

MOVING THE RACE CONVERSATION FORWARD

#MediaOnFerguson

An August 2014 national survey by the Pew Research Center found a deep racial divide among respondents when it came to how deserving of attention they perceived matters of race to be in the case of the police killing of African-American teen Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

An overwhelming majority (80%) of surveyed black respondents felt that “this case raises important issues about race that need to be discussed,” in contrast to only 37% of surveyed white respondents. Moreover, a plurality of whites (47%) felt that “race is getting more attention than it deserves,” whereas fewer than one in five (18%) blacks felt racial dimensions are being overlaid.

However, the question remains: how much attention is race actually getting in the coverage of the incident and its aftermath in the community? Are whites correct in their perception that race is dominating coverage? And what is the character of discussions on race when they do occur? The truth is race almost certainly isn’t getting as much attention as many whites might think, and even when the issue is raised, the character of the discussions more often than not fails to meet a racial justice standard. That is to say, very rarely do systemic and solutions-focused perspectives take the lead in stories and cable television discussions on the issue.

In the first 10 days of coverage in 19 of the highest circulation mainstream print and cable news outlets in the nation, there were nearly 1,000 articles and cable news programs devoted to the shooting of Michael Brown and community events in its aftermath. Terms such as “race,” “racial,” “racism,” “racist,” and “diversity” were explicitly mentioned in fewer than half of the stories in mainstream media coverage – 46.3%, indicating a significant but not overwhelming amount of attention. Moreover, only seven percent, 70 of the 994 mainstream pieces, led with explicit racial terms, using them in the first few paragraphs of content.

Of those 70 articles, fewer than half (48.6%) could be said to have led with even minimally “systemically aware” perspectives on race. So even when race was front-and-center in mainstream coverage, more than half of the coverage approached the issue of race relations from a strictly individualized or otherwise systemically absent perspective.

That is to say, the character of leading mainstream content on Ferguson was split down the middle between systemically aware and systemically absent perspectives.

What is “Systemically Aware” Content?

As described in Race Forward’s 2013 Moving the Race Conversation Forward report, which examined the character of race discussion in mainstream media, we define content as “systemically aware” when it mentions or highlights policies and/or practices that lead to racial disparities; describes the root causes of disparities, including the history and compounding effects of institutions; and/or describes or challenges the aforementioned.

In contrast, “systemically absent” content focuses attention solely on individual-level acts of racism; dismisses and/or negates the existence of systemic racism within institutions or society more broadly; and/or describes racism as a past-tense condition.

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Endnote: Stark Racial Divisions in Reactions to Ferguson Police Shooting (August 18, 2014), <http://www.people-press.org/files/2014/08/8-18-14-Ferguson-Release.pdf>

Therefore, the race issues that 80% of African-Americans in the Pew survey feel “need to be discussed” aren’t getting a robust grounding in mainstream coverage of the issue. Only 34 of 994 articles led with a minimally systemically aware perspective. Some examples of systemically aware coverage from the first ten days after Brown’s death are featured below in the column at right, contrasted with examples of systemically absent content with an interpersonal / race relations focus at left.

Examples of Contrasting Mainstream Media Coverage of Ferguson

SYSTEMICALLY ABSENT

- Police chief identifies that “healing racial discord here has become a ‘top priority’”
- Reports that the “shooting has kindled nights of racial unrest”
- An op-ed that notes “there are many more [inter-racial] friendships and marriages ... but at the same time racially charged suspicion and anger persists among millions”
- Ferguson is identified as “a previously obscure St. Louis suburb that is now synonymous with questions of race relations”
- An op-ed that faults “Hatred and violence toward minorities by some white law enforcement officials” (i.e., individuals)

SYSTEMICALLY AWARE

- Interview of Kellogg Foundation’s Gail Christopher on importance of tackling structural racism to produce “true racial healing in America”
- Coverage of the #iftheygunnedmedown social media movement highlighting anti-black media bias
- An op-ed that argues “the protests also reflect broader patterns of racial injustice across the country, from chronic police violence and abuse against black men to the persistent economic and social exclusion of communities of color”
- An editorial that argues “it doesn’t take a federal investigation to understand the history of racial segregation, economic inequality and overbearing law enforcement that produced so much of the tension...”
- An article that notes “racial imbalance in police forces is not rare nationwide”

Coverage of Michael Brown or Ferguson, Missouri-related content in first ten days

— FROM 19 MAINSTREAM MEDIA PUBLICATIONS AND OUTLETS —

Articles and transcripts in first ten days

994

Pieces which mentioned “race” “racial” or “racism”

460

Pieces which led with “race” “racial” or “racism”

70

Pieces which led with systemically aware content

34



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Conclusion

As this analysis shows, race is not getting “more attention than it deserves” in mainstream coverage of Ferguson as White respondents in the Pew Research survey claim, particularly if we analyze the coverage measuring whether it “leads with systemically aware perspectives.” Moreover, it’s important to note that the bar for what constitutes “systemically aware” content is quite low. Very few mainstream articles discuss racial justice interventions and solutions.

Barring brief mentions of the protests that followed the shooting (often without mention of community demands and desires), fewer than five mainstream pieces led with a racial justice intervention or solution – the few that did covered social media campaigns to combat media bias, or discussions of community policing initiatives. The numbers aren’t much better for racial justice solutions coverage either. The Ferguson-based Organization for Black Struggle was mentioned by name in only four of the nearly 1,000 mainstream articles and cable television programs analyzed with only passing mention of the organization’s demands and call for action, or those echoed by their allies. Searching for the following solutions-oriented terms, for example, yielded few results: “data collection” (one article); “police oversight” (four articles or mentions in broadcast stories); “police training” (seven articles or mentions in broadcast stories) “video cameras” (twelve articles or mentions in broadcast stories); “incentives” (thirteen articles or mentions in broadcast stories).

And while it may be no surprise to many readers that mainstream media aren’t typically leaders in articulating systemically aware perspectives on race, these high-circulation publications and outlets do reflect our narrow national definition and understanding of race and racism. It’s no wonder that more news consumers are flocking to Twitter and other social media as their source of first, second and last resort as their feeds “explode with videos, photographs and messages” (see David Carr’s “View of #Ferguson Thrust Michael Brown Shooting to National Attention,” *New York Times*, 8/17/14). This shocking incident and its aftermath may serve as a pivotal, milestone moment for those who study such trends.

This is an enduring trend. This is the consequence of heavy militarized police forces that have been infused with money from the federal government to terrorize communities

–Phillip Agnew, Director, Dream Defenders, speaking on *All In With Chris Hayes* 8/12/14

But unlike black-on-black violence, which is tragic but typically punished through proper legal channels, killings of unarmed young people by law enforcement continue to happen with impunity. Instead of acknowledging the legitimacy of black anger over this, the President simply told us to calm down and stop looting. In doing so, he joined the chorus of far too many politicians and civil rights leaders who understate and trivialize righteous anger in order to show the public that they have “the people” under control.

–Marc Lamont Hill, *Obama, can't you see black anger in Ferguson?*, CNN.com 8/15/14

Moreover, though social media outlets are often described as contentious spaces, they have increased awareness about race and racism in the U.S., policing practices in African-American communities, and youth political action. Twitter, in particular, has become a medium where users, influencers, reporters, and activists chronicled the shooting of Mike Brown and activities related to community unrest following Brown's death. Users also shared personal stories and editorials that addressed individual and structural racism in the United States, and circulated visual media, such as video and still images, at a faster rate than cable and print news outlets. Those images include youth political action, which has been on full display this summer via Twitter, and to a lesser extent, Instagram.

A handful of mainstream media actors have also played a productive part. Some excellent coverage including a systemically aware perspective was produced in this 10-day period by outlets such as MSNBC, even if the pieces didn't always lead with this norm-defying racial content.

Still, if we as a nation are to confront and overcome our persistent racial injustices and inequities, coverage that leads with systemically aware articulations of race and racism will be a critical to our chances of success given its potential to raise consciousness and recognition and support for policy and practice solutions.

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METHODOLOGY

Nexis search Aug 9 through Aug. 19 of the following high circulation mainstream publications:

National: The New York Times, The Washington Post; USA Today

Local – Missouri: The St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Local – Midwest: Chicago Sun-Times; The Cleveland Plain Dealer; Minneapolis Star Tribune

Local – Northeast: The Boston Globe; New York Daily News; The Philadelphia Inquirer

Local – South: The Atlanta Journal Constitution; The Dallas Morning News; The Tampa Bay Tribune

Local – West: The Arizona Republic; The Denver Post; The Los Angeles Times

Cable TV outlets: CNN and CNN.com; Fox News*; MSNBC and MSNBC.com

*Note: FoxNews.com is not indexed in Nexis. Given previous findings in our research on the extent of systemically absent coverage on this network, this omission suggests we are at least slightly overestimating the amount of systemically aware content on Ferguson in high circulation mainstream media outlets.

Speaking of the clause in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," [Chief Justice Roger] Taney wrote [in the Dred Scott decision]: "It is too clear for dispute, that the enslaved African race were not intended to be included, and formed no part of the people who framed and adopted this declaration." Taney went on to say that black men "had no rights which the white man was bound to respect." No rights which the white man was bound to respect [image of unarmed black men killed by police]. No rights which the white man was bound to respect [images of protesters confronted by militarized police]....

– Melissa Harris-Perry, 8/16/14