NBC: Media Coverage of Police and Criminal Action.

*An investigation of media bias.*

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**Introduction**

NBC has long been a very popular source of news. Much like any other media source, however, the news source has a particular coverage style. News coverage can often display some undertones of bias. CNN and FOX News, for example, are both known for producing politically biased media. NBC has successfully taken a more neutral stance, but there is still some bias on more political issues. Of these issues, one of the most prevalent is in regards to the “Black Lives Matter (BLM)” movement. This movement views police activity as substantially targeting black individuals in criminal situations. NBC has published several online articles and broadcasted many segments regarding this issue. As such, it is important to analyze the manner in which this news source describes and covers both the police and the suspects/ victims. This will highlight the way that NBC covers the issue of police brutality and excessive force among black individuals and compare it to criminological and ethical research from the past.

**Description of Media Coverage of Crime & Ethical Issues**

The media coverage of police officers and the behaviors of criminals is vast. The National Broadcasting Company is no different. Throughout recent years, extensive coverage has been given to police activity and brutality as a result of the “BLM” movement. Of the cases receiving extensive media attention, one of the most highly-reported was the Terence Crutcher.

The Terence Crutcher case was described by NBC as follows, “Terence Crutcher Shooting: 'Disturbing' Helicopter Footage Shows Tulsa Police Kill Unarmed Man.” This headline is structured in a way that quickly criminalizes the police. Despite the word disturbing being in quotes, there is a clear undertone of bias. Also, the title itself includes the word “unarmed.” This makes the decision of the police immediately questionable. If worded differently, someone listening to or reading the news story could’ve interpreted the situation adversely. Instead, from the beginning, the audience is taking the side of the victim. Additionally, the situation was described similarly. In fact, the first line of the segment mentions that the victim’s arms were raised as he approached the police car. NBC also described the feelings of the family. This influences the audience’s perceptions as well. Those watching a news broadcast or reading the coverage online will be more likely to sympathize when presented with family members and other triggers of emotion. Furthermore, NBC structured its recommended content in a way that influenced interpretations. At the bottom of the page featuring this new story, there is a link to a video titled “Police Killing Unarmed Black Men.” The proximity to the story about Crutcher encourages a reaction from the audience. Thus, the media bias is clear in this situation. Given the quote selection NBC utilized, the police were even portrayed negatively within the segment. There is an enforced idea of what is wrong and right featured within this news story.

This is similar in the Ferguson case. Michael Brown’s situation was described by CNN in this headline: “The Killing of an Unarmed Teen: What We Know About Brown's Death.” The headline describes the encounter in a more targeted fashion. Unarmed is once again used as an attention-grabbing device. Additionally, the rhetoric of this title has shifted. “Killing” is used to describe this encounter. There is no direct mention of a police encounter, instead this is being described purely as criminal.  “Witnesses have said it was a white policeman; Brown was black.” NBC once again draws attention to race. The identity of the officer, however, is completely unknown. In fact, the news source even said so earlier in the article. The article also utilizes a “Who is Michael Brown?” section to describe the man and encourage sympathy amongst the readers. For example, his playful nickname is provided. It was even accompanied by his hobbies and dreams. Additionally, the article described the call to action that the family and people of Ferguson were seeking. This was partially in response to the violent protests throughout Ferguson, but it also encourages the public to question the police and their actions.

Another case covered by NBC was Alton Sterling. “At Alton Sterling's Funeral, Mourning and a Call for Justice” is a title that seeks to elicit emotional response. The “call to justice” is especially impactful. It is not unusual for funerals to be mentioned in the news, but this particular funeral received a lot of attention. The event was publicly broadcasted in the video NBC provided to accompany their segment. In the case of a white man being gunned down by police, the news would be less likely to provide such extensive funeral coverage. As such, this shows that NBC is expressing interest and feeding into the BLM movement. Furthermore, the death of the officers was described as a revenge killing and a complication in the movement. The article even reminisces on the rich history of Baton Rouge’s civil rights movement.

Tyre King was another case broadcasted by NBC.  This broadcast, however, acknowledges the fact that the BB gun carried by Tyre looked nearly identical to a real firearm carried by police. As such, this shows that there is room to support the officer in this situation.

NBC took a more neutral stance within the article. Instead, gun violence was mentioned as the object of controversy. The South Carolina shooting was another addition to the controversial cases handled by NBC. This segment focuses almost entirely on the footage, but the description of the events maintains some bias towards the situation and police. The description does not mention whether or not the man was armed. It also lacks a reason for why the man was fleeing. Of course, an officer fatally shooting someone in the back is difficult to “sugarcoat,” but it could have received some further analysis before it was released on NBC.com.

Another case covered by NBC was about a 66-year-old woman. The 66-year-old black lady was shot and killed by a white police sergeant. This case became public because there was a single black woman with schizophrenia who was shot when there were about four or five other police officers in the room. In the article, it was claimed that the lady had a history with the police. The officer had entered the apartment while she was holding a pair of scissors, once she was convinced to set them down, she grabbed a baseball bat. Upon grabbing the baseball bat, she was immediately shot in the torso twice. NBC was trying to make the police officer seem like the criminal, while he was just trying to defend himself. A black officer is then brought in to talk about how the white officer should have shot the woman in the leg or used non-lethal force.

        This brings us to the coverage of a protest on the shooting of the 66-year-old woman. In this video, the activist says how the officer was in the wrong and too quick to kill. The video clip by NBC only includes the commissioner saying “what is clear is that we have failed.” They could have put in the entire speech and just a couple minutes of the interview, but instead they decided to put in those few words. In the video, they bring up many times how the officer should have used his taser and not his gun. In the end, NBC brings up the officer’s past and the prior settlements, but they did not state what the instances were. They are still placing all the blame on the white officer being in the wrong.

        In the Jamar Clark police shooting, protesters once again filled the streets as they found out the two officers had been linked with the shooting. In the article, NBC wanted the main point from the article to be that “both officers were white.” This should not matter in the case of whether or not the officers acted in the right or wrong way. Later in the article they continue to talk to the county attorney, where he is seen supporting the two officers. After backing up the officers, the protesters have made it their initiative to ensure that he is not going to be reelected. This segment is solely focusing on how the officers were white, while the man they shot was black. Thus, it is a race issue and should be seen as unfair.

        The shooting that resulted in the death of Keith Lamont Scott was another case broadcasted by NBC. This broadcast acknowledges the fact that Scott had a gun and was asked to drop the handgun ten times by the officers. The officer, however, was not charged. In the video, there was a body camera that shows the suspect rolling a joint (marijuana,) as he held a gun in his hand. In the end, NBC had found that the suspect’s family had lied to the investigators over the shooting and the officer was not in the wrong for the shooting, in fact, it was stated that he “acted lawfully”.

        NBC also broadcasted the active shooter at The Ohio State University. In this case, it was stated that police acted in a fast manner which could have been an act of terrorism. Abdul had started to stab individuals and left eleven of them injured and in the hospital. The police officer, Alan Horujko, had shot and killed Abdul Razak Ali Artan just minutes after he drove up and over the curb. The officer only shot the subject after telling him to drop his weapon, and when he did not drop the knife, that is when he chose to shoot. Everything was done that could have been done to limit the amount of injuries that had occurred, and he states that the act was deliberate. NBC is siding with police officer in this case, as he was only protecting people, and therefore, acted rightfully.

**Comparing Media Images to Criminological Research**

The media images we observed and examined say a lot about the impact NBC has on the media portrait of crime and justice. As we explained before, NBC is not historically known for being a biased media outlet, but their broadcasts and articles can tell a different story. In an article from the Presidential Studies Quarterly, media bias was observed in a different light, it stated that “while accusations of media bias have long been a staple of partisan discourse, a number of issues have generally undermined their scholarly validity. While some have unearthed specific instances of biased story construction or patterns of bias in news content, these examples tend to be undermined by the inherent subjectivity of defining ‘bad’ news” (Groeling). This shows that our observation could be accurate, but it is important to realize that the media should still be trusted as a credible source. The scholastics of a media platform are often hurt when observing the effects of media bias. In our analysis, we recognize the possibility of bias, but respect the importance of recognizing a negative stigma toward the media. As such, it is important to focus on the factual evidence more than the controversy at hand.

This factual evidence can be found in the form of another article by Tim Groeling. This article details the importance of understanding that media bias can be defined “as a portrayal of reality that is significantly and systematically (not randomly) distorted” (131). This specific definition relates to our findings in many ways. For instance, the titles of the articles/ headlines for broadcasts immediately distorted views of the audience. Prior to even reading or viewing the information, the title of the article had an impact on the viewers. The semantic and rhetorical choices of NBC influenced perception to support either the police or the accused criminals.

In addition to the distortion of reality, media bias can also develop the frame by which we view crime and criminal justice. The impact of popular media outlets like NBC is staggering. As such, subliminal messaging can be utilized to shape the perception of each individual involved in a case. Meanwhile, the audience is completely unaware of the messages they are receiving. In many recent cases, the subliminal messaging has been focused on race, age (particularly young people,) and violent crimes. Just as many of the articles we examined showed, race and youth prove to be key factors in most of the popular and controversial pieces in circulation. People watch the news with the intent to gain information, but they are also being fed a potentially negative stereotype or stigma. An interesting evaluation of this can be found in the criminological research of Perry Moriearty, he states that “like a virus, these messages installed themselves into viewers’ racial schemas, where, without their knowledge, the messages increased the viewers’ implicit biases about age, race, and causes of and solutions to violent crime” (889). That is why the choice of words within the articles and news broadcasts from NBC are so crucial. Simple phrases can easily shape the audience’s opinions of various schemas and attitudes.

Furthermore, as we discussed in our evaluation, body cameras are becoming a mandatory and essential part of an investigation regarding an officer. According to an article by Claudia Mateescu, Alex Rosenblat, and Danah Boyd, there is still some controversy around the topic. “While police body-worn cameras (BWCs) are a promising tool for police accountability, expanding body camera use will come at a serious financial cost” (146). Overall, BWCs are a positive means to prevent corrupt police officers from getting away with poor behavior. NBC relies on a lot of footage from BWCs to display violent or wrongful encounters with police. The financial situation is a problem, but the accountability they provide is completely worth the extra costs.

In regards to the cost of fair criminal justice, our evaluation of NBC’s potential bias overturned some interesting information about racial profiling. As previously discussed, race is often shown to be a major factor in police activity and investigation. For instance, NBC’s coverage of the Terrence Crutcher incident detailed that the helicopter pilots could be heard discussing his race before the shooting occurred. This is a more extreme example of the racial profiling people experience every day. Crutcher may have been broken down, but he could still be classified as a victim of “driving while black.” According to an article on racial profiling, “nationally, the most frequent incidents of police-citizen contacts take place in the context of traffic stops. In 2005, 56.4% of all police-citizen encounters and, in 2008, 59.2% occurred as a result of a traffic stop” (Dunn 961). These staggering numbers could’ve been used in the NBC broadcast to support the claims of racial profiling in this case. It is surprising that these statistics were not utilized. In the end, however, NBC followed and described this case with a similar opinion in mind.

Finally, NBC focused its attention on high profile police shootings of black males, rather than white males. An article by Cynthia Lee discussed that these cases included “the August 2014 shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; the November 2014 shooting of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio; and the April 2015 shooting of 50-year-old Walter Scott in South Carolina. Official governmental data on the exact number of fatal police shootings that occur annually in the United States is woefully lacking. Until fairly recently, government data suggested that approximately 420 persons are killed in police encounters each year” (145). This number may not seem staggering, but many of these cases are kept under wraps, Additionally, “nongovernmental sources dispute this fact. Instead, they suggest that the actual number of persons killed each year by police is probably double that figure. For example, multiple sources report that over 1,000 individuals were killed by police in the United States in 2015” (Lee 146). These statistics do not discuss the situations or the race of the victims, so it is not evident that police kill more (innocent) people of specific races. The frequency of which these case appear on the news, however, would show otherwise. We did not find much evidence of NBC coverage of controversial white police deaths. They were overwhelmingly about minorities.

In the end, the debate over NBC’s bias is an ethical issue and nothing more. If NBC is biased, then that contradicts our first point of discussion. The media should be overwhelmingly based on fact. People need to be able to trust their news to be factual and precise, rather than influential and persuasive. This issue of ethics also concerns the subject of police brutality and excessive force. If NBC is right in taking this stance, then it is time for change. The police should not racially profile. Every potential criminal should be processed and treated equally. Furthermore, criminals should not be defended solely because of their race. It is important to consider the crime at hand. All in all, these issues are difficult to observe, but they are crucial to the media and criminal justice relationship.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the media tends to exhibit bias on issues like racial profiling and NBC is no exception. No matter the case, the media tends to support a specific side and cater towards that stance. The media needs consider both sides of the case, rather than simply picking one side to persuade viewers to support. NBC has an ethical and factual responsibility to uphold. If this media outlet continues to focus their coverage on one side of a case, then their credibility will be lost. Nonetheless, NBC is still a less-biased alternative to other major news sources. Racial bias and police violence may overwhelm this fact, but it still remains true. In the end, it is key NBC’s bias is apparent.

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