of white power – that have added to the climate.<sup>23</sup>

In terms of media coverage, the Commission determined that the answer stems from overall treatment by the media in ghettos.<sup>24</sup> They concluded:

- Newspapers, radio and television tried to give a balanced account despite some sensationalism
- Elements failed to portray the scale of the violence and tended to exaggerate the mood
- Important media segments failed to report adequately on causes and the underlying problems<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> “2016 Survey.” *ASNE*. Accessed April 3, 2017.

<http://asne.org/content.asp?contentid=447>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Report on the National Advisory Committee*,

<http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

The commissioners recommended that the media expand coverage of the black community, integrate black activities into all aspects of coverage, create more diversity in newsrooms, improve coordination with police officers, ensure accurate reporting of racial news and cooperate in the establishment Institute of Urban Communications to train and educate journalists in urban affairs.<sup>26</sup>

In terms of societal affairs, their recommendations encompassed three main themes: create programs that are on equal scale with the problem, aim these programs for high impact in immediate future, and undertake new initiatives to change the system of frustration the citizens are feeling.<sup>27</sup> These include enriching slums and promoting racial integration, committing nationally to stop segregation (through actions such as removing feeling of powerlessness, increasing communication across racial lines to stop stereotyping and eliminating all barriers to choice of jobs, education and housing) and ending racial violence.<sup>28</sup>

The reporting on the racial events in Ferguson seem to fall into the same traps as the ones outlined by the Kerner Commission, as will be talked about later.

## FRAMING THEORY AND AGENDA SETTING

Erving Goffman first put forth framing theory or the idea that *how* something is presented to an audience influences the choices people make about how to process that

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

information.<sup>29</sup> Frames help organize meaning; the most common use is the frames media place on the information they convey. They tell the audience both what and how to think about an issue.<sup>30</sup> A closely related concept is agenda setting, the idea that media influences the audience what to think about in terms of important topics.

Framing helps make sense of complex issues, but it also causes a change in thinking in the public and how people react to certain events, according to Goffman.<sup>31</sup> In another study, Thomas Nelson, a political psychologist, conducted a lab experiment to show the impacts a frame can have on someone's perception of events.<sup>32</sup> He randomly assigned 222 undergraduate students at Ohio State University to two different groups. Both groups watched a news story about the Ku Klux Klan protesting an event, but the frames for the stories were different. One group was assigned to a free speech frame and the second to a disruption of public order frame. At the end of the experiment, the researchers found people were more tolerant of the actions of the KKK when it was framed in a manner of free speech.<sup>33</sup> He also found that media provides cues on how to integrate beliefs and attitudes in times of controversy and that framing is even more powerful when they align with existing beliefs, such as stereotypes.<sup>34</sup>

Most white Americans lack intimate contact with members of another race because of residential and career segregation, according to Kimberly Gross, an expert on

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<sup>29</sup> Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974). Emphasis added.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Nelson, et al. "Media Framing of a Civil Liberties Conflict and Its Effect on Tolerance." *The American Political Science Review* 91.3 (1997). Accessed August 25, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2952075>

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 579.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

framing effects on opinion and emotions.<sup>35</sup> The lack of personal experiences with minority groups allows the media to “compensate whites to some degree for their lack of either past or current personal interracial experiences.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore, the media have a unique opportunity to provide important representations of racial differences and to potentially shift the public’s opinion on racial issues. However, when African Americans are portrayed as drug dealers, welfare dependent and violent on television, it creates three distinct frames that legitimize racial violence: the white racial frame, black counter-frames and the black-white confrontation frame.<sup>37</sup>

***White racial frames.*** This frame stems from ideologies during the colonial period, Chris Messer, an expert in organizational deviances and social movements, says. Messer writes, “This white racial frame generates closely associated, recurring, and habitual discriminatory actions. The frame and associated discriminatory actions are consciously and unconsciously expressed in the routine operation of racist institutions in this society.”<sup>38</sup> An important characteristic of this frame is its fluidity. From 1870 to 1950, the frame was enforced through slavery, until it ended in 1865, and then transformed to show itself as racial discrimination. After 1950, during the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, the frame has been enforced through portraying African Americans as welfare-dependent,

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<sup>35</sup> Kimberly Gross. “Images of ‘Others’: The Effect of Media Coverage of Racial Unrest on Public Opinion.” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2001). Accessed November 15, 2016. <http://ezproxy.tcu.edu/docview/230815705?accountid=7090>

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>37</sup> Chris Messer, “The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921: Toward an Integrative Theory of Collective Violence.” *Journal of Science History* 44.4 (2001): Accessed August 25, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41305432>

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 51

lazy, dumb and a threat to the safety of white women. Lastly, this frame created the idea that whites are superior to blacks.<sup>39</sup>

***Black counter-frames.*** Most black counter-frames to the white racial frame rely on the use of changing the narrative to one of resistance to modify current stereotypes and come from the active resistance to white racial frames.<sup>40</sup> Counter-frames allow those in the African American community to actively combat racism during times of violence or discrimination. During the Tulsa Riot of 1921, Messer argues, the black counter-frame was viewed through the lens of the white police officers being a “group of armed ‘militants.’”<sup>41</sup> Further, these counter-frames point out a broader concept of injustice when it comes to equal law enforcement and protection. Similar to the white racial frames, the black counter-frame served to organize action from the community. Blacks may actively attempt to offer protection to the one in trouble or may refuse to serve as a spectator to the racial violence.<sup>42</sup> Looking at both frames collectively help others understand racial violence and the inequality and contextual nuances that come from it.

***Black-white confrontation.*** The term “black-white confrontation” was first used in the Kerner Commission.<sup>43</sup> The black-white confrontation frame the Kerner Commission speaks of “conditioned the responses of readers and viewers and heightened their reactions.”<sup>44</sup> Generally, this frame assumes that the media portrays a consistent fight

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. *The Kerner Report*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 365.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 367.

between black and white members of a community. Further, it suggests one side of the conflict always feels deeply wronged by the other side and needs to get justice.<sup>45</sup>

## BRIEF HISTORY OF FERGUSON AND ITS RACIAL UNREST

Ferguson, Missouri, was created in the 1850s after resident William B. Ferguson allowed a railroad to come through his land on the condition it became a regular stop. Over time the city has become a city of more than 21,000 people, according to 2015 population estimates.<sup>46</sup> More than 14,000 of the residents are African American and a little over 6,000 are Caucasian.<sup>47</sup> However, the city has more white officials than black, which led to a constant power struggle between the officials and their constituents.<sup>48</sup> It also leads to areas of disgruntlement (such as housing and job opportunities) that the Kerner Commission had warned against.<sup>49</sup>

***Ferguson riots.*** On August 9, a Caucasian officer named Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African American, on the corner of West Florissant Avenue and Canfield Drive in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown was suspected of robbing a nearby convenience store. Brown allegedly attacked Wilson to try to gain control of the officer's gun. Brown then fled, and Wilson shot Brown when Brown turned to confront

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<sup>45</sup> Jane Twomey. "Constructing the Riot: An Ideological Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles Riot in Five Newspapers. (PhD diss., University of Maryland: 1998): 31. Accessed August 25, 2016. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41674999>

<sup>46</sup> "City History | Ferguson, MO – Official Website." Accessed September 13, 2016. <http://www.fergusoncity.com/141/City-History>

<sup>47</sup> "Ferguson, Missouri QuickFacts from the US Census Bureau." Accessed March 29, 2017. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/2923986/accessible>

<sup>48</sup> Art Holliday, "Ferguson police department diversity questioned." *KSDK.com*, August 18, 2014. <http://www.ksdk.com/news/local/ferguson-police-department-diversity-questioned/278855945>

<sup>49</sup> *Report on the National Advisory Committee.*  
<http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf>

Wilson again. Brown's body lay in the street for four hours, while residents began to gather voicing their disbelief and outrage.<sup>50</sup>

Later that evening, residents created a makeshift memorial for Brown. An unidentified police officer allowed his K9 dog to urinate on the memorial.<sup>51</sup> A police spokesman for Ferguson also called the memorial a "pile of trash in the middle of the street."<sup>52</sup> Both instances caused even more tension among the bystanders. Peaceful protests had continued through the next day but became unruly after a candlelight vigil on August 10. Local police had arrived in full riot gear – personal armor, batons, riot shields, riot helmets, pepper spray, tear gas, and rubber bullets. Stores and businesses were looted or vandalized. People were arrested for assault, burglary and theft. During these incidents, police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at lines of protesters and reporters, which only further aggravated the residents of Ferguson. Missouri Governor Jay Nixon eventually called in the National Guard after attempting to implement a curfew.<sup>53</sup>

***The aftermath.*** In September of the same year, a memorial to Brown was burned down and then built up again after a public apology from Ferguson police chief Thomas Jackson. Later that same evening, several hundred protesters gathered and asked for Jackson's resignation. In October, protesters were arrested on the charges of failure to

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<sup>50</sup> Tyler Goodridge. "Disrupting the Status Quo: A Case Study of Digital Mobilization and Awareness Within Black Lives Matter." (PhD diss., 2016). Accessed September 19, 2016. <http://ezproxy.tcu.edu/docview/1791139474?accountid=7090>

<sup>51</sup> Ben Mathis-Lilley. "Police Handler Let Dog Urinate on Michael Brown Memorial the Day He Was Killed." *Slate*, August 27, 2014. [http://www.slate.com/blogs/the\\_slatest/2014/08/27/ferguson\\_police\\_dog\\_urinated\\_on\\_michael\\_brown\\_memorial.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2014/08/27/ferguson_police_dog_urinated_on_michael_brown_memorial.html)

<sup>52</sup> Stephen A. Crockett, Jr. "Officer Who Called Michael Brown Memorial 'Trash' Faces Discipline." *The Root*, December 29, 2014. <http://www.theroot.com/officer-who-called-michael-brown-memorial-trash-faces-1790878180>

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

comply with police and resisting arrest. In November, Nixon declared a state of emergency in anticipation of the upcoming grand jury results. On November 24, 2014, the grand jury decided not to indict Wilson which caused another set of riots. Wilson was exonerated because the grand jury did not find enough evidence and credible enough witnesses to indict him. March 11, 2015, saw another set of protesters following the announcement of the resignation of the chief of police, Thomas Jackson. A third wave of riots happened on the one-year anniversary of Michael Brown's death.<sup>54</sup>

***The Ferguson Commission.*** The Ferguson Commission was appointed by Missouri governor Jay Nixon after the Michael Brown shooting to determine how to progress sustainably on issues of race in the community.<sup>55</sup> There were 16 members appointed to the board representing a “diversity of communities,” according to the commission’s website. Over the time span of a few months, the members of the board put together a report titled “Forward through Ferguson: A Path Toward Racial Equity,” which outlined steps and recommendations needed to make progress on racial issues. The commissioners explored topics such as use of force, anti-bias and cultural competency and public demonstration. The recommendations included reforming law enforcement’s use of force policy, eliminating incarceration for minor infraction offenses, and incorporating youth at the forefront of these plans.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Emily Brown. “Timeline: Michael Brown shooting in Ferguson, Mo.” *USA Today*, August 10, 2015. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/08/14/michael-brown-ferguson-missouri-timeline/14051827/>

<sup>55</sup> “Forward Through Ferguson.” *The Ferguson Commission*. Accessed September 15, 2016. <http://forwardthroughferguson.org/>

<sup>56</sup> Ferguson Commission. *Forward Through Ferguson: A Path Toward Racial Equity*. (Ferguson: Ferguson Commission, 2015), accessed March 2, 2017. <http://forwardthroughferguson.org/report/executive-summary/>

In terms of media coverage, the Ferguson Commission recommended that the city government designate credentialed media as non-demonstrators so they can complete their job without worrying about being arrested. Another caveat mentioned in the report was for agencies to “communicate with citizens and the media swiftly, openly and neutrally.”<sup>57</sup> Lastly, the board members recommended anti-bias training for media which would include developing statewide training and accountability measures for all forms of media outlets.<sup>58</sup> All these recommendations are like those found in the Kerner Commission.

*The media coverage.* Media coverage of the racial unrest in Ferguson refocused America on the black-white confrontation reminiscent of racial unrest dating back to the 1960s. Noah Rothman, an associate editor at *Commentary*, said most people agree the press had not played a neutral role in Ferguson coverage.<sup>59</sup> There were more rumors than facts and reporters put themselves in harm’s way by placing themselves in the center of riots and unrest. He wrote: “The news media did not come to Ferguson to chronicle events but to correct historical wrongs . . . If so, the press almost certainly overcompensated on the streets of Ferguson.”<sup>60</sup>

Furthermore, some scholars and citizens alike asked whether television news outlets such as CNN and Fox News had a confirmation bias in the reporting of the shooting. Confirmation bias is a subconscious tendency to seek and interpret information

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Noah Rothman. “Taking Sides in Ferguson.” *Commentary* 138.3 (2014): 18. October 1, 2014. <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/taking-sides-in-ferguson/>

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

in ways that align with our current beliefs and expectations.<sup>61</sup> It was not only television news at fault in the media coverage. Newspapers and television news outlets with a lack of diversity in their staff members tend to represent a one-sided bias of white racial frames, even if unwillingly.

Others have wondered whether the media provoked the riots. Ron Christie, a reporter for The Daily Beast, a liberal-leaning news and opinion website, argued the public should not have heard about the shootings in the first place because the shooting should not have happened.<sup>62</sup> Christie said the incident provided an opportunity “to declare that a racist cop had gunned down an innocent black youth.”<sup>63</sup> The conservative viewpoint of media coverage of Ferguson sees the media as inciting and furthering the riots and racial unrest. They see the media coverage as choosing sides instead of doing their jobs to report fairly and with minimal bias.<sup>64</sup> Further, some conservatives believe talking about racial issues during time of crisis will get nothing done for helping to ease the issue. Eric Deegans of NPR writes:

It’s the Catch-22 of covering racial issues. The public tends to pay the most attention after a calamity: someone is dead, has been hurt or has been victimized. But in that moment, the public debate becomes polarized. People are more focused on winning arguments than understanding other perspectives and cherry-pick data to serve their own side.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> “Confirmation and Other Biases.” *Facing History and Ourselves*. Accessed December 7, 2016. <https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/video/defining-confirmation-bias>

<sup>62</sup> Ron Christie. “How the Media and Obama Made Ferguson Even Worse.” *The Daily Beast*, March 12, 2015. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/03/12/media-and-obama-are-to-blame-for-latest-ferguson-tragedy.html>

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Eric Deegans. “Four Lessons from the Media’s Conflicted Coverage of Race.” *Code Switch NPR*. December 6, 2014.

Reporters have little experience of covering racial unrest to fall back on. They were born after the riots that took place in the 1960s. They also were not getting many updates or worthwhile information from the media zone the police set up. Journalists who were covering the riots in Ferguson were simply learning as they went, which could have caused some media bias and subconscious framing in terms of the black-white confrontation.<sup>66</sup>

As with most news stories that deal with the “fog of war,” (a term denoting the uncertainty in situational awareness that occurs during a battle or conflict situation) coverage of the protests spurred several discussions on what journalists can do to improve their coverage of high-intensity events. Jessica Mendoza, a reporter for MintPress News, wrote, “Real growth means that every racially-charged story – not just those that grab headlines or generate hashtags – is put into context, scrutinized for bias and examined in as many perspectives as possible.”<sup>67</sup> Through a series of different interviews, Mendoza argued mainstream media should go beyond episodic coverage of racial unrest and look at events in everyday life that deal with the same scenarios. Even further, reporters and journalists need to commit themselves to the awareness of racial issues by diversifying newsrooms, reporting accurately and fairly, and examining the

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<http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/12/06/368713550/four-lessons-from-the-medias-conflicted-coverage-of-race>

<sup>66</sup> Paul Farhi. “With no textbooks on how to cover riots, reporters in Ferguson learning as they go.” *The Washington Post*, August 18, 2014.

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/with-no-textbooks-on-how-to-cover-riots-reporters-in-ferguson-learning-as-they-go/2014/08/18/e942cff4-2716-11e4-8593-da634b334390\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.9ba07f1d286f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/with-no-textbooks-on-how-to-cover-riots-reporters-in-ferguson-learning-as-they-go/2014/08/18/e942cff4-2716-11e4-8593-da634b334390_story.html?utm_term=.9ba07f1d286f)

<sup>67</sup> Jessica Mendoza. “Ferguson Case Reveals US Media’s Flaws in Covering Issues of Race.” *MintPress News*, December 10, 2014. <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-12-04/ferguson-case-reveals-us-media-s-flaws-covering-issues-race>

story for flaws.<sup>68</sup> Diversifying the newsrooms however is the first step to accurately covering racial events. Joel Anderson, a black reporter at BuzzFeed, covered the events in Ferguson. In a series of tweets found in an article on Quartz, Anderson reflected on the time he realized the officers on scene would not know he was part of the media.<sup>69</sup> The next step in accurately covering racial events, therefore, comes from the public and the acceptance of a more diverse news team.

Anderson's experience in the "fog of war" also brings up safety issues for those covering racial riots. Several journalists interviewed said they saw journalists willingly putting themselves in danger to get a story.<sup>70</sup> The International Journalists' Network, however, tells journalists the best way to do their job in a riotous environment is to stay aware and not to take unnecessary risks. Further, journalists need to have an escape route, be as discreet as possible on the scene, carry as little as possible, connect with locals and trust their instincts.<sup>71</sup>

***Social media use.*** An interesting characteristic of the riots in Ferguson was the effect of social media on the unfolding unrest.<sup>72</sup> In fact, the first sources of information about the shooting of Michael Brown came from social media.<sup>73</sup> The use of social media helped put the events of the unrest on the national, and even an international, news cycle.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Sonali Kohli. "Why We Need Black Journalists to Cover Ferguson." *Quartz*, August 20, 2014. <https://qz.com/251989/why-we-need-black-journalists-to-cover-ferguson/>

<sup>70</sup> Tim Pool of Timcast (independent media), telephone conversation to author, November 14, 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Dena Levitz. "Tips for Reporters Covering Riots in Baltimore and Beyond." *International Journalists' Network*, May 1, 2015. <https://ijnet.org/en/blog/tips-reporters-covering-riots-baltimore-and-beyond>

<sup>72</sup> Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa. "#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States." *American Ethnologist* 42.1 (2015): 4. Accessed September 19, 2016. DOI: 10.1111/amet.12112

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

News organizations learned about the arrest of two journalists, Ryan Reilly and Wesley Lowery of The Washington Post, thanks to Twitter.<sup>74</sup> Even further, some journalists created a compilation of tweets and Facebook posts to tell the story of what was happening on the ground. Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa, in their article published in *American Ethnologist*, even argue journalists would not have shown up in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri, if it was not for the prominence of the event details on Twitter.<sup>75</sup>

When the riots began, the hashtag #Ferguson popped up and was tweeted more than eight million times during the month of August 2014. About 3.6 million of those tweets happened in the first week of the riots alone. The hashtag has popped up as a way to document incidents of perceived misrepresentations and violence among the African American community. The most common use of #Ferguson was to give information about events being held in honor of Michael Brown and to call national attention to the alleged police brutality happening in Ferguson.<sup>76</sup> Users on Twitter – especially black Twitter (the section of Twitter focused on interests of the black community)<sup>77</sup> – found social media as a way to bring “visibility and accountability to repressive forces.”<sup>78</sup> Sanjay Sharma, in the article “Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion,” said tweets in the Black Twitter universe help to create identities that others

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<sup>74</sup> Theresa Cramer. “Is Social Media the Only Truly Free Press?” *Econtentmag.com*, September 19, 2016. <http://www.econtentmag.com/Articles/Column/T.0/Is-Social-Media-the-Only-Truly-Free-Press-99671.htm>

<sup>75</sup> Bonilla and Rosa. “#Ferguson: Digital Protest,” 7.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Goodridge. “Disrupting the Status Quo,” 14.

<sup>78</sup> Bonilla and Rosa. “#Ferguson: Digital Protest,” 12.

can interact with. The use of “Blacktags,” racialized hashtags such as #onlyintheghetto, help produce opportunities for expressing and discussing race online.<sup>79</sup>

### METHOD

*The news will go on tomorrow without you. Remember you have a life too and don't do anything dumb while you're out there. (Joel Anderson of BuzzFeed, telephone conversation with author, November 1, 2016.)*

The method used to analyze media coverage's impact of racial unrest includes analyzing both local and national news articles about the events and interviews with journalists who were on the ground during the riots.

### NEWS ARTICLE ANALYSES

There were two different realms of news articles analyzed: the national and the local. The national realm consisted of news articles from The New York Times, The Washington Post, USA Today and The Root, an online alternative media for the African American community published in New York. The first three news organizations were chosen because of their pervasiveness in online news. The fourth organization was chosen to give a perspective from the black community in a way that mainstream media does not. Five news articles per news organization were analyzed, for a total of twenty total articles in the national realm. The article publication dates ranged from August 1,

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<sup>79</sup> Sanjay Sharma. “Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks and Contagion.” *New Formations* no. 78, August 2013: 46-64. Accessed February 28, 2017. DOI: 10.3898/NEWF.78.02.2013

2014, to November 30, 2014, to encompass the original shooting and the non-indictment of officer Darren Wilson.

The local realm consisted of news articles from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, The Missourian, St. Louis American and the Riverfront Times, a black news organization serving the St. Louis area. These organizations have an online presence. Like the national news realm, there were five articles per organization were analyzed. Together 40 articles were analyzed across the eight different news organizations. None of the articles included opinion pieces. The analysis of online news articles created more analysis for factors influencing framing than traditional news organizations due to the use of multiple photos and multimedia elements and the lack of space constraints, to name a few.

In today's online media landscape, it is almost impossible to find a news story that does not include a picture or some form of multimedia. Multimedia elements have become so integral to media that some would argue it increases the number of factors that can influence framing. For example, including a photo of members from different ethnic backgrounds protesting with the members of the Ferguson community would frame the event in a way that shows the killing of Brown was the "straw that broke the camel's back" and it is not simply African Americans acting like "thugs." It would allow the audience to understand that the circumstances of the event are not simply violence for violence's sake, but that there is more nuance to the story.<sup>80</sup> If a journalist includes only a photo of black teenagers looting businesses, however accurate it may be in that moment, then the frame will influence others to believe that only African Americans are causing

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<sup>80</sup> Donna Barry and Heidi Williamson. "In Ferguson and the Entire Nation, Institutional Racism Extends Far Beyond Law Enforcement." *The Root*, August 28, 2014. <http://www.theroot.com/in-ferguson-and-the-entire-nation-institutional-racism-1790876856>

the trouble in the community and will further portray them as “thugs.”<sup>81</sup> Going off that same concept, including more multimedia elements will create more opportunities for a news frame to take hold. Some examples of multimedia elements include slideshows, video interviews with witnesses or experts, an infographic, or a news package.

The Kerner Commission also warned about media reliance on government officials as a source of news.<sup>82</sup> The journalists who covered the Ferguson riots seemed to learn this lesson – to an extent. There were 16 out of 40 stories analyzed that relied only on government officials. Government officials includes sources such as the mayor, law enforcement, or elected representatives. Since Ferguson is majority black but is represented by mainly white government officials, relying on these people alone creates a white racial frame without representing the black counter-frame or even a perspective that does not align with government views.

Another way online news articles could influence framing even if unwittingly is thanks to the lack of space constraints that are seen in traditional newspapers. The abundance of space for the articles creates a few opportunities for framing to arise. The first is through the temptation to editorialize. Traditional newspapers seemed to curb the temptation to editorialize a bit by physically limiting how long a story can be. However, that is not the case for online news organizations. For example, in “‘Shut down’ protests continue Saturday in Brentwood” from the St. Louis American, Kenya Vaughn tells the story about a confrontation between a white and black woman in a parking lot.

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<sup>81</sup> Mitch Ryals. “Tear gas, shootings, arson and looting in Ferguson after no true bill announcement.” *Riverfront Times*, November 25, 2014.  
<http://www.riverfronttimes.com/newsblog/2014/11/25/tear-gas-shootings-arson-and-looting-in-ferguson-after-no-true-bill-announcement>

<sup>82</sup> *Report on the National Advisory Committee*.  
<http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf>

“Uggh. If you people had jobs you wouldn’t be out here,” a white woman said while sternly pointing her finger at a young black woman in the Target parking lot early Saturday afternoon.

The black woman may not have been one of the several hundred protesters who converged on the Brentwood Promenade Shopping center in a demonstration organized by Millennial Activists United.

She could have been one of the displaced shoppers forced to exit the store as the Black Friday super sales spilled into Saturday and demonstrators followed suit with their “shut down” protests that temporarily closed three of the St. Louis area’s largest shopping malls.

Whoever she was – protester or not – she was stunned. But before the rage that visibly began to possess her could fully take hold, another voice came from behind as the antagonizing woman – who appeared quite progressive at first sight – could finish putting her items away and drive off in her Lexus.

“Well if you people had any sense of humanity she wouldn’t have to be out here,” a young white woman said, quickly jumping to the possible protester’s defense. “Because Mike Brown would still be alive.”

As a final dig, the apparent college student and confirmed protester joined the chant that was underway from a few paces down the strip mall. “Black lives matter. Black lives matter,” the young woman shouted, making sure to establish direct eye contact with the woman. “Black lives matter.”

The woman let out another gasp as she sped off.<sup>83</sup>

There is nothing wrong with reporting a story through an anecdote. However, there are several instances of editorializing in these few paragraphs. How did the reporter know the black woman was stunned? How did she know the white woman “appeared quite progressive at first sight”? How did she know the college student was chanting with the others “as a final dig”? It seems the reporter is creating a black-white confrontation frame through the anecdote and instances of editorializing. A reasonable person would

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<sup>83</sup> Kenya Vaughn. “‘Shut down’ protests continue Saturday in Brentwood.” *St. Louis-American*, November 29, 2014. [http://www.stlameric.com/news/local\\_news/shut-down-protests-continue-saturday-in-brentwood/article\\_aa9d0f02-782f-11e4-a668-573f23bdd802.html](http://www.stlameric.com/news/local_news/shut-down-protests-continue-saturday-in-brentwood/article_aa9d0f02-782f-11e4-a668-573f23bdd802.html)

read this article and then be offended at the white woman in the Target parking lot due to her treatment of the black woman.

One of Vaughn's other articles, "Chesterfield Mall temporarily closed..." is an example of how to resist the temptation of editorializing with the unlimited space in online news reporting.

Chesterfield Mall became the latest in a trio of shopping center closures following a full day of demonstrations in response to the grand jury decision not to indict Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson for the shooting death of Michael Brown.

It would join the ranks of The Galleria and West County Mall. All three suffered the inconvenience of being forced to temporarily shut its doors on Black Friday – arguably the busiest shopping day of the year.

Suspicious eyes of observant shoppers, security and police gave second (and third) glances at the influx of black faces that sat throughout the food court of Chesterfield Mall given the circumstances of the day. For nearly 30 minutes, demonstrators sat quietly. In an attempt not to be conspicuous, some ordered items. Others sat anxiously waiting for their cue.

At around 7 p.m., the first of many chants would kick off an hour-long protest that would stretch to just about every corner of the three-level shopping center.<sup>84</sup>

The second article did not embellish anything that happened during the shutdown protests. Rather, it told the story in a way that got the point across while adding emotion. While there is still a hint of black-white confrontation in this article through the description of the "black faces," it is less pronounced and less likely to influence a reasonable reader that there is conflict between the two races. Lack of space constraints also give journalists more words to work with. The more words, the more likely a frame will emerge. In the same two articles written by Vaughn, the "Shut down" article has a

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<sup>84</sup> Kenya Vaughn. "Chesterfield Mall temporarily closed in latest Black Friday shut down." *St. Louis-American*, November 28, 2014.  
[http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local\\_news/chesterfield-mall-temporarily-closed-in-latest-black-friday-shut-down/article\\_eb0c61ea-7786-11e4-9c6d-63dd37e366cf.html](http://www.stlamerican.com/news/local_news/chesterfield-mall-temporarily-closed-in-latest-black-friday-shut-down/article_eb0c61ea-7786-11e4-9c6d-63dd37e366cf.html)

total of 756 words while the “Chesterfield Mall” article has 485. This aligns with the emergence of a black-white confrontation frame seen in the first article.

One of the most intriguing aspects I found in news articles was whether race was mentioned. Out of the 40 articles analyzed, 30 included a mention of race. For example, The Washington Post, in “In Ferguson, three minutes...,” mentioned the moment a “white police officer named Darren Wilson and a black teenager named Michael Brown ... found themselves together on Canfield Drive.”<sup>85</sup> However, when analyzing “Outrage over teenager’s death...” in The New York Times, the author writes about the death of “Michael Brown, 18, who was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Mo.”<sup>86</sup> The first article employs the black-white confrontation frame through the identification of those involved fault lines. Fault lines are social aspects that shape your life, such as race, class, gender, generation and geography.<sup>87</sup> It is journalists job to identify people’s fault lines when it is necessary, and this is one of those cases. The lack of mention of fault lines in some articles though creates the idea that some actively decided against employing the frame of black-white confrontations.

## JOURNALIST INTERVIEWS

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<sup>85</sup> Manuel Roig-Franzia, DeNeen L. Brown and Wesley Lowery. “In Ferguson, three minutes – and two lives forever changed.” *The Washington Post*, August 16, 2014. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-ferguson-three-minutes--and-two-lives-forever-changed/2014/08/16/f28f5bc0-2588-11e4-8593-da634b334390\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.ccbe2516b282](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/in-ferguson-three-minutes--and-two-lives-forever-changed/2014/08/16/f28f5bc0-2588-11e4-8593-da634b334390_story.html?utm_term=.ccbe2516b282)

<sup>86</sup> Samantha Storey. “Outrage Over Teenager’s Death Erupts on Social Media.” *The New York Times*, August 11, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/12/us/mike-brown-shooting-social-media.html>

<sup>87</sup> Sally Lehrman. “How to Cross Your ‘Faultlines.’” *Society of Professional Journalists*. <http://www.spj.org/dtb2.asp>

Through interviews, there were a total of six working journalists who were spoken to. The six journalists are Joel Anderson, a black male working for BuzzFeed; Marcus DiPaola, a white male working for Xinhua News in China; Tim Pool, a white male working for his own Timcast; Ryan Reilly, a white male working for The Huffington Post; Mariah Stewart, a black female working for The Huffington Post; and Omar Villafranca, a Hispanic male working for CBS News. The six journalists come from a variety of backgrounds (CBS News, The Huffington Post, BuzzFeed, independent media, etc.) but tended to have similar beliefs. However, two stood out. Tim Pool, of Timcast, and Marcus DiPaola, of Xinhua News, seemed to vocalize the opposite sentiments of the other four journalists interviewed.

The questions asked included the following:

1. Why were you sent to Ferguson?
2. What was your experience like reporting on racial unrest?
3. How do you feel the media presence affected the riots?
4. What have we as media learned from Ferguson in terms of media coverage?
5. What would you recommend for future journalists covering similar events?

All interviews were conducted over the phone due to the demanding schedules of journalism and lasted anywhere between 15 and 45 minutes. The average time interviewed was 30 minutes.

The interviews with the journalists brought an interesting distinction from the analysis of the news stories. Most journalists (except for Pool) said the media was simply documenting the event. Reilly, a reporter who was arrested during the unrest, said:

There's a tendency to blame the media but the reality is that the initial gathering came out long before any national reporters were there. It was a pretty organic

thing. Later on, when it got all the attention, that's when some people from outside of the communities started coming in, and that's when it became a bit of a spectacle.<sup>88</sup>

Anderson said, "If anything inflamed tensions there, I think it was the curfew more than the media being there."<sup>89</sup> Stewart agreed and then added her own caveat:

I feel like it was more so the reporters themselves and the questions they asked that incited some people's emotion and rage because of their lack of understanding. It was necessary for the media to be there because they needed to document the things police were doing and the incidents that were going on, but I felt there needed to be some sensitivity training among some reporters and cameramen.<sup>90</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Pool was the only one who thought the media presence affected the riots in some way. He was under the impression there were staged events and posed photos that circulated the mainstream media. Pool said, "When people in the crowd see something that they understand as media, it immediately changes their behavior. What you wind up seeing on the other side of the camera is an inaccurate portrayal of what's going on."<sup>91</sup> Pool went on to say, in his own implicit words, that there was some emergence of a black-white confrontation due to the changed behavior of those involved in the riots.<sup>92</sup>

Stewart and DiPaola acknowledged the mere presence of video equipment could have affected the way people presented themselves but both highly doubted it was enough to change the outcome of the media coverage.

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<sup>88</sup> Ryan Reilly of The Huffington Post, telephone conversation with author, November 1, 2016.

<sup>89</sup> Joel Anderson of BuzzFeed, telephone conversation with author, November 1, 2016.

<sup>90</sup> Mariah Stewart of The Huffington Post, telephone conversation with author, November 16, 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Tim Pool of Timcast (independent media), telephone conversation with author, November 14, 2016.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

*Coverage weaknesses.* When asked about the journalistic weaknesses seen in the reporting of Ferguson, there was a mixed set of answers. The first theme that arose is best described by Pool, who has covered multiple riots, including the Arab Spring unrest in the Middle East. He said the biggest error was lack of safety awareness for self and others.<sup>93</sup> His example came from a group of unnamed reporters who he said heard the gunshots and then turned to him to ask what that noise was. He goes on to say, “The storytelling is negatively impacted by the inability to understand the context which they’re placing themselves in.”<sup>94</sup>

Another theme that appeared throughout the six interviews was the lack of compassion for those living in Ferguson. Villafranca touched on how important the “why” of this story was to help tell the story more compassionately. He said, “Just showing the picture and telling people what’s going on doesn’t tell you why. That was the main question: Why were people upset? It wasn’t just about what happened to Michael Brown.”<sup>95</sup> Villafranca and his news organization, CBS, started to collect data about how the citizens in the area were treated to put the riots into context. He found that Brown’s death was “basically the straw that broke the camel’s back” in Ferguson.<sup>96</sup> Residents, he said, were reacting more to the police insensitivities they experienced on a daily basis than the shooting of Michael Brown itself – even though that was also part of the reasoning for the riots. Reporting more compassionately toward the residents – who are most likely unable to leave the community after the cameras are gone – and how they

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Omar Villafranca of CBS News, telephone conversation with author, December 14, 2016.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

are portrayed in the media would have helped the stories become more comprehensive. Anderson agreed with Villafranca and said: “Some outlets just focused on the clashes and not the systemic issues that came from it. The fact that people got that mad should have been a clue that the people in this town are mad about something that goes beyond one death.”<sup>97</sup>

Lastly, Stewart talked about the sensationalism that comes not from a desire to overplay the story, but from hard deadlines in journalism.<sup>98</sup> She said that news organizations were more focused on *what* happened as opposed to *why* things were happening, which created rumors and spotty coverage of the events. She said, “People need something and it’s easier to focus on the sensational aspects.”<sup>99</sup> Villafranca also said he saw aspects of sensationalism happen during the riots. He said the reporting of rumors as facts was one of the biggest journalistic errors he saw in Ferguson coverage. Once the media reported one thing falsely, he said, it was false across the world. Villafranca said, “We have to answer to the sins of other people. That makes our job difficult.”<sup>100</sup>

*Coverage strengths.* On the other side of the argument, however, there were things that journalists did correctly while covering racial riots. Some examples are going to local meetings to better understand citizen’s complaints and calling out those who reported in error. A theme seen throughout many of the interviews focused on not relying solely on official reports of what happened. Some journalists went out into the streets and tried to humanize those who had grievances with their local government, Anderson said,

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<sup>97</sup> Anderson, telephone conversation.

<sup>98</sup> Stewart, telephone conversation.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Villafranca, telephone conversation.

I think Ferguson maybe helped media to see that just because officials said it happened one way doesn't mean that it happened that way. Media became a little bit more fair toward claims of people who say, "I've been abused" or "Police have been treating me this way." I think the media humanized a lot of the people in Ferguson in a way that I hadn't seen in domestic coverage before.<sup>101</sup>

Stewart agreed. She said journalists "put down their pens and pencils" to try and get the perspective that was needed to capture the nuances of the riots.<sup>102</sup> Most of the journalists there, she said, were outsiders and simply needed to talk to residents to humanize them.<sup>103</sup> Similar to humanizing the residents, Reilly mentioned the reporting he saw on why the riots started – the grievances with the local community government – had the right focus.

In certain circumstances, there was too much focus on property damage than there were on the underlying issue. It gave people the opportunity to try and dismiss legitimate grievances and sort of paint everybody protesting with a broad brush because of the act of a few people. I think a lot of the reporters didn't quite get across the actions of the police had on the way things unfolded. But some did.<sup>104</sup>

*Coverage recommendations.* Journalists interviewed for the current study had some recommendations for future journalists covering future riots. Reilly, who was one of the journalists arrested in Ferguson, said safety should be a reporter's first priority. He said, "It's never worth it to put yourself in a situation you can't get out of. It's not worth the picture. It's not worth the story."<sup>105</sup> All the other journalists interviewed agreed with Reilly's statement.

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<sup>101</sup> Anderson, telephone conversation.

<sup>102</sup> Stewart, telephone conversation.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Reilly, telephone conversation.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

The major arching theme of recommendations, however, was understanding. They recommended any reporters sent to cover civil unrest in the future should do the following:

- Listen to the residents
- Seek to understand the community
- Communicate everyday life of the city, not just what is going on in the street during clashes with police
- Complete sensitivity training to facilitate interracial and intercultural understanding before going to the front lines of racial clashes

These were the same recommendations that stemmed from the Kerner Commission analysis.<sup>106</sup> Working journalists seem to be saying that we've learned some of how to improve riot coverage but we still have lots of work to do.

Stewart talked about how the focus on injustices in the community and the grievances from residents helped create a discussion forum across the nation.

As tragic as an event that Ferguson was, that Michael Brown lost his life, it opened up so much in this country to have people focus in on these things like shootings and police brutality and systematic oppression. Things that would have been passed up before seem to be focal points now. Some people did get woke from this experience. They realized black people do go through a lot.<sup>107</sup>

The question that posed the most interesting answers was “What have we learned from Ferguson?” The interviewees had a wide range of answers – ranging from absolutely nothing to better coverage of “fog of war” events.

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<sup>106</sup> *Report on the National Advisory Committee.*  
<http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf>

<sup>107</sup> Stewart, telephone conversation.

Pool claimed the mainstream media learned “absolutely nothing.” He said: “We didn’t learn anything from covering these events. I take that back. They learned how to manipulate the audience better and how to pander to get more traffic and boost their ratings.”<sup>108</sup> He was the only one who voiced this sentiment. The other journalists tended to lean toward a more positive view of the aftermath.

Anderson, Villafranca and Stewart mentioned a similar theme for lessons learned from the media – smart journalistic reporting. Villafranca and Stewart specifically referenced the municipal court systems in Ferguson. Villafranca argued smart reporting of racial riots is not “simply pointing a camera to people protesting in the streets.”<sup>109</sup> He said journalists were better about talking to more people on the ground and verifying their reports with third party sources, such as grand jury documents.

We started open record acting how many tickets were written in the area and we were able, through our reporting, to find out that at one point there were more tickets written for small crimes than there were people in Ferguson. That validated a lot of the anger people felt when saying, “Listen, I’m just trying to get to work. I have to take the bus and sometimes I have to cross the street to run and catch the other bus. All of a sudden I get a jaywalking ticket. It’s 75 bucks and I can’t afford to pay it. It turns into a bench warrant because I don’t show up. Now I have \$400 in fines and if I get pulled over for whatever reason, I’m going to jail for jaywalking.”<sup>110</sup>

Stewart praised the media’s attention to the municipal court system by looking at “how these little towns were using their police forces to write tickets to mostly black and poor people to generate revenue.”<sup>111</sup> Anderson spoke to the same sentiments Villafranca and Stewart spoke of but in a more general way.

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<sup>108</sup> Pool, telephone conversation.

<sup>109</sup> Villafranca, telephone conversation.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Stewart, telephone conversation.

I think Ferguson has made everybody a little bit better, a little bit smarter. I think it goes back to Trayvon Martin or even a bit before that. That set the tone for reporting in Ferguson when everyone was there. A lot of the big major outlets and some of the more regional ones kind of got the message that [looking at stats to tell why the riots are happening] is what smart journalistic reporting is.<sup>112</sup>

Another interesting theme that popped up during interviews with the journalists is the mention of the police presence in Ferguson. Most called it “unnecessary” and “too militarized.”<sup>113</sup> Reilly said the local police departments needed to recognize treating people the way they did in Ferguson was a violation of the First Amendment, which is a “really truly essential component of American democracy.”<sup>114</sup>

### DISCUSSION

*The reason I stayed in Ferguson is because I knew the media would flock to a different story and they would kind of forget about the people here. (Mariah Stewart of The Huffington Post, telephone conversation with author, November 16, 2016)*

Local news organizations seemed to focus more on the grievances of the residents and what caused the racial tensions between blacks and whites in the community of Ferguson. National news organizations tended to “parachute in,” (a news term referring to national correspondents – who may have little local context for the stories they’re covering – who are sent to cover local news) events which is exactly what Stewart warned against.<sup>115</sup> An example of “parachuting in” to a society with a lack of knowledge and compassion for

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<sup>112</sup> Anderson, telephone conversation.

<sup>113</sup> Reilly, telephone conversation.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Stewart, telephone conversation.

the residents can be seen in the editorial decisions of The Huffington Post. The news organizations decided to send in Ryan Reilly, a white male, to cover the community that was experiencing disdain for white males. However, they semi-fixed the problem when the organization hired Mariah Stewart, a black female, as a correspondent who had lived in the area. Stewart, in her interview, mentioned how her fault lines helped create some compassion for those she was covering.<sup>116</sup> The national news realm tended to create a frame of black-white confrontation, probably for this reason of “parachuting in.” The lack of diversity in newsrooms causes holes in the representation of some demographics as well as reinforces a white racial frame.

The Kerner Commission, back in 1968, recommended some steps for more accurate coverage of racial unrest.<sup>117</sup> Through analyzing both local and national online news articles and interviewing journalists who were on the ground during the events, it seems there has been some progress on the recommendations. However, there is work to be done. Increasing the diversity in the newsrooms such as The Huffington Post will increase the representation and coverage of black culture in mainstream media. This will cause stories such as racial unrest to be treated with cultural sensitivities and the nuances it needs to be accurately portrayed. Further, it will start to disband white racial frames, black counter-frames and black-white confrontation frames.

Another way to move toward the recommendations stated by the Kerner Commission is for journalists to complete sensitivity training. According to the American

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> *Report on the National Advisory Committee.*

<http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kipner.pdf>

Press Institute, there have been a few diversity programs for journalists.<sup>118</sup> But there's not enough. There are also groups of working journalists, such as the National Association of Black Journalists, who are trying to diversify the newsroom as well as working to get sensitivity training mandated throughout all news organization training.

### CONCLUSION

*When people are in pain, they're going to be in pain. They're not worried about cameras. (Marcus DiPaola of Xinhua News, telephone conversation with author, November 16, 2016)*

The concept behind this project was to determine whether journalists have learned their lesson from the Kerner Commission when covering events of racial unrest. Several scholars have dedicated massive amounts of time to this cause, and this paper contributes to the overall understanding in a minor way. This is a never-ending field of study. There will be more race riots in the future if citizens and journalists do not fix the issues at hand. There will always be the concept of a black-white confrontation if citizens and journalists do not fix the issues at hand. There will always be "us" versus "them" if citizens and journalists do not fix the issues at hand. This study has offered suggestions

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<sup>118</sup> "Diversity Programs." *The American Press Institute*.  
<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/diversity-programs/>

on how to improve the practice of journalism through diversifying newsrooms and completing sensitivity training.

#### LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There are a few limitations pertaining to my choice of research. One limitation, and probably the most prevalent one, was the political leanings seen in the journalists. The journalism field naturally produces more liberal-leaning professionals; some journalists are also naturally better at removing personal biases than others. Finding conservative working journalists and a range of journalists with different degrees of bias removal proved to be harder than anticipated. Whether that was due to my own personal biases or the research topic remains an unanswered question.

The news articles and organizations I analyzed tended to be more liberal. Also, the 24/7 news cycle journalists experience in the modern-day media landscape did not help much either because it created a sense of “publish now, correct later,” which led to the dissemination of rumors. Lastly, the news articles I chose to analyze reflected my own biases. I – as a white female from one of the wealthier suburbs of north Dallas – was the one who picked out which articles to read and how they were to be coded, so there was some subjectivity in the analyzing process.

I believe further research would help further the journalism field as well as bring out some interesting anthropological insights. Investigations could consider one specific journalist or news organizations’ implicit biases and how those biases may have affected their coverage of breaking news stories. Another idea for potential future research includes interviewing the public about how they believe the news media did in their

coverage of racial riots. It seems that the public has a belief that news organizations are pushing a media agenda; however, this notion has not been backed up by hard data.

Lastly, it would be a worthwhile endeavor to consider how the increase of citizen journalists and social media presence affects readers' perspective of racial riots across the country.

## APPENDIX A: DEFINITIONS

**Framing:** Media emphasizes certain aspects of an event and places them within a field of meaning; related to agenda-setting theory

**Agenda-setting:** When a news organization covers one topic more frequently and that the audience will understand as a more important issue

**Stereotypes:** A widely held but oversimplified image of a person or thing

**Black-white confrontation:** A news frame that puts black communities and white communities “at war” with one another; first coined in the Kerner Commission reports

**Kerner Commission:** A commission put together by Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967 to explore the reasons behind the Detroit Riot of 1967

**Racial representation:** Representation of particular social groups or ethnicities in media coverage

**Patriarchy:** A system of society or government in which the father or the eldest male is head of the family and descent is traced through the male line

**Hegemony:** Leadership or dominance, especially by one country or social group over others

**Confirmation bias:** The subconscious tendency to seek and interpret information in a way that supports existing beliefs and expectations

APPENDIX B: NEWS ARTICLES USED FOR ANALYSIS – NATIONAL

- 1) “Bruised and Weary, Ferguson Struggles to Heal” by Julie Bosman for the New York Times
- 2) “Chaos Erupts Again in Ferguson” by Larry Copeland and Charisse Jones for USA Today
- 3) “Crowdfunding for Ferguson Officer Tops Out at \$235K” by Yamiche Alcindor, Larry Copeland and Marisol Bello for USA Today
- 4) “Evidence Supports Officer’s Account of Shooting in Ferguson” by Kimberly Kindy and Sari Horwitz for the Washington Post
- 5) “Fatal Encounter in Ferguson Took Less than 90 Seconds, Police Communications Reveal” by Monica Davey for the New York Times
- 6) “Ferguson a Defining Moment for Race Relations In USA” by Yamiche Alcindor and Aamer Madhani for USA Today
- 7) “Ferguson Burning After Grand Jury Announcement” by Yamiche Alcindor, Greg Topo, Gary Strauss and John Bacon for USA Today
- 8) “Ferguson Shooting: Myths Vs. Facts” by Yamiche Alcindor for USA Today
- 9) “Ferguson: ‘Nothing Has Changed From 1853. This Is the City of Dred Scott.’” by Sharee Silerio for The Root
- 10) “From Slavery to Ferguson: America’s History of Violence Toward Blacks” by Breanna Edwards for The Root
- 11) “Governor Activates Missouri National Guard in Advance of Ferguson Grand Jury Decision as FBI Issues Warning” by Wesley Lowery, Emily Wax-Thibodeaux and Sarah Larimer for the Washington Post

- 12) “In Ferguson and the Entire Nation, Institutional Racism Extends Far Beyond Law Enforcement” by Donna Barry, Heidi Williamson for The Root
- 13) “In Ferguson, Three Minutes – and Two Lives Forever Changed” by Manuel Roig Franzia, DeNeen L. Brown and Wesley Lowery for the Washington Post
- 14) “Justice Dept. to Probe Ferguson Police Force” by Sari Horwitz, Carol D. Leonnig and Kimberly Kindy for the Washington Post
- 15) “Militarized Police in Ferguson Unsettles Some; Pentagon Gives Cities Equipment” by Niraj Chokshi for the Washington Post
- 16) “Missouri Tries Another Idea: Call in National Guard” by Monica Davey, John Eligon and Alan Blinder for the New York Times
- 17) “Missouri: Five Arrested in Ferguson After Memorial at Shooting Site Burns” by the Associated Press for the New York Times
- 18) “New Witness Gives Her Account of Michael Brown Shooting” by Stephen A. Crockett Jr. for The Root
- 19) “Outrage Over Teenager’s Death Erupts on Social Media” by Samantha Storey for the New York Times
- 20) “Youth Groups Working for Ferguson’s Future” by Danielle C. Belton for The Root

APPENDIX C: NEWS ARTICLES USED FOR ANALYSIS – LOCAL

- 1) “After Promises of Advance Notice, Nighttime Release of Grand Jury Decision Stuns St. Louis” by Lindsay Toler for The Riverfront Times
- 2) “Another Night of Unrest in Ferguson” by Kenya Vaughn for the St. Louis American
- 3) “Artists for Justice to Host Event in Response to Ferguson Shooting” by Matthew Patston for The Missourian
- 4) “Chesterfield Mall Temporarily Closed in Latest Black Friday Shut Down” by Kenya Vaughn for the St. Louis American
- 5) “Columbia National Guard Dispatched to Ferguson” by Jared McNett for The Missourian
- 6) “Ferguson Concert Brings Peace” by Jim Gallagher for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch
- 7) “FERGUSON DAY ONE WRAPUP: Officer Kills Ferguson Teen” by Leah Thorsen and Steve Giegerich for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch
- 8) “How Will Ferguson Grievances be Resolved?” by Ken Leiser for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch
- 9) “Journalists Contemplate Media Influence in Perceptions of Ferguson” by Tori Heppermann for The Missourian
- 10) “Michael Brown Sr. to Officer Darren Wilson: ‘Turn Yourself in Right Now’” by Jessica Lussenhop for The Riverfront Times
- 11) “Mothers Respond to Non-Indictment with Another ‘Cry for Justice’” by Bridjes O’Neil for The St. Louis American
- 12) “MU Students Recount Their Arrests in Ferguson” by Kouichi Shirayanagi for The Missourian

- 13) “National Guard a Welcome Sight for Longtime Downtown Ferguson Residents” by Mitch Ryals for The Riverfront Times
- 14) “Nixon Swears in Ferguson Commission” by Bridjes O’Neil for the St. Louis American
- 15) “No Indictment for Ferguson Officer Darren Wilson in Fatal Shooting of Michael Brown” by Lindsay Toler for The Riverfront Times
- 16) “Protesters Prepare for the Worst in Ferguson” by Jennifer S. Mann for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch
- 17) “Shut Down Protests Continue Saturday in Brentwood” by Kenya Vaughn for the St. Louis American
- 18) “Stephen Webber Offers Solutions to Ferguson Problem” by Guimel Sibingo for The Missourian
- 19) “Tear Gas, Shootings, Arson and Looting in Ferguson After No True Bill Announcement” by Mitch Ryals for The Riverfront Times
- 20) “Weariness of Ferguson Protests Grows” by Koran Addo for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

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