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An Analysis of Anti-Black Crime Reporting in Toronto: Evidence from News Frames and Critical Race Theory

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Introduction

Modern media representations of Blacks as violent and criminal (Crichlow 2009, 2014) have contributed to the construction of Blacks, and particularly Black males, as ensconced in a life of crime, poverty, and violence. The issue of media depiction of Black males is particularly important in the present age—coined “post-racial”—after Barack Obama’s presidential victory in 2008. Politics constitutes a variant of the post-racial era in Canada, where political parties have sought out racial minority candidates in predominantly Black, ethnic, and racialised communities. This was most evident in the appointment of Canada’s first Black Governor, General Michaelle Jean, in 2005. In general, however, media reports about Toronto’s Black communities address violence, gangs, and crime, and are anecdotally recognised as reporting Blacks as academic under-achievers, recipients of child welfare, overrepresented in youth correctional facilities, and living in abject poverty (Crichlow 2014). Entman

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and Rojecki (2000) suggest that print media and television visually construct poverty as nearly synonymous with Blacks and that surveys show that whites typically accept this view. In this sense, news—whether print or visual—encourages the acceptance of the prototypical Black as poor and the prototypical poor person as Black (Entman and Rojecki 2000, p. 102). These anti-black working class racist stereotypes besmirch the image of Black men who are either not poor or are from middle and upper class groups (Collins 2004; Poindexter et al. 2003).

It is arguable that Blacks have been pathologised, demonised, and vilified (Drummond 1990; Crichlow 2014) in the media. Stereotypical depictions of Black masculinity as wanton and stigmatised are held responsible for the social problems that beset them, rather than the everyday state lynching and racist violence that diminishes their sense of self-worth. These negative portrayals and perceptions are important, because public mass-mediated perceptions have the potential to exaggerate people's perceptions. Therefore, stereotypes often become the distorted dominant viewpoint whether they are accurate or not, and so all forms of new and old media complements what one reads in textbooks at schools, colleges, and universities (Ribeau et al. 1997, p. 149). Further, the media's stereotypical portrayal of Blacks as criminals is also political, which operates to produce anxiety, moral panic, and antiblackracism in Canada (Tator and Henry 2006). Racist stereotypical perceptions of Black males construct the lens through which the media, as a dominant institution, dehumanises Blacks.

Antiblackracism is a conceptual framework for understanding a dialectic which involves “a particular form of systemic and structural racism in Canadian society, which historically and contemporarily has been perpetrated against Blacks” (Benjamin 2003, ii). Antiblackracism highlights the “resistance against dominant and hegemonic systems of Whiteness and the building of agency and social transformation against racism and other forms of oppression” (Benjamin 2003, ii). When Blacks are continually portrayed in the context of crime, it becomes impossible to maintain the critical analysis to recognise and confront the ideological (read: media) repressive apparatus of the private sector and government. These hegemonic parameters make it difficult for the black male—particularly the financially poor—to escape the race/poverty/crime nexus.

Media narratives situate social problems such that they arise solely from the actions of Blacks (and in particular, Black youth); typically, the media does not represent social problems as emanating from the structural, systemic, and social conditions in which poor working class Blacks live.

Critical race theory (CRT) is integral to the approach taken in this research to demonstrate how state violence on the Blackbody constitutes crime news worthiness. CRT is a conceptual tool designed to challenge the color-blind notion of law, the neutrality of law, subtle forms of racism, racial discrimination in law, and how law can be used as a tool to challenge racism. Legal scholars (Delgado and Stefancic 1995; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Matsuda 1996; Valdes et al. 2002; Bell 1992) contest the absence of attention to race in the courts and the law; however, its use and influence has extended to other disciplines (Iverson 2007, p. 588). Bell (1992) and Delgado and Stefancic (1995) among other legal scholars began writing about liberalism defects and the way the western system of civil rights statutes and case law reinforces white-over-black domination (Delgado et al. 1995). In this paper, CRT informs how we come to the data—we consider how the news represents Blacks—and how racism can be challenged by considering the relationship between media portrayal and socially constructed hegemonic values.

This study addresses qualitative coding of mainstream news articles collected for the period of ten years and helps to consider the accuracy of W.E. Du Bois's (1903) suggestion that the problem of the twentieth century [and beyond] is "the problem of the colour line." We seek to more deeply understand the media's representation of Blacks, which in previous studies has been shown to be negative and demoralising. This analysis is important because media reporting contributes to creating white anxiety and a less just and equitable concept of Blacks. Employing frame theory analysis of crime reporting, together with antiblackracism and CRT frameworks, this article examines coverage of crime and portrayal of Blacks in Toronto print media. We examine here whether reporting of Blacks and criminal justice is racially informed and whether racist policing and news reporting of Black folks remains an everyday disarticulating reality for Blacks in Toronto; in other words, we consider whether racism is not an issue of the past but rather of the present and future, particularly in Canada. This consideration is anathema to the reality that crime is not

a “normal” part of Black male youth identities—even in an urban Canadian area.

In order to consider the interplay between media reporting and the race/crime nexus, we attempt to answer the following research question (RQ1):

RQ1: How has Canada’s largest newspaper framed news as it relates to blacks, police, and race?

Specifically, we focus on (a) the tone of media coverage (positive, negative, or neutral) and (b) reporting of “gangs,” “guns,” “poverty,” “drugs,” “unemployment,” “violence,” and “crime reduction” as frames constructed by news media reports about race and crime in Toronto.

An investigation of how mainstream Toronto media cover issues relative to Blacks, police, and race remains meaningful because of media frames’ notable effects on the audience, including opinion leaders and those engaged in policy (Entman 2004). The current research seeks to bring attention to broad issues surrounding contemporary Canadian media’s framing of race and policing, including does media coverage inform Canadians about the economic and social issues surrounding race and policing? What kinds of contextual information does this coverage provide to Canadian readers? How do these reports enhance audiences’ understanding of race, police, and the relationship between the two? How would news stories add to non-Blacks’ understanding of the issues facing blacks in contemporary culture, thereby leading to a more nuanced understanding of race issues in Canada? These meaningful questions inform this investigation and its goal to provide a more well-rounded understanding of contemporary race issues in Canada, and the greater Toronto area in particular.

This investigation considers print news coverage of issues pertaining to race (specifically Blacks) and police in a Canadian newspaper. *The Globe and Mail* is a Toronto-based Canadian newspaper with a nationwide distribution, and has been in print for 172 years. With a readership of over 3.5 million, it is Canada’s most-read newspaper, and is the only Canadian paper to demonstrate an increase in readership over the past five years (globelink.ca 2016). In 2015, *The Globe and Mail* was awarded five

National Newspaper Awards—making it the most awarded newspaper in Canada. Editor-in-Chief David Walmsley states that the newspaper takes on “brave, independent work that challenges conventional narrative” (Globe Tops National Newspaper Awards 2015). *The Globe and Mail* is therefore positioned as forward-thinking and rigorous in its approach to news reporting, with an educated readership, thus making it an ideal venue for research on race- and police-related reporting.

Method

Data Collection

To answer RQ1, we analysed data collected from *The Globe and Mail*. The unit of analysis in this investigation is the individual news article. Data collection processes aimed to collect the largest set of news articles relative to the RQ. The LexisNexis database was employed to retrieve articles from *The Globe and Mail* over the ten-year period from 2005 to 2015 containing all keywords “black” and “police” and “race” either in headlines or in the body of the article. These specific search terms were employed in order that the data reflected articles specifically relating to Blacks and their interaction with police, either literally or via legal policy. The search term “race” was included in order that articles with a direct reference to race relations or race issues were captured.

A total of 448 articles containing all such search terms were retrieved for the ten-year period. Data was cleansed in order that opinion and editorial articles were removed, as they are congruent with personal opinion rather than objective reporting as is associated with large newspapers in Canada. News articles such as film or book reviews which were captured by the database search but irrelevant to the present study were also removed. The careful elimination of articles that were opinion rather than reflective of the ideology of the newspaper ensured that the data was limited to robust articles produced exclusively for *The Globe and Mail*. Similarly, articles relevant to the “black market” (e.g. in art) or Conrad Black were removed; such articles were captured in the database search though were irrelevant to this study. The resultant articles were $n = 155$.

Data Analysis

Frame theory has characterised research which seeks to examine and explain the ways in which news media favor particular “frames,” or vantage points, in their coverage (e.g. Goffman 1974; Entman 1991). In keeping with previous research employing frame analysis methodology (e.g. Dimitrova and Connolly-Ahern 2007; Douai and Lauricella 2014), we first examined the tone toward Blacks and the tone toward police in each article. We considered whether the article is written in such a way that it frames Blacks as “positive,” “negative,” “both positive and negative,” or “neutral.” For example, if an article asserted that blacks were “violent,” “looking for trouble,” or “dangerous,” then the tone toward Blacks was coded as “negative” toward blacks. Similarly, if the overall tone of an article indicated that Blacks were “cooperative” or “hard working,” then the tone toward Blacks was coded as “positive” toward blacks. If an article contained both tones, it was coded as “both positive and negative,” or if no discernible tone was evident, it was coded as “neutral.” The same practice was applied to the tone toward police. If an article made reference to the police as “careful” or “responsible,” it was coded as positive toward the police. If the overall tone of the article indicated that the police were “brutal” or “petty,” then the article was coded as “negative” toward police. If an article contained both tones, it was coded as “both positive and negative,” and if no overarching tone was evident, the article’s tone was coded as “neutral.”

The second stage in the data analysis addressed the overarching frames employed to categorise the various news stories addressing Blacks, police, and race in Toronto. Articles underwent an initial coding process (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2006) whereby all potential frames were identified. The authors and three independent coders discussed the codes in detail and identified the five overarching themes present in the data. Data were then coded as to whether they utilised the following frames: gangs, guns, poverty, drugs, unemployment, (general) violence, or crime reduction. Each of the categories addressed specific key issues relative to each news story. For example, articles that addressed blacks, police, and race were coded with the “gang” frame when the main tenets of the

reporting were gang issues (or more specifically, problems). Similarly, articles coded with the “guns” category addressed weapons and violence specifically relative to a gun or guns. Articles that gave particular attention to issues of poverty in the Black community were coded with the “poverty” frame. When drugs were an issue to either the police or Black individuals, the “drugs” frame was applied to the article. Unemployment is a particular area of concern in detecting bias in media reporting; when articles referred to unemployed Blacks or youth, the article was allocated to the “unemployment” frame. General violence was another overarching frame in the data, so articles indicating non-specific violence such as “street violence” were coded as fitting with the “violence” frame. Finally, crime reduction is a particular effort on the part of police, and so articles framed with the overall objective to curb violence were coded as “crime reduction.”

Given that three independent coders assessed the data, inter-rater reliability was essential in assessing the integrity of the research process. After creating a mutually agreed upon coding guide, the coders met to discuss cases in which disagreement in frame codes occurred. Pursuant to discussion and adjustments to codes allocated to each article, inter-rater reliability was high among the coders at 98%.

Results

This study examines how Toronto’s *Globe and Mail* covers issues relative to Blacks and police in Toronto. The study considered a total of $n = 155$ articles that addressed police, Blacks, and race. In keeping with prior studies of news media frames (e.g. Entman 1991; Pan and Kosicki 1996; Douai and Lauricella 2014), we attempt to maintain rigorous research standards by considering both the tone and the dominant news frames present in the corpus of news reporting. In this project, “tone” refers to the overall positive, neutral, or negative tone in the article regarding both Blacks and police. The complimentary element in this research focused on how *The Globe and Mail* articles framed significant issues present in the intersection of Blacks, race, and police issues.

Tone of Coverage

Blacks

The clear majority of news reports in the *Globe and Mail* were neither overwhelmingly positive nor negative toward Blacks; a combined 50% of articles were either both positive and negative (27%) or neutral (23%) in tone. While 29% of news coverage about Blacks as they related to the police was positive, about 1/5 (21%) of news coverage was negative. If an overall figure of positive coverage of Blacks in the context of the police is considered (i.e. unambiguously positive articles plus articles that were both positive and negative), the figure becomes 56% of all news coverage in this data from *The Globe and Mail*. Similarly, an overall figure of negative coverage (unambiguously negative articles plus articles that were both positive and negative) amounts to 48% of all news stories in the data.

Police

Just over 1/3 (35%) of all news articles in the data indicated a clear neutral tone toward the police. If the neutral figure is combined with articles containing both positive and negative tones in the same piece, the figure becomes 62%. However, only 18% of the articles indicated an unambiguously positive tone to the police, while 20% of the articles in the data indicated a clearly negative tone. Articles with any positive tone (i.e. unambiguously positive articles plus articles containing both positive and negative tones) comprised 45% of the data, while 47% of articles in the data contained either an overall negative tone or contained a negative tone alongside a positive (Table 15.1).

Framing Blacks and Police in Toronto News Reports

A framing analysis of the *Globe and Mail*'s coverage relating to Blacks, police, and race revealed clear issues associated with violence. A

Table 15.1 Articles’ tone toward Blacks and police in *The Globe and Mail* coverage

	Positive		Negative		Both positive and negative		Neutral		Total	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Blacks	(45)	29	(32)	21	(42)	27	(36)	23	155	100
Police	(28)	18	(31)	20	(42)	27	(54)	35	155	100

preliminary reading of the data suggested that we focus on issues associated with violence; these issues were made more specific by considering problems traditionally associated with violence, such as gangs, guns, and drugs. Data analysis shows that the general “violence” frame most frequently dominated coverage of Blacks, the police, and race in this data at 52% of the news stories over the ten-year period examined.

In more specific terms, 44% of the articles were framed by means of gun violence. The “gangs” frame represented almost 1/3 (30%) of the articles in the data. The poverty frame comprised 19% of the articles, the “drugs” frame 15%, and 5% of the articles were framed by means of “unemployment” issues. Despite the significant number of articles framed in general terms of violence and specific frames relative to violence, the “crime reduction” frame represented just over 1/3 (33%) of the articles in this data. In both mainstream and alternative or community media framing of Black lives and crime, none of these efforts have been directed to Black LGBTQ persons and criminal justice. We see this as one shortcoming of this analysis, because ignoring this population will only maintain the exclusion and alienation this group faces within criminal justice (Table 15.2).

Discussion

The general tone of news stories examined in this study was largely neutral. This neutral tone indicates that neither Blacks nor the police are depicted in positive or negative ways in *The Globe and Mail*. However, this neutral tone demands that we pay more attention to the frames incorporated in the news stories in order to gain a fuller understanding of

Table 15.2 News frames in *The Globe and Mail* coverage of Blacks and police and race

News frame	<i>N</i>	%
Violence	(81)	52
Guns	(68)	44
Crime reduction	(52)	34
Gangs	(7)	30
Poverty	(29)	19
Drugs	(24)	15
Unemployment	(8)	5

how news is communicated and meaning of relevant issues is constructed. The media's frames of reference—in this investigation seen via Canada's the *The Globe and Mail*—are widely present to construct newsworthy stories (Turnage 2009; Dickerson 2001). While the tone of news reporting in this investigation is overall a neutral one, it is evident that *The Globe and Mail's* frames in news relative to Blacks are constructed to reflect the skin color of urban Blacks in Toronto as indicative of trouble. Both the news frames and the narrative of Blacks as socialised trouble-makers comes from the media's ability to frame and reify a debate without the audience or its readers realising that the media has this power (Poindexter et al. 2003, p. 527). Indeed, the frames evident in relation to Blacks and the police are overwhelmingly violent; the only potentially positive frame is that of "crime reduction," though it is indicative of inherent violence in the Black community.

The framing of Blacks, even and perhaps especially in the context of news, allows for media consumers, including politicians and policy makers, to use both media and narrative against Black and racialised communities of race/racism/violence. News reporting then serves to create an ideological divide between political parties and ethnic groups. Hall (2003) argues that framing news stories is accomplished through "representations of the social world, images, descriptions, explanations and frames for understanding how the world is and why it works as it [does]" (p. 91). Data in this study indicate that *The Globe and Mail's* mass media language, narrative, and grammar about Black youth violence in Toronto are grounded in a language that equates Blacks with violence. The news articles communicate to readers nothing, or at best very little, about the

social conditions and structural context of the violence and crime within communities. In particular, the Black community suffers from lack of state investment in meaningful rehabilitation programs, affordable housing, abject poverty, state neglect, and racist policing in these communities. None of this is addressed in the frames inherent in the media stories examined here.

Many Toronto youth explore a number of social possibilities, identities, and experiments while coming of age in order to make it in life; these include associations with gangs, use or dealing of drugs, or theft. Such behaviors are seen as risky by law enforcement and the police—not to mention that some are illegal—which leads to both criminalising and hopelessness of Black youth. (It should be noted that some alternative experiments include attendance and participation in school, which is scarcely reported in the media.) *The Globe* and *Mail's* nature of framing, combined with issues of stereotypes and crime, is evident in the framing of news articles in this study. Previous research has demonstrated how African-American males are overly represented in media crime reports. The reinforcing of these negative stereotypes toward Blacks in Canadian and American contexts only serves to give white audience members an “identity advantage” over Black audience members (Mastro et al. 2011). Ryan, Carragee, and Meinhofer (2001) argue that “frames organize discourse, including news stories, by their patterns of selection, emphasis and exclusion” (p. 175). Thus, by “select[ing] some aspects of a perceived reality and mak[es] them more salient in a communicating text” (Entman 1993, p. 52).

The media's framing of race in crime reporting to construct and deconstruct realities of Blacks in Toronto has the potential to contribute to reinforcing a discriminatory culture. Minority neighborhoods endure the challenge of a disproportionate amount of television news coverage devoted to crime within their communities (Entman 1992); an examination of frames in this study indicates that the same is true of print news media. Recently a Toronto chapter of #BlackLivesMatter was formed in order to respond to the social injustices of Blacks in Toronto. #BlackLivesMatter can be seen as a counter-hegemonic movement in order to address the need to turn framing negative messages associated with Blacks into positive ones. The #BlackLivesMatter movement used

the media to advance their own definitions of political issues through mainstream news media.

#BlackLivesMatter: Reframing the Message

The media is a powerful influencer in hegemonic values and structure, and the issues addressed in this data suggest the perpetual nature of negative stereotypes by the media about Black people's lives. Following the death of Trayvon Martin in 2013, Patricee Cullors reposted the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter from her friend Alicia Garza's Facebook page, which served as the beginning of a rehumanising project (Robinson 2015). When #BlackLivesMatter was reposted, Cullors and Garza did not know the magnitude of its potential to make a positive impact via social media outlets. The #Blacklivesmatter hashtag and resultant movement is a cross-generational struggle for rethinking and redefining Black people's lives void of state violence with a positive message about themselves.

#BlackLivesMatter explains on their website: "When we say Black Lives Matter, we are broadening the conversation around state violence to include all of the ways in which Black people are intentionally left powerless at the hands of the state... #BlackLivesMatter is working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically and intentionally targeted for demise #BlackLivesMatter" (<http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>). Judith Butler, in an interview with George Yancy, reframes the meaning of #BlackLivesMatter: "according to Butler: one reason the chant "#BlackLivesMatter" is so important is that it states the obvious but the obvious has not yet been historically realized. So it is a statement of outrage and a demand for equality, for the right to live free of constraint, neutralization and degradation of black lives, but also a police system that more and more easily and often can take away a black life in the flash all because some officer perceives a threat" (Yancy and Butler 2015, p. 2).

Traditional media, portraying Blacks as stereotypically violent and incompetent, lost traction in its political power and social control to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. The hashtag and resultant movement had (and still has) the ability to build an online following and consensus among its followers with a positive political and ideological message. The

American Dialect society even voted the #BlacklivesMatter as the Word of the Year in 2014, making for a Twitter hashtag a “word” for the first time (Evans 2015). This significant movement has had effects on traditional print news. The framing of crime stories and violence associated with the Black community in this study indicates a fertile ground for the #BlackLivesMatter movement in Canada.

We argue that news framing—in this case, via news stories involving Blacks and the police—tells only half the story. Accounts of gun violence, gangs, and illegal activity without explicit acknowledgment of their connection to underlying social and economic issues undermine and disguise the impact of racism on Blacks. The failure to link stories of violence to other broader issues serves to make such events appear as isolated incidents among “bad” people who have failed to be civically engaged. The emergent frames in this investigation demonstrate the negative issues associated with Blacks and police in Toronto. The lack of social networks that provide encouragement and opportunities alternative to violence is lacking in the greater Toronto area. In order to reduce violence in Black lives, communities must work on providing what has been missing, not perpetuate media frames which criminalise Blacks (and particularly Black men and youth) and frame them as violent. The failure to recognise and depict the complexity of structural, systemic, and social issues facing Black men is currently being addressed by #Blacklivesmatter. This movement in both Canada and the USA is an example of the rallying call for those who see the possibility of transformation through transforming the living conditions in Black communities, and as a way to talk about the prevalence of Black crime.

Conclusion

Mainstream media’s ability to frame news stories can be used to shape public opinion and serve as a foundation for public discourse. This paper sought to answer how Canada’s largest newspaper framed news as it relates to Blacks, police, and race. Overall, the tone in news stories toward both Blacks and the police was neutral. However, the news frames demonstrated an overall violent culture, with stories of guns and gangs

pervasive in the data. These stories and their inherent notion of violence serves to keep Blacks “where they are” in the current political discourse. Without explanation of the inherent issues facing Blacks, including economic, educational, and community challenges, the media is only communicating a fraction of the story. This fraction then continues the cycle of racism whereby the public narrative is such that Blacks are overwhelmingly violent, uneducated, troublesome, and problematic. While this paper did not examine the role that new media plays in the reproduction of racist crime stereotypes of Black males, we are cognizant of the implications for future new media studies and critical race theory. This is most evident with the emergence of the #Blacklivesmatter movement, which started as a new social media activist platform. With the increase in citizen-led media and mobilisation via social media (in this case, via a powerful hashtag), we suggest that it can become possible to communicate the larger picture of race and racism. We hope that mainstream media, including major print news outlets, will then accept the responsibility of communicating the meaning of race issues and racism in Canada.

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