

SPC333

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Semester Research Paper

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White Supremacy in Contemporary American News

Media

White supremacy is the belief that gives preference and privilege to white people and believes that whites should be in power and should control people of other races. Racism is prejudice or discrimination against other races that perpetuates white supremacy. These two terms are often used together, as they go hand in hand. White supremacists commit acts of racism.

Since the 2016 presidential election, white supremacy has been on the rise in American culture and media. With a president that was making racist statements and that was not condemning white supremacy, people believed that their white supremacy was acceptable. Donald Trump was supported by extreme right-wing conservatives with white supremacist ideals with neo-Nazis and KKK members among those that publicly showed their support for Donald

Trump's presidency. Through this, white supremacy was even more normalized in American culture and media.

The ideas of racism and white supremacy have split the country, and the media, down the line of the political aisle. However, this is only in terms of blatant examples of white supremacy such as racial slurs or preferences of particular people or institutions. The media on both sides of the political spectrum is guilty of white supremacy in a way that is not as noticeable to those who aren't paying close attention.

"Beyond Employment Diversity: Rethinking Contemporary Racist News Representations" by Christopher P. Campbell speaks to the racism in modern news. One important takeaway from this article is that racism comes in many different forms, "News coverage by organizations that are racially diverse can still reflect the attitudes of contemporary racism." It may not be overt, but racism in the media and white supremacist attitudes are alive and well. Examples of this include, but are in no way limited to, the phenomenon known as "missing white woman syndrome" and news media coverage of social movements and protests. We can see this when looking at news coverage of white versus Black victims as well as coverage of coverage of protests against Black life versus protests for Black life. These are two prime examples of white supremacy in news media. The role of new media in society is very important. The majority of the population is not educated on media literacy, and therefore the news media has the power to persuade people to feel or act in certain ways. News media is where people go for information, but the media get to pick and choose what information they want to present and how they want to present it.

This paper explores the two previously mentioned examples of white supremacy in the media through recent events that dominated, or in some cases didn't dominate, the news. Using

news articles from various publications, academic articles taken from the SPC333 Reading Pack, and academic articles found online, I show how these current events and the coverage of them reflect the normalcy of white supremacy in American culture.

The first section of the paper explores missing white woman syndrome, specifically through the coverage of the Gabby Petito case and the lack of coverage for other cases of missing girls. I compare the difference in coverage of multiple cases and the differences in the phrasing used for the coverage. The second section of the paper will explore the media coverage of Black Lives Matter protests versus the coverage the January 6th insurrection at the United States Capitol. Again, I compare the difference in coverage and the difference in wording used in the articles.

Missing White Woman Syndrome: Gabby Petito

Missing white woman syndrome refers to the likelihood of media to sensationalize cases of missing white women while giving little to no coverage to similar cases that involve victims of color or lower economic class status. The media often frames missing young white women as everyone's daughter, and the news does not rest until answers are found. Simultaneously they ignore the growing numbers of missing women of color and give little or no coverage for their cases. This is a long-standing issue in our society that has only gotten worse. Most if not all famous missing victims whose cases took America by storm were young, white, and blonde. A perfect example is the Elizabeth Smart case.

The most modern and relevant example of this phenomenon today is the Gabby Petito case. Gabby Petito was a 22-year-old girl who went missing when on a road trip with her fiancé.

This case immediately sparked the public's interest and suddenly the story was everywhere. There was public outrage all over the country, and people were doing all they could to help find the missing woman. This case received coverage from when she went missing all the way to the location of her body and to the location of her murder's body. The coverage of this story was detailed and frequent.

There are countless news articles from most every source in America that cover this case. The story gained national attention, and even received some coverage internationally. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to five different news articles regarding the case from *USA Today*, *NBC News*, *CNN*, *The New York Times*, and *CBS News*.

CNN, *The New York Times*, and *CBS News* all had detailed timelines of the case published. All the timelines include detailed accounts of the events. These accounts include eyewitness reports, police statements, body cam footage, photos of evidence, multiple photos of the victim, and posts from the victim's accounts. It is clear from these articles that there was immediate coverage of the case as soon as Petito went missing. The amount of detail in these reports are key, there was a lot of time and energy dedicated to covering this case.

Even short articles like "A Desperate Search for a Missing Woman" from *USA Today* are packed with information. This particular article is only one five sentence paragraph, but it includes a photo of the victim and the vehicle, the date the victim went missing, where to look for the victim, and where to call with information. Even with minimal words this article gives all the relevant information someone would need on the case. There was no shortage of information being circulated regarding the case.

The *NBC News* article does a great job of highlighting missing white woman syndrome, then embodying it. The author describes Petitto as a beautiful young woman and describes the circumstances as tragic. The author points out that this case strikes a chord with the public because people see this as possible being their daughter. The author then brings this point to the lack of coverage for women of color, “In the cases of those families whose missing loved ones didn’t dominate national headlines for weeks, who are still searching for daughters and sisters and cousins years, even decades, after their disappearances — notably families of Indigenous women and other women of color who didn’t get on the national media radar — Gabby’s story raises painful questions about why the cases of some missing young women receive so much attention and are at least, in part, resolved, while others remain open cases, and open wounds. We need to pay attention to them just as much.” This quote hits the nail right on the head and it’s a great simplifies version of the concept of missing white woman syndrome. However, this is all the author says on the issue and immediately contradicts that statement.

Directly after making the statement quoted above the author went on to name only one other victim – a young white woman who went missing in 80s. The second half of the article focuses entirely on this case giving background, details, and quotes from friends and family. I in no way intend to minimize the young woman’s disappearance, however there is easily observable irony in the author bringing up the lack of coverage for indigenous woman and women of color and then not name a single one, instead focusing on another young white woman.

For comparison I decided to look at coverage of missing Black women. Two cases caught my attention, Rajah McQueen and Keyshia Pearse. These cases struck my interest because they had almost no media coverage. For the case of Rajah McQueen I was able to find only two

articles. Both were local Cleveland news outlets, and it took three months of her being missing to get any coverage at all. The article from *News 5 Cleveland* was fairly detailed, telling how the family has taken to going door to door for leads. The article even included a quote that I found incredibly relevant to the topic, ““I’m not saying no one [case] is more important than the other, because she’s not the only person who is missing. I just want those resources that everyone else is getting to, at least, apply for her,” said Shamir. “It’s just another black girl, just missing.” This shows just how little care the public and the media take in these cases. In the *FOX 8* article McQueen is allotted one sentence with no description and no photo. This coverage is not likely to be helpful, as it has no information.

In the case of Keyshia Pearse only one article could be found. The article from *Amsterdam News*, a local New York City Black publication, mentions Pearse one time. The only information given on the case was the last date she was seen. There was no description, no witnesses, no photos. Coverage in any way shape or form is important, but without more information and more coverage these girls will continue to go unfound, and families will continue being forced to go door to door for answers.

“The Missing White Girl Syndrome’: Disappeared Women and Media Activism” by Sarah Stillman breaks down the concept of missing white woman syndrome and explains what the media is telling society to think through this phenomenon.

There was a shocking statistic about this phenomenon presented in the article, “News treatments of child abductions in the USA show a particularly glaring bias in favor of cases featuring young white females: between 2000 and 2005, 76 per cent of child abductions featured on *CNN News* between 2000 and 2005 were white children, although only 53 per cent of abductees are white (Hargrove and Haman 2005). Virtually all of the most prominent cases

featured conventionally are attractive females.” (492) This is backed up further by the discussion of the Jessica Lunsford case from Florida. Lunsford was a young white girl. That case received national attention, and Jessica was framed as America’s daughter in a way by the media. However, a body found that was believed to be Jessica got no further coverage than not being Jessica. Despite this being another young woman whose life has been taken, the media did not seem to find it newsworthy.

The author claims that solution to this issue is to make changes to the news all together, “Ultimately, however, the goal is not to replace one sensational missing female case with another: a white girl with a brown girl, a university student with a sex worker. What we need is a different way of constructing 'news' altogether, one that acknowledges the social roots of gender-based violence and respects survivors' rights to speak for themselves in the mainstream media, whenever possible - not as tokens of suffering used to peddle newspapers, but as knowledge-bearers and agents of social change.” The issue of missing white woman syndrome is deep rooted in white supremacy. Nonwhite lives need to start being valued by the media and by society. Attention needs to be brought to every case, regardless of race, age, gender, class, or anything else. Cases that involve women of color should be amplified by the news media, as this is rising issue in our society. The media tells people what to believe is important, so the media needs to make it clear to everyone that not just white lives are important.

Black Lives Matter vs. January 6th Insurrection

Media framing is a way that the media presents information on events or people in a way as to make the viewers feel a certain way. This past year media framing became much more

relevant of a topic. In “Ethnoviolence and The News Media” by Howard J. Ehrlich, the author discusses how to new media can control the public and can use that control to keep minority groups at a lower status. The news media is where many people go for information, and this information can be used as a basis for racism at times. Attitudes of white supremacy reflected through news media are picked up by consumers. According to the author, “the media functions to maintain the subordinate status of minorities, deviants, and dissidents.” This quote explains why what the media chooses to present and how they choose to present it is so important, it also shows how deep-rooted white supremacy in the media is.

Two major protests caught the attention of national news, and they were framed in very different ways. These two protests were the Black Lives Matter protests that took place across the entire country, and the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol. The coverage of these events is so important because it continues to shape public opinion. After having Trump in office, as stated before, white supremacy is no longer hidden.

In “The Media, Public Perception, and Policy Decisions: An Analysis of Two Racially Different Newsrooms’ Coverage of BLM and DACA” by Chamian Y. Cruz, the author speaks to the effects of Trump’s actions on the nation, ““Between February 2016 and April 2018, journalists set the public agenda on immigration and race relations through constant coverage of DACA and BLM, but this is in part because the president has been outspoken about his views on these topics. Trump has constantly described immigrants as criminals (Reilly, 2016) and insinuated that blacks are violent (Arkin, Rafferty, & Sotomayer, 2017). It is possible that he has primed the public through marginalizing news frames and second-level agenda setting.” In such an impressionable and divided society, how the media frames these events is crucial for public opinion and therefore success of the movements.

There was no shortage of news articles on either event, but I chose a select few that I thought highlighted my point best. For the analysis of the Black Lives Matter coverage, I chose articles from *NewsMax*, *The Heritage Foundation*, *The Hill*, and *The Washington Post*. These articles seemed to have a lot in common. For one, most of the articles quoted prominent Republican political figures. The articles also shared key words. Heavily used words used to denigrate BLM in the article were “ANTIFA,” “chaos,” “violent crime,” and “terrorism.” The articles all denounce the movement in one way or another and equate the protests to “anarchist” movements and nameless violence. The articles also equated the BLM movement to “socialism” and ‘communism,” which is interesting as those are two distinctly different ideologies.

The *NewsMax* article was the most outlandish one. This article made claims the Black Lives Matter was directly harmful to Black lives, and that it would cause more danger in Black communities with less police presence. The issue of defunding the police seemed to be the biggest focus of the articles after the violence. This is clear media framing. The articles barely mentioned any other issues of the Black Lives Platform and make no effort to differentiate between the protestors and the extremists. The media wanted the people to have a negative outlook on the protests.

For coverage of the January 6th insurrection at the Capitol I chose two articles from *Fox News* and one article from *NewsMax*. These articles speak to the stark difference in coverage of these two events. While the articles that covered the Black Lives Matter movement seemed to focus on the negative and emphasize violence, the coverage of the Capitol riot seemed to do the exact opposite. *Fox News* downplayed the event and made false claims that the people were peaceful, and that the government was hiding something. One quote from *Fox* even tried to take attention away from the event and back to white supremacy, “Congressional Democrats are

guilty of "hypocrisy" for refusing to spend money on securing the border while countenancing Capitol Hill looking like "a Green Zone of a war-torn country,"". This is a blatantly racist statement, and *Fox* felt it was appropriate to publish.

One thing that the *Fox* and *NewsMax* articles had in common with the Black Lives Matter articles was that they often quoted prominent Republican figures. The *NewsMax* article quotes former Vice President Pence, where he claims the left is using the insurrection to distract from the "stolen election." The media did not want as much public outrage with this event as they did the Black Lives Matter protests. Keywords like violence and terrorism were left out, despite being used generously to cover protests with equal or less violence.

The media needs to be impartial when it comes to covering these types of situations, as many outlets have a favorite in this case. The news should present all the facts to inform readers. Uninformed readers will simply make do with the little information they have, and this leads to issues within society. The deep-rooted white supremacy in the media today is absorbed by consumers and taken out into the world. This is dangerous for many people.

As a society we need to denounce white supremacy. It is engrained in our culture, and until changes are made to move away from this mindset racial tensions will only increase. The media makes it clear through their coverage and messaging that white lives are the main priority, and white ideas are the only ones worth sharing publicly.

The media directly impacts society. For this reason, the media is extremely powerful and can do great harm or good. The media needs to begin taking the responsibility seriously and start making informed choices on their actions to achieve the greatest good. The media needs to be

representative of the population, unbiased, and examining and presenting the whole picture when it comes to reporting.

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