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#IfTheyGunnedMeDown: Postmodern media criticism in a post-racial world

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12

#IFTHEYGUNNEDMEDOWN

Postmodern Media Criticism in a Post-Racial World

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After the 2014 fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old African American man, by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, some news organizations included in their immediate coverage a photo of Brown taken from his Facebook page. In a now iconic image, Brown stands in a Nike tank top, unsmiling, and flashing a peace sign (misidentified by some news organizations as a gang sign). Later, less incendiary photos from Brown's Facebook page surfaced. Within a few days of Brown's death, the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown appeared on social media. Young African Americans posted two photos of themselves, representing positive and potentially negative images, questioning which photo would be used by the media if they were shot by police. These posts reflected an insight into the notion of media representation that likely escapes most audience members who regularly view news coverage of Black men. These young African Americans perceptively and concisely identified the problems inherent in dominant media representations of Black men as pathological criminals, a persistent representation that affects both racial attitudes and public policy decisions.

Stuart Hall, whose work on race and representation influenced a generation of critical media scholars, had died only a few months before the Ferguson shooting. He would have quickly recognized the meaning of these postings. His work challenged the "preferred reading" of media texts; he described the cultural power of analyzing those meanings as the "politics of signification" (1980, p. 138). In this chapter, I will describe the work of Hall and others who have examined race and media through the lens of representation to show how media texts generate powerful meanings about African Americans and other people of color. Second,

I will argue that the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown posts are consistent with a body of work in media studies that has largely failed to effect change in media representations of people of color. Finally, I will ask whether social media or other pop culture texts have the potential to shift the discussion to an audience beyond the academy.

Media Representation and Race

Hall used the term *representation* to describe the complex ways in which the mass media both present images and re-present images that have multiple meanings, especially about race and ethnicity. For Hall, the analysis of media representations is key to unlocking the power of the dominant meanings—meanings that indirectly serve the interests of the wealthiest and most powerful members of a society. His notion of representation is transformational and

> a way of constantly wanting new kinds of knowledges to be produced in the world, new kinds of subjectivities to be explored and new dimensions of meaning which have not been foreclosed by the systems of power which are in operations.
>
> (Jhally, 1997)

As John Fiske explained, "The definition of culture as a constant site of struggle between those with and those without power underpins the most interesting current work in cultural studies" (1992, p. 292). He called Hall's seminal essay, *Encoding/Decoding*, a "turning point" in cultural studies, because it "introduces the idea that television programs do not have a single meaning but are relatively open texts, capable of being read in different ways by different people and suggests that "there is a necessary correlation between people's social situations and the meanings that they may generate from a television program" (p. 292).

Hall (1980) described decoding media texts through two levels of analysis. Simply put, the first level is the denotative or preferred reading—that which was intended by the producer—and the connotative (negotiated and/or oppositional) readings of the same message. What Hall would describe as a negotiated reading of media texts allows for analysis beyond the meaning intended by their producers. According to Hall, such readings require a recognition of the dominant ideology at work and how that ideology is "shot through with contradictions" (1980, p. 137). Hall wrote, "Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal relation to the discourses and logics of power" (p. 137). In this way, the denotative, commonsense meanings of the stories can only be understood within the context provided by connotative, interpretive readings.

Hall ultimately described oppositional readings of media messages in which audiences resist the preferred meaning and recognize deeper, problematic meanings. As Hall said, "One of the most significant political moments . . . is the point when events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading. Here the 'politics of signification'—the struggle in discourse—is joined" (p. 138). Fiske and Hartley described this highest level of analysis of media messages as that which recognizes the "mythology" or "ideology" that hides in the coding of media messages: "This, the third order of signification, reflects the broad principles by which a culture organizes and interprets the reality with which it has to cope" (1978, p. 46).

Other cultural studies scholars have advanced similar notions about representation in interpreting media texts. Louis Althusser (1971), for instance, described the concepts of hailing and interpellation to explain how media messages coax audiences into specific understandings that serve the interests of the message producers. As Fiske noted, "These terms derive from the idea that any language, whether it be verbal, visual, tactile or whatever, is part of social relations and that in communicating with someone we are reproducing social relationships" (1992, p. 289). Likewise, Antonio Gramsci (1971) used the concept of *hegemony*—the subtle, unseen political, social and economic ideology that reflects the interests of the wealthy and powerful—to describe the way in which media representations function.

Like Althusser and Gramsci, Roland Barthes was concerned with the subtle functioning of hegemony. In his seminal work *Mythologies* (1957/1972), Barthes described his efforts to examine French society through the prism of cultural myths:

> The starting point of these reflections was usually a feeling of impatience at the sight of the "naturalness" with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history . . . I hate seeing Nature and History confused at every turn, and I wanted to track down, in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*, the ideological abuse which, in my view, is hidden there.
>
> (p. 11, emphasis in original)

Barthes was concerned with how artifacts of popular culture—advertising, photojournalism, studio wrestling, and others—reflected a kind of groupthink that doesn't allow for more complicated interpretations of events. Similarly, Clifford Geertz argued that "as a frame for thought, common sense is as totalizing as any other . . . It pretends to reach past illusion to truth, to, as we say, things as they are" (1983. p. 84).

Cultural studies scholars have frequently addressed the notion of representation in news coverage, which routinely reflects mythical common

sense about the events of the day. Fiske and Hartley (1978) identified "myth chains" as one of the ways in which journalistic storytelling embeds ideological understandings, and they argued that "news reporting and fiction use similar signs because they naturally refer to the same myths in our culture" (p. 65). Himmelstein (1984) identified the "myth of the puritan ethic" (p. 205) in news coverage that routinely extolled the values of hard work and middle-class life while implicitly questioning the values of the underclass. Richard Campbell (1991a, 1991b), in describing the myth-making capacity of journalism, suggested that the notion of "balance" was itself a "code word for . . . middle American values." He continued, "These values are encoded into mainstream journalism—how it selects the news, where it places its beat reporters, who and how it promotes, how it critically reports and thereby naively supports government positions" (1991a, p. 75).

Sociologist Herman Gray (1986, 1991, 1995) has examined racial representations in both prime time television programs and journalism and identified the "twin representations" of African Americans in fictional and nonfictional television (1986, p. 304), contrasting the upper middle-class life portrayed on *The Cosby Show* with underclass Black life portrayed in a contemporaneous PBS documentary, *The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America*. Gray argued that race as it was portrayed on fictional television was consistent with The American Dream, and appealed "to the utopian desire in blacks and whites for racial oneness and equality while displacing the persistent reality of racism and racial inequality or the kinds of social struggles and cooperation required to eliminate them" (1986, p. 302). Gray argued that the underclass Black life on nonfictional TV, on the other hand, failed to "identify complex social forces like racism, social organization, economic dislocation, unemployment, the changing economy, or the welfare state" in explaining the crisis in the urban underclass (p. 300).

Gray concluded that

> the assumptions and framework that structure these representations often displace representations that would enable viewers to see that many individuals trapped in the under class have the very same qualities (of hard work and sacrifices as seen on *Cosby*) but lack the options and opportunities to realize them.
>
> (p. 303)

My own work on race and news expands on Gray's examination of the twin representations of African Americans (as well as Hispanic and *other* Americans); in describing my approach in *Race, Myth and the News*, I wrote, "The danger of the commonsense claim to truth is in its exclusion of those who live outside the familiar world it represents" (1995, p. 18). My first study (Campbell, 1995) found that the racial mythology

embedded in broadcasts across the United States represented "a hegemonic consensus about race and class that sustains myths about life outside of white, 'mainstream' America" (p. 132).

I identified three persistent myths in representations of race in American journalism (Campbell, 1995; Campbell et al., 2012). In the "myth of marginality," people of color (who are ignored) are less significant and are marginalized in news coverage (1995). In the hundreds of newscasts I viewed, I observed the general invisibility of people of color in the news, including news in cities with large minority populations. Additionally, I cited other studies (including Entman, 1990, 1992 and Gist 1990) providing evidence of the underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayal of minorities in all forms of daily news coverage.

Second, I identified a "myth of difference" in local TV newscasts in which people of color are routinely represented differently than White people. Television news reinforced historical stereotypes about people of color, both "positive" stereotypes of successful African American athletes and entertainers and negative stereotypes (especially of African American and Hispanic men) as violent criminals. I closely analyzed several stories that reflected a pattern of subtle racial biases in the newsroom and argued that well-intended journalists (and audience members) "are likely unaware of the biases and stereotypical thinking that are deeply rooted in the cognitive and cultural processes in a society that is dominated by white, middle-class perceptions" (p. 82).

Finally, in my analysis of local television news coverage of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, I identified a "myth of assimilation," in which people of color, especially African Americans, are shown to have overcome racism and become fully assimilated into the American mainstream, where equality has been achieved. This is now referred to as post-racialism. Stories about the King holiday were dominated by a theme of racial harmony, despite the evidence of lingering racial hostility in many of the cities adopting that theme. I wasn't surprised by this; as I wrote:

> The social and professional processes that dictate how news is covered are based on an implicit common sense, a common sense that may have more to do with stereotyped notions about the world than with a true understanding of it. Most Americans would like to believe that their country is a tolerant and fair one, that discrimination does not exist, that equal opportunity is there for all. But what we would like to believe and what actually exists are clearly at odds.
> (1995, p. 111)

I was concerned about news organizations creating a mythical world in which racial harmony is the norm while continuing to bombard audiences with stories about people of color suspected of violent crimes.

In reflecting on the work of Gray (1986, 1991) and Jhally and Lewis (1992), I noted: "If our society is the just and fair one that was portrayed on King Day, the constant barrage of menacing images of minorities that more commonly appear on local TV news will undoubtedly fuel racist attitudes" (p. 111). When revisiting representations of race on local television news in 2012 (Campbell, LeDuff and Brown), we found few changes to the myths I had identified in 1995; indeed, the mythic representations of race in journalism in the age of the Barack Obama presidency seemed even more problematic.

Certainly, the gap between Black and White opportunity in the United States has not closed during the Obama era, and the 2007 recession had a more dire impact on Black America than on the population at large. According to the Economic Policy Institute (2014), the African American community suffered a "dramatic increase in unemployment and a staggering loss of income" during the recession (p. 1). The institute found that the median Black household's income fell 10.1%, compared to 5.4% for White households. A few other numbers similarly reflect the disparities: Twenty-six percent of Black American families live in poverty; 11% of White families live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). About 32% of White Americans have college degrees; fewer than 19% of African Americans have graduated from college (JBHE.com, 2013). Black unemployment is over 11%. White unemployment is 5.4% (Rosen, 2014). Joblessness among Black teenagers is nearly 38%; 17% of White teenagers are jobless (PBS Newshour, 2014). African Americans are jailed at a rate of six times the rate of Whites (Drake, 2013). African Americans are arrested at a rate 10 times higher than people who are not Black (Heath, 2014). The notion of post-racialism—the belief that America has overcome its racist legacy—seems preposterous in the face of such statistics, although it continues to reflect the attitude of more than half of White Americans, who hold "explicit anti-Black attitudes" (Edsall, 2013, p. 1). Remarkably, most Whites believe there is more anti-White than anti-Black discrimination, which they believe has been "all but eliminated" (Fletcher, 2015). Although research by media scholars has for decades pointed out the penchant for media institutions to provide gross misrepresentations of African Americans and other minority populations, there has not been a significant change in those misrepresentations in the primary (sometimes called "mainstream," a term now loaded with conflicting political connotations) media systems in the U.S.

Race, Media, and Postmodernism

My interest here is in whether the social media posts following Michael Brown's shooting reflect a new postmodern media criticism, moving the critique of problematic racial representations into the realm of popular

culture, where it is then addressed by traditional news organizations. Certainly, this would not be the first time that pop culture has illuminated racial attitudes in the United States. As early as the 1960s, comedian Richard Pryor pushed the envelope by challenging racial inequities during his hilarious but incendiary performances. As Pryor biographer Scott Saul noted, "He's talking about the gap between how [Blacks and Whites] travel through the world and perceive it. And people are starting to have a conversation through him, this very conversation about racial injustice in America" (on *Fresh Air*, 2014). Satirical television programs in the 1970s and 1980s—e.g., NBC's *Saturday Night Live* and Fox's *In Living Color*—also ventured into race in a way that mainstream media had not.

Rolling Stone media critic Jon Katz presciently argued in 1992 that young Americans were looking to places other than traditional organizations for news and information. He contended that popular music, non-news television and the film industry informed America's youth far more than newspapers or TV newscasts did:

> Straight news—the Old News—is pooped, confused and broke . . .
>
> In the place of Old News, something dramatic is evolving, a new culture of information, a hybrid New News—dazzling, adolescent, irresponsible, fearless, frightening and powerful. The New News is a heady concoction, part Hollywood film and TV movie, part pop music and pop art, mixed with popular culture and celebrity magazines, tabloid telecasts, cable and home video.
>
> Increasingly, the New News is seizing the functions of mainstream journalism, sparking conversations and setting the country's social and political agenda.
>
> (Katz, 1992, p. 33)

As far as the "New News" and its role in the media discussion about race, Katz argued that film director Spike Lee was "far ahead of his mainstream competitors on racial issues. So is [rapper] Ice Cube" (p. 35). Although Katz's article significantly pre-dated the advent of social media and did not use the term postmodernism, this new means of information dissemination reflects a kind of postmodern "New News" on steroids, with young people flocking to social media sites to share news and opinions about relevant events, including events related to race. Young African Americans especially are flocking to Twitter, at a significantly higher rate than young Whites (Smith, 2014).

But first a word about postmodernism, a slippery concept at best, and one that tends to defy definition as it applies to media studies. For instance, *Television Quarterly* once headlined an article, "'We Know It When We See It': Postmodernism and Television" (Campbell & Freed, 1993). The authors described "PoMo" as "newfangled attitudes about oldfangled

ideas" (p. 75) and cautioned about approaching media criticism with a postmodern filter: even "trying to define and categorize PoMo style is a decidedly logical, rational and modern critical practice—the very essence of what postmodernism wants to resist at all turns" (p. 76).

Collins (1992) similarly argued that postmodernism has been employed in divergent, contradictory ways, and listed six different applications of the term:

> (1) a distinctive style; (2) a movement that emerged in the sixties, seventies, or eighties, depending on the medium in question; (3) a condition or milieu that typifies an entire set of socioeconomic factors; (4) a specific mode of philosophical inquiry that throws into question the givens of philosophical discourse; (5) a very particular type of "politics"; and (6) an emergent form of cultural analysis shaped by all of the above.
>
> (p. 327)

More recent discussions include the notion of post-postmodernism, called automodernity by Robert Samuels (2010), which posits that new media herald a new cultural and technological period that empowers individual media users in a way that traditional media have not. Baya's analysis of automodernity noted that this period "transcends the initial postmodern diagnosis and requires new perspectives upon understanding audiences" (2013, p. 157). He argued that with digital communication and the "omnipresence" of media messages, audiences spend increasing amounts of time both receiving and producing media content. As Baya observed, "The average 'digital youth' user simultaneously operates his laptop for working, socializing on instant chat or on networks such as Facebook, participating in online games, giving feedback on blogs and engaging in several other types of electronic conversations—multitasking and mixing work with leisure, private with public space" (p. 157).

#IfTheyGunnedMeDown

Acknowledging the ephemeral nature of the concept of postmodernism, I proceed with an analysis that, in a simple sense, argues that postmodern elements of contemporary media defy and challenge traditional media in a way that is worthy of analysis, especially when it comes to representations of race. Perhaps more significantly, I'll argue that the impact of the social media critique becomes more profound as it generates coverage by traditional media outlets and reaches larger (and older) audiences. That was particularly true of the social media posts following Michael Brown's shooting, an event that—along with other high-profile killings of Black

men by White police officers—launched a series of protests across the United States that continued into 2015. Within six weeks of the shooting, the phrase #IfTheyGunnedMeDown was used on Twitter more than 168,000 times (Vega, 2014), prompting *The New York Times* to comment, "The speed with which the shooting of Mr. Brown has resonated on social media has helped propel and transform a local shooting into a national cause" (Vega, 2014).

The power of Black Twitter, a collective of African American Twitter users who function as a kind of "media response team" (Vega, 2014), is a function of the fact that young African Americans use Twitter at a rate much higher than Whites (Pew Research Center 2014). Generally, the news coverage of the Michael Brown shooting was consistent with the kind of stereotypical coverage vilified by cultural studies scholars; Brown was just another Black criminal, and White officials provided a commonsense explanation of the shooting. But in its coverage of the hashtag campaign, *The New York Times* addressed issues of media representations that typically go uncovered. The *Times* interviewed a 32-year-old blogger who said news photographs in stories that involved African American men often "removed context from a situation" (Vega, 2014). The newspaper also reported on another young Black man who had posted his own #IfTheyGunnedMeDown photos and noted that Black victims are "portrayed as if they deserved it, cop versus robbers, good guys versus black guys" (Vega, 2014). A 19-year-old student told the *Times* that the Black social media movement deserved to be taken seriously: "Hashtag activism is activism . . . We might be tweeting from a couch, but we're also getting up and doing the work that needs to be done" (Vega, 2014).

The #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign quickly reached hundreds of thousands of social media users, and a much larger audience as coverage of the campaign exploded. Many major national news organization—including *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Washington Post*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Time* magazine, and NPR—featured extensive coverage of the campaign, including multiple examples of the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown postings. *Washington Post* reporter Soraya Nadia McDonald suggested that the campaign questioned

> if it's possible for people, especially young black men, to live their lives online without worry that an innocent photo of them gettin' gully at a party will somehow become appropriate as evidence of black thuggery . . . The hashtag asks if black teens have the same right as others to make mistakes—to do dumb things and post then post about it on Facebook or clown around with their friends—without becoming branded in perpetuity.
>
> (2014)

In its coverage, National Public Radio sought out young people who had tweeted #IfTheyGunnedMeDown photos:

> There's that ambiguous "they" in the hashtag, and we asked the tweeters who, in their minds, it referred to. Generally they said it referred to those with power and authority—in particular the police and the media. "But it could have been directed to anyone who is small-minded enough to fear a young black person automatically if it's nighttime, if he's wearing a hoodie, if his music is too loud, or if he's reaching for his wallet," said Brianna Chevonne. "It can apply to anyone of any race who is ignorant enough to be fearful of young black people to the point they would take their lives."
>
> (NPR Staff, 2014)

The hashtag campaign was also covered in Europe. The BBC ended its story this way: "The hashtag has proved wildly popular and been used more than 100,000 times in the last 24 hours. '#IfTheyGunnedMeDown Tweets should be required reading in every journalism class in America,' said one commentator" (BBC Trending, 2014).

Six months after Michael Brown's death, the hashtag had been used on social media sites more than two million times. It had inspired a mural at the Center for Civil and Human Rights in Atlanta and at least two songs, extending its impact outside of traditional media. Other hashtag campaigns that surfaced amid the Ferguson protests also merited national coverage. CNN, ABC, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, the BBC, and other major news organizations reported on 300,000-plus posts with the hashtag #CrimingWhileWhite, which told the stories of young White people who recognized their privileged treatment from police that would have been unlikely had they been Black. The posts described things such as "When I was 22 I pushed a cop when I was drunk at a bar. I was told to go home and sleep it off" and "Pulled over in high school. Black friend searched & asked if he has dope—Cop tells me I must be lost & to get home" (Williams, 2014). Although generally intended as an important acknowledgement of White privilege, some African Americans took offense. As one wrote, "#WhitePrivilege is being able to use a hashtag to admit to committing crimes and being applauded for bravery" (Williams, 2014).

Similarly, when riots broke out at a pumpkin festival in Keene, New Hampshire two months after the Michael Brown shooting, the hashtag #pumpkinfest was used to highlight the differences in the news coverage (and the treatment by police) of the White rioters. One post, labeled "Your media guide to the difference between #Ferguson and #pumpkinfest," included photos from each event, with the Ferguson protestors

labeled "thugs, animals, destroying their community" and the Keene rioters "rowdy, mischief, booze filled revelers" (Kleeman, 2014). But the #pumpkinfest campaign received less news coverage, thereby limiting its impact.

The substantial coverage of the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign by traditional news organizations is a sign that those organizations recognize the significance of hashtag activism. Perhaps those organizations may begin to address journalistic conventions that continue to marginalize Black and Brown men, and will consider alternative approaches to cover violent crime. As the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown activists have succinctly observed, journalism has failed the poor communities in which violence and police violence thrive. Crimes in those communities are generally covered as singular events without history, without context. Coverage of the roots of that behavior—failed economic policies, disastrous public education, substance abuse, racism—is not part of the journalistic routine and gets only sporadic attention. Is it possible that journalism will acknowledge this weakness and more effectively provide coverage that helps explain the crises in America's poorest communities? Probably not. As I pessimistically observed 20 years ago,

> America's racial myths—rooted in the nescience of hundreds of years of White supremacy—endure despite the best intentions of the news media. It may well be that the very nature of those media—and of the society in which they exist—may not allow them to function in a manner that will contribute to more accurate portrayals of life outside of the mainstream. That would require newsroom process and social forces to be systematically questioned and altered.
>
> (Campbell, 1995, pp. 135–136)

Race and Postmodern Media

So the real hope for the media's ability to address police violence and other forms of contemporary racism may not be in traditional journalism but in the postmodern efforts of hashtag activists and other forms of non-news media, what Katz (1992) described as the New News. Postmodern media addressing race in a more complicated way than traditional journalism include websites such as Buzzfeed (see "If Black people said the stuff White people say"), films such as 2014's *Dear White People* (based on a social media site examining the "micro-aggressions" of contemporary racism), and cable television programs such as the Comedy Channel's *The Daily Show* (with its "Senior Black Correspondent") and *The Nightly Show with Larry Wilmore* (once *The Daily Show*'s Senior Black Correspondent). Prime time network television in 2015—e.g., *Blackish* and *Fresh Off the Boat*—has shown an inclination to address

race in new ways. Even the popular ABC drama *Scandal*, which throughout its run had adopted a post-racial stance in which the African American star's race was rarely addressed, aired an episode in March of 2015 in which the Ferguson episode was fictionally recreated a few blocks from the White House. On HBO's *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* the week after the Michael Brown shooting, the satirist delivered a stinging 15 minute diatribe ridiculing the racist police response, the militarization of police forces in Ferguson and elsewhere and, indirectly, the traditional news media's "neutral" approach to the events in which White authority figures are cited to provide "balance" to a story in which the racist behavior of those authorities was otherwise ignored.

And postmodern media are gaining a significant foothold in American culture. When *The Daily Show*'s longtime host and executive producer John Stewart announced his exit from the program in February of 2015, *The New York Times* observed the role the satirist played in contemporary culture: "For a segment of the audience that had lost its faith in broadcast and print news outlets or never regarded them as sacrosanct in the first place, Mr. Stewart emerged a figure as trusted as Walter Cronkite or Edward R. Murrow" (Itzkoff, 2015). Such a comparison might draw guffaws from traditionalists, but it is indicative of the potential of postmodern media to serve the role that journalists once performed in a democratic society, which includes explaining how race and racism function, notions that traditional journalism has generally been inept at addressing. Even President Barack Obama, in an interview with *Rolling Stone*, acknowledged Stewart's impact:

> I don't watch a lot of TV news . . . I like *The Daily Show*, so sometimes if I'm home late at night, I'll catch snippets of that. I think Jon Stewart's brilliant. It's amazing to me the degree to which he's able to cut through a bunch of the nonsense—for young people in particular, where I think he ends up having more credibility than a lot of more conventional news programs do.
>
> (Wenner, 2012)

There are no simple answers to questions about the impact postmodern media might have on journalism, racial attitudes, and public policy. Several questions seem particularly significant: Will the problematic news representations of African Americans and other people of color have less impact in a world in which the audiences for traditional journalism are drying up and young people are exposed to less stereotypical news coverage and more complicated discussions of race in non-news media? Will journalists reconsider newsroom conventions that focus on *crimes* instead of *crime*? That is, will news organizations consider new approaches to the coverage of the root causes—the economic, social and educational

disparities that disproportionately affect African American and Latino communities—of the stories about violent crime that they tell on a daily basis? Will the efforts of hashtag activists and other voices from postmodern media have an impact on public policy?

Within six months of the Michael Brown controversy in Ferguson, several other stories about police brutality against people of color gained national coverage. In Cleveland, a 12-year-old African American boy was shot and killed by police who mistook the pellet gun he was playing with for a real weapon. In New York, Eric Garner, a Black man, died after a police officer used a chokehold to subdue him after he was arrested for selling loose cigarettes at a store in Staten Island; Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," became a rallying cry for protestors. A Hispanic man armed only with rocks was repeatedly shot by police officers in Pasco, Washington, and a South Asian man was hospitalized after being slammed to the ground by a police officer in Madison, Alabama. Protest marches and social media campaigns of varying impact followed all of these incidents. Activists called for investigations, indictments, and changes in police procedures.

If nothing else, the attention paid by traditional media with large audiences to the social media campaigns and protests was significant, and the public debate seems to have expanded. The #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign was preceded by the Occupy Wall Street movement, which also utilized social media to accentuate the economic disparities between the vast majority of Americans and the wealthiest, known as the "1 percent." The Occupy protests worked to raise awareness about income inequality, which became a focus of widely publicized political debate in the ensuing months. But the likelihood of significant changes to American-style capitalism seem remote, and the police brutality protests, despite pithy catch phrases useful on social media and in street protests—Hands Up, Don't Shoot; I Can't Breathe; Black Lives Matter—may be equally ineffective at bringing about long-term changes to public policy and flawed journalistic coverage of the issues.

The Ferguson protests did have some tangible impacts. In February 2015, the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* published an extraordinary, 14-part multimedia project titled "Ferguson" that examined the shooting, the protests, the investigation, policing, civil rights, the courts, religion, education, the economy, and solutions. This is precisely the kind of journalism that is all too rare in the US, the kind that might help explain racism and the factors contributing to the animosity between police and minority communities. In terms of public policy, at the height of the Ferguson protests, President Obama requested $75 million in federal funding to arm local police forces with body cameras, although the efficacy of that approach was questioned, especially because videotape from cell phones that caught police misconduct in other high-profile cases didn't have much of an impact (Friedman, 2014). In March 2015, a Justice Department

civil rights investigation concluded that the Ferguson police department was racially biased and "routinely" violated the constitutional rights of the city's Black citizens (Horwitz, 2015), and led to the resignation of Ferguson's city manager and police chief.

But some observers questioned the real impact of the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign and the related protests. The son of Malcolm X, Ilyasah Shabazz, opined in *The New York Times* that his father would have been "heartened by the youth-led movement taking place across the nation, and abroad, in response to institutional brutality." He continued:

> In a sense, his ability to boil down hard truths into strong statements and catchy phrases presaged our era of hashtag activism.
>
> But he would be the first to say that slogans aren't action. They amount to nothing but a complaint filed against a system that does not care. In his speeches, he did not simply cry "Inequality!"—he demanded justice, and he laid out the steps necessary to achieve it.
>
> (2014)

Media mogul Oprah Winfrey and activist Al Sharpton also weighed in on the movement's lack of focus and identifiable leadership. While promoting her film *Selma*, which captured a pivotal moment in the civil rights protests of the 1960s, Winfrey commented, "I think that what can be gleaned from our film . . . is to really take note of the strategic intention required when you want real change" (Somashekhar, 2015).

Cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson questioned President Obama's reaction to the Ferguson protests, noting the first African American president's continued role as the media's exemplar of post-racial America. Rather than vilifying the horrid, racially motivated behavior of White police officers, according to Dyson, the president was, "vague, halting and sincerely noncommittal" (2015). Dyson, an African American who has written widely about the role of race in popular culture, continued,

> Instead, [President Obama] lauded the racial progress that he said he had witnessed "in my own life," substituting his life for ours, and signaled again how his story of advancement was ours, suggesting, sadly, that the sum of our political fortunes in his presidency may be lesser than the parts of our persistent suffering.

Post-racialism in the media lives on when America's Black president serves as a constant, powerful contrast to the realities of racism. The young African Americans who posted their photos under the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag may have contributed to an awakening of those realities, but the long-term impact of that campaign and the other anti-racism protests that

surfaced in 2014 remains to be seen. As the media critic/public intellectual Noam Chomsky observed of the Occupy Wall Street movement, "The Occupy tactic was a remarkably successful tactic . . . It just lighted a fire all over the place. People were just waiting for something to light the spark. And it was extremely successful, but it's a tactic, and tactics are not strategies. A tactic has a half-life; it has diminishing returns" (2013).

Ultimately, the Ferguson protests and related social media campaigns will likely not trigger dramatic shifts in American public policy or in traditional media approaches. Local TV news audiences will continue to be bombarded with murder-of-the-day coverage of poor Black and Hispanic communities, and journalists will largely continue to ignore the context for the horrible realities of life in America's most impoverished communities. Sadly, the good news may be that audiences for traditional journalism are rapidly shrinking, and future generations of social media-savvy audiences will rely more heavily on media that have the potential to provide representations of people and communities of color that refute the mythical notions that have dominated news coverage for decades.

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