Lee Zhi Ying

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Assignment 1

News misrepresentation of African Americans in Crime Reporting

Sam Dubose, Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Renisha McBride, Jordan Davis, Kendrec McDade, Timothy Stansbury Jr., Sean Bell, Aaron Campbell, Orlando Brown, Travares McGill and John Crawford. These are the names of African-Americans who had been killed by police, security guards, or neighbourhood watchmen in America, according to Tony Weaver Jr. in Analysis of Representations of African Americans in Non-linear Streaming Media Content. They serve as examples which reflect the lives of African-Americans in the society. Although the loss of lives has triggered protests in the country and result in the advocacy of gun reforms, and the opposition of militarisation of local police forces, the news’ biased reporting on African-Americans is still prevalent in the society.

Stereotypes linking to African-Americans are prevalent in the news industry. Physical stereotypes of African-American people include darker skin tone, broader nose and lips, Also, media often refer to African-Americans as “Blacks”. By enforcing the connection between skin colour and crime, the audience perception and stereotypes of African-American will grow. A study by The Sentencing Project has shown that although African-Americans comprise of only 21 % of the people who were arrested in Los Angeles, 37% of the suspects shown on Television crime news stories was African-American. Moreover, the percentage of white Americans who had been victimised by African-Americans was 10%, but 42% of such crimes were broadcasted on television news. Volume 48 of the Journal of Experimental Social Psychology states that African-Americans who are physically more stereotypical are more likely to be judged violent or criminals in the news. For instance, in crime reporting, news portrayal of African-Americans criminals often include a more significant amount of visual and informational content as compared to White criminals. A Social Science & Medicine Journal issue disclosed a worrying pattern of racial bias whereby individuals are nearly two times more probable to be convicted if the victims are African-Americans and Latinos as opposed to White Americans.

Framing is also present in news representation of African-Americans. With reference to Converging media, An introduction to Mass communication, framing is the presentation and phrasing of a message in a certain way, which can change the public’s opinion on it.  According to Polit Behav, minority groups in support of the accused’s rights and push for state protection from violence were labelled as “enemies of freedom”. Also, in crime reporting, the use of juxtapositions such as “law-abiding citizens “ and “criminals” were prominent as African-Americans have long been linked to crime in the white mind. According to the hypothermic needle model, it can be assumed that messages have a profound, direct, and equal impact on individuals, leading to the assumption that the public relates crimes to African-Americans. This is evident in a study by The Lancet, African-Americans were stereotyped as drug addicts despite a similar rate of occurrence of drug use among White Americans. African-Americans were also disproportionately targeted for incarceration. According to the Human Rights Watch, although African-Americans comprise only 14 percent of frequent drug users, they make up 37 percent of those comprehended for drug offences. Also, African-Americans and Hispanics are thrice as likely to be checked in traffic stops than white Americans. Furthermore, African-Americans are also twice as likely as white Americans to be comprehended and four times as likely to experience forceful encounters with police, as shown in the International Journal of Intercultural Relations. According to Converging Media, A New Introduction to Mass Communication, framing alters people’s perception on other people, issues and events as good communicators would frame debates in such a way that their views would be in favour of instead of their opponents. Since media is a form of business and is profit-driven, media organisations would publish news articles which relate to these stereotypes and build on the stereotypes the public have on African-Americans to garner more views from the public and earn more profits, even if the news published is an inaccurate portrayal of African-Americans.

With reference to the Powerful Effects theory, when members of the public are exposed to stereotypes in biased news reporting, they would form an inaccurate perception of specific people or groups. If African-Americans are overly depicted in the news as perpetrators, people will create the impression that African-Americans are usually associated with violence and crime. Media crime coverage not only heightens the prominence of black crimes, it also warps public’s perception of who commits crimes and set off biased reactions. The mainstream media are good communicators of cultural norms and beliefs which define how the world is and messages included in the media is usually stereotypical. By the Cultivation theory, the over-portrayal of white victimisation and black criminalisation in the news would result in readers to develop misperception on the African American community due to over-exposure to consistent media stereotypes in the news, hence adopting beliefs of African-Americans which coincide with the media content and naturally associating crimes with them. Especially for individuals who are heavy media users who do not have personal experiences with the portrayed realities, they are more likely to form perceptions of African Americans that are congruent with those shown in the media, with reference to the Representations of African Americans in Non-linear Media content by Tony Weaver Jr. People from other countries in the world would also cultivate the mean world syndrome, and view America as more polarised than it is in reality. Readers may also be desensitised and find it normal that African-Americans are represented as criminals in the news since media performs the role of correlation and interpret meanings to the audience, which may not be representative of the reality.

On the other hand, While the majority of the news media portray African-Americans negatively, there have been efforts in the news media to reflect African-Americans positively. Movements such as Black Lives Matter are gaining momentum around the world. In 2014, Black Lives Movements had made headlines in the news, raising social awareness on African-Americans now as compared to the past. Black Lives Matters is a movement which exposes white privilege and racism against the African-Americans in America. As a result, people are gradually steering away from previous stereotypes on African-Americans. However, according to , media portrayal of these movements are usually negative and often marginalised. For example, the news media limit discussion on most significant issues to Black Lives Matter Movement. Although there are more positive coverage on African-Americans, the important issues are heavily censored by media and as a result, the beliefs people have on African-Americans would not change significantly.

Moreover, it is assumed that audiences are passive and do not think critically when looking at news, hence would accept the news portrayal specific racial groups such as the criminalisation of African Americans and victimisation of White Americans and influence into the same thinking.  However, in reality, each person has his or her own set of ideas and beliefs as they belong to different backgrounds and have their personal experience. Hence, with reference to consistency theory, people choose to consume what is consistent with his preferences and beliefs. Therefore, even if media does interpret news for people, people do reject what the media presents if it does not coincide with their predetermined preferences. Moreover, in this modern age, people are exposed to a wide variety of news with competing messages. Ideally, this means that audiences should be able to access all these information and come to a rational conclusion of what is suitable for them .

In conclusion, the news media can affect society’s perception towards the African-Americans due to media bias and framing. By portraying the African-Americans in a certain way, people are influenced and form stereotypes about them and the inaccurate portrayal of African-Americans would be passed down generation to generation, resulting in a homogenised culture rather than a diverse one in the long run. However, it is not certain as different people come from different backgrounds and interpret news differently and as a result, it is difficult to prove whether biased crime reporting in the news really shape the public’s perceptions on African-Americans.

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