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Racial Media Framing of Riots and Protests:A Constructionist View

Vanessa Pruitt

ABSTRACT

Protests are one way in which minority groups, lacking representation or access to policy making to change their situation, bring attention to social justice issues deeply affecting them. However, although protests are generally an attempt to gain media attention, the media are often unsympathetic to the causes underlying the protests which they support. To the contrary, media tend to discredit these social movements and apply their own agenda to their reporting through a process called framing. Framing is rooted in the theory of social constructionism, wherein the media play a role in constructing our shared social reality. The way most media currently frame minority riots and protests has major implications for race relations within society. The way media responds to minority protests and social movements is examined in this paper; additionally, solutions to these media framing issues are speculated.

KEYWORDS: Social Justice, Theory, Media, Race

The majority of people in the United States recognize that racism is still an issue in this country, but they would like to believe it is not widespread (Huffpost 2015). The fact is, racism is still prevalent in all areas of the country but has evolved to take on different forms. Because it's less socially acceptable now to project explicit racism, racist actions have taken on a more implicit form that can be intentional or unintentional. One of these subtle forms of racism is called racial microaggressions, which communicate demeaning messages to people of color and other marginalized groups (Hoffman, Granger, Vallejos & Moats 2016). The problem with these subtle microaggressions is that they are often dismissed as "harmless" or "normal" by society in general. In addition, another hidden form of racism today includes systemic racism, which involves elements of racism built into our social systems including wage discrimination, school segregation, and lack of political representation (Byrd 2011). These forms of racism and prejudice are not often visible by society at large.

When groups of people in society are lacking privilege and power, in order to advocate for change, they find it necessary to find alternative ways to bring attention to social justice issues. One natural response to the long-standing experience of degradation and oppression is to protest. Protest movements play a significant role in addressing social justice issues by bringing light to "hidden" racism and prejudice much of society may not be aware of.

Because the racial context for protests is often hidden or dismissed, and racial microaggressions become normalized, the media struggles to provide context to protest movements, and their response to these acts of protest can contain racial microaggressions in and of themselves. The media play a significant role in shaping perceptions of riots and protests as either legitimate or illegitimate forms of social demonstration (Campbell, Chidester, Bell & Royer 2004). One way the media shapes perception is by situating riotous activity within very

specific frames. Frames are a way in which media develop a central organizing idea for news content. Framing selects, highlights, eliminates, and expounds on information to suggest what the “issue” might be in a news story. Framing influences the viewpoint of anyone reading a news story in several ways: defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgements, and providing context, perspective, and symbolic power (Harsin 2015). The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the media frames riots and protests in specific ways that have important implications for race relations within society.

The implications of media framing of protests and riots and race relations within society deal with power. Frames promoted by the media have a direct relation to the frames powerful social and political elites wish to have presented (Hanggli 2012). However, less powerful social groups, especially racial and cultural minority groups, lack the ability to have their own frames situated in the media, which would bring attention to important social issues and advocate for change. It is to society’s benefit we examine the complex social processes underlying media, framing, minority groups, social movements, protests and riots, in order to advocate for these minority groups and for social justice.

THEORY

Social Constructionism

Social reality is constantly being constructed. According to the theory of Social Constructionism, all cultural and social reality, including values and meaningful actions, are collectively formed due to social actions and practices that are often taken for granted (Segre 2016). Social conventions exist objectively, as they create and shape what is considered “real”. In this way, all knowledge, fads, and scientific knowledge result from a process of social construction. This construction may be deliberate or not, conscious or unconscious. The media play a definite role

in constructing and framing reality and in creating interpretations of events (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson 1992). Media messages and mental imagery convey values, ideologies, and beliefs whether journalists are conscious of this intent or not. In fact, social constructions are largely unconscious. They appear to transparently describe reality, absent of political content. Even journalists feel their imagery is reality, and may unwittingly construct reality for readers and for other journalists.

The ideal in a democracy is for the media to report “just the facts and information,” but this ideal never really happens. Because most media outlets are a business and businesses need profit, they construct and frame news and information to the benefit of that business (Gamson et al., 1992). Especially in American society, reality construction that takes place in the media usually promotes a “good feeling” about capitalism. The way media constructs and frames certain issues also becomes a struggle for attention in reaching out to the public (Hanggli 2012).

The construction of a social reality does not end with media coverage. Readers also decode and interpret imagery from the media depending on the context, social location, and prior experience. Different readers find different meanings in content imagery (Gamson et al., 1992). However, many of the assumptions within media are taken for granted and contain subtexts and invisible messages so imbedded in culture that people are unaware of them. Consumer interpretations of the news are influenced by media cues and past learning to determine how well the media fits within the reality they have experienced beforehand. Constructions of reality are then evolved or solidified based on these factors. Readers are often oversaturated with media and its interpretations of reality, causing a fragmentation of sorts where news is jumbled together and a hyperreal version of reality is constructed. This fragmentation of information is heightened using dramatic formats, turning events into isolated happenings, and resulting in “sketchy

dramatic capsules that make it difficult to see the connections across issues or even to follow the development of a particular issue over time (Gamson et al., 1992).”

FINDINGS

Media Framing

Media’s leading role in constructing social reality is through framing. Media have two powerful ways to frame their agenda (Smith, McCarthy, Clark & Boguslaw 2001). Selection bias involves selecting a limited number of events to report out of all possible events, while description bias involves framing the political message conveyed in news reports and choosing how events are framed and portrayed to the public. Media frames include arguments, words, and images journalists use to relay information about an issue to their audience and to organize and provide meaning to everyday reality (Hanggli 2012). Enough evidence suggests framing influences public opinion and shapes experiences, perception, and politics (Harsin 2015). However, the ideologies and discourses that make it into popular media and culture are not static. They are actively produced and come about through a constantly shifting consensus, struggle, and compromise on economic, political, social, and cultural issues (Budarick & King, 2008; Gamson et al.,1992). Ideologies present within frames are an example of ideological norms put into practice through the interpretation of social events by the media. Ideologies of media producers influence frames and different frames contain different ideological constructs (Budarick et al., 2008). While these ideological frames do not necessarily directly change the reader’s opinion about issues, certain frames can change the perceived importance of certain considerations, and these changes in importance are used by readers to make personal judgements about relevant issues (Lee, McLeod & Shah 2008).

Because of the business aspect of media, and the fact that media can influence its audience, media attention tends to be biased toward more powerful social and political forces, making power a key factor in the presence of media frames (Hanggli 2012). Often, media frames are proportionate to the degree which they are promoted by elite social and political actors. Journalists should not be viewed as having the key role in presenting frames. Rather, journalists play a relatively passive role and focus more on representing powerful figures and disseminating news stories from the frames of the elite. Frames are also an example of the competition for social dominance between different classes, sectors of capital, and social groups to impose their “visions, interests, and agendas on society” (Gamson et al., 1992). Much of the media’s discourse is a struggle over what frames or meaning will be given to “media-worthy” events, and social movements with more power have greater access to media to have their preferred frames featured prominently.

To determine how media frames certain events and issues to convey its interpretation of reality, social researchers developed various forms of frame analysis. Frame analysis is used to look at the way in which events are interpreted by journalists and how these events are framed in a media product (Budarick, et al., 2008). Various forms of text or discourse analysis may be used to analyze how frames are used in the media (Gamson et al., 1992). Researchers typically focus their analysis on framing of domains like race, class, gender, or policy domains like health, housing, and energy.

Protests

Protests are an essential and inevitable social practice of minority social movement groups. At the core of social justice issues, groups are actively confronting various aspects of their existence. Minority social groups are forced to confront social structures and impositions when

their existence is threatened, they are cut off from meaning or relationships, or they are limited in their political freedom (Hoffman et al., 2016). Because these groups lack representation and routine access to political processes within society, they must indirectly influence third parties to sympathize with their cause. Protests are one way they create this sympathy (Hoffman et al., 2016; Boykoff 2006; Smith et al., 2001). In recent history, the use of public protests in an attempt to enact social change has dramatically grown. These protests act to attract the attention of the mass media to indirectly communicate with potential supporters.

The problem is that media typically follow a logic independent or contradictory to social movement agendas. The media is more concerned with how they present images of protest and project that to the public (Hoffman et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2001). Matters such as demonstration size and specific policy concerns have little to no impact on what events media choose to cover. The media is more concerned with highlighting unruly activists, arrests, counter-demonstrations, and violence, and in putting more emphasis on authorities than protestors themselves. Other failures of the media's protest coverage are using scare headlines, reporting rumors, speculating about potential violence, relying on official sources without skepticism, and broadcasting live from rioting sites without editing (Campbell et al. 2004). The result is protestors are rarely accurately portrayed in the media. However, negative framing by the media is not necessarily bad publicity for social movements. These social movements still gain attention from the media, and evidence supports that when media portray protestors negatively, they are also more likely to provide in-depth information and reporting about the social movement and the objections and demands of the protestors (Taylor & Gunby 2016).

Media outlets frame riots and protests in various ways. One of the most prevalent types of framing is causal framing, which blames protests and riots for factors like culture (including the

values and beliefs of protestors), irrationality or stupidity, economy, illegal immigration, education, discrimination, and police (Harsin 2015). Causal framing usually also includes solutions which help to build on the frames presented, including imposing curfews, changing culture and parenting, economic policies, deportation, voluntary affirmative actions, etc.

Because of the fluctuating nature of cultural ideologies and therefore frames, coverage of various social and political issues varies widely across time and across the “journalistic field” (Rohlinger, Kail, Taylor & Conn 2012). In general, how a certain media outlet generates profits influences what types of events are covered and how. Historically in America, riots and protests were viewed more from a liberal perspective, as an inevitable struggle to redistribute power in any political system (Campbell et al., 2004). For example, the race riots of the 1960s were often situated within a social protest frame, which associated the riots with the Civil Rights Movement and efforts by minorities to secure freedoms for themselves. Modern riots and protests in America seem to be viewed in a different context. Contemporary riots such the LA and Cincinnati riots are typically framed not as an agent of social change, but as ineffective and illogical. Media leans more toward a conservative perspective, in which protests are a futile and foolish rage against social order. Ideological frames also vary depending on the media platform. More mainstream media outlets prefer to appear “objective” in their reporting to attract a larger and more general reader base, while partisan outlets tend to target more niche readerships, with more ideological and political perspectives (Rohlinger et al., 2012).

Racial Media Framing

The media’s use of framing often contributes to the phenomenon of “modern racism” by adding to hostile race relations and rejecting and denying the activities and aspirations of minority people (Campbell et al. 2004). Some common framing techniques media employ that confound

racial issues include linking the terms “race” and “riot” rhetorically and emphasizing riots as a rail against social order rather than a legitimate protest of systematic issues. Rioters are often framed as dangerous criminals, and rioting is framed as illogical, discounting valid discontent and social concerns.

These racial framing issues are not isolated incidences. Framing analysis has uncovered this phenomenon in a variety of examples. One such example is media’s reaction to the TF1’s French Banlieue riots, where ideologically left and right newspapers in France blamed youth and “criminals” for rioting, all but ignoring the racial tensions and systematic social problems at play, including employment and housing inequality and lack of political and media representation for minority people (Harsin 2015).

Another such framing analysis example is how various media outlets framed the Redfern Riots (Budarick et al. 2008). More mainstream newspapers framed racial elements in such a way that they upheld racial strains, cultural differences, and resentment between communities. In contrast, the “Koori Mail,” a niche media outlet geared toward the minority group, framed racial identity in such a way that explained the discrimination behind the riots, not the riots themselves.

The way media frames riots and protests have implications for race relations within society. The dismissal by media of the systematic issues that play into riots and protests is classified by some researchers as a form of racial microaggression in and of itself (Hoffman et al., 2016). These acts by media reinforce to marginalized groups their unimportance in society. Further, majority individuals tend to attribute these microaggressions to alternative causes and misunderstandings, further invalidating the cumulative experiences of marginalized groups. Media’s framing agenda also tends to maintain the dominant political and social hegemony of elites, reinforcing the misrepresentation and lack of representation of minority groups.

DISCUSSION

So, what can be gained from this knowledge of the media and its framing of racial issues within society? Change can seem daunting when the media seems dominated by social elites and unable to see the error in its framing of modern issues. After all, the “modern media system is frustratingly devoid of insight into broader social forces that affect media discourse, media generally act in ways that promote apathy, cynicism, and quiescence rather than active citizenship, participation (Gamson et al., 1992)”.

There are ways in which media and the public arena can indeed promote active citizenship and therefore critical thinking. One positive to note is that readers are not passively taking in media. Many readers decline to take on the frames they read within the media, either by negotiating with the meaning or rejecting it (Gamson et al., 1992). This is known as oppositional reading. Therefore, what we should be focused on as a society is promoting the process of critical thought.

In addition to the promotion of critical thought within our society, there should be support for media outlets that promote “openness” in their discourse. For example, certain symbolic literary devices such as irony, metaphor, jokes, contradiction, and hyperbole, promote openness in text and invite readers to interpret what they are reading rather than inhibit alternative meaning. Certain niche media outlets, such as minority news outlets, could also use more support by those interested in alternative framing of racial issues within society. Niche media tend to play a more passive role in constructing ideologies, however they tend to “re-mold and adapt” ideologies in order to contribute to social discourse (Budarick et al. 2008).

Finally, the shortsighted reporting of race relations in the media can be improved by encouraging more minorities to become involved in journalism (Campbell et al. 2004). A

definite disconnect exists between how minority leaders view rioting as “meaningful, politically purposeful acts” and what the general public often see as “infrequent, unnecessary, and pathological” protests. Having more minority journalists may prove as a buffer between these two very different viewpoints.

In one of his lesser known speeches, Martin Luther King Jr. presented a powerful perspective on protests as a social movement:

“I think America must see that riots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro poor has worsened over the last few years. It has failed to hear that the promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity. And so in a real sense our nation’s summers of riots are caused by our nation’s winters of delay. And as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence and riots over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention” (1967).

The biggest takeaway from this paper should be to understand that until society and the media take the plight of minority groups seriously, riots and protests will continue. The first step should be to find out how to make minority voices heard through media, rather than discounted.

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