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No Laughing Matter: Media Framing a Local TV News Stunt Gone Wrong

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In September 2021, two White male television personalities wore Afro wigs during a newscast as part of a gag dubbed “return to the 70s,” referring to the change in weather temperatures. A local activist and a professional media group called the prank disrespectful and inappropriate. Television station officials suspended the anchors from on-air duties and fired the station’s news director. These events generated headlines locally, nationally, and internationally. This paper is a case study centered on media coverage and grounded in framing theory. This multimethod approach includes a qualitative content analysis of articles and videos from newspapers, television stations, magazines, YouTube, websites, and blogs to identify news frames used by media outlets that covered the Afro wig incident.

Keywords: Afro wig, newspapers, television station, framing, news media

In the late summer of 2021, one of the most-watched television stations in Arkansas made headlines for the wrong reasons. On Thursday, September 16, 2021, two White male television personalities on KATV Channel 7 News in Little Rock, Arkansas, wore Afro-style wigs on air (Brantley, 2021). To celebrate cooler temperatures after a summer heat wave, anchor Chris May and meteorologist Barry Brandt wore the wigs during a “return to the 70s” weather

segment during the 10 p.m. broadcast (Brantley, 2021).

The Afro wig incident garnered local, national, and international media attention after a local activist, Dr. Anika Whitfield, complained to the station about the racist implication, but KATV did not respond immediately to Whitfield's complaint (Brantley, 2021). Whitfield reportedly wrote that a "European American man" wearing an Afro wig perpetuated "systemic racism" (Cost, 2021). Systemic racism, sometimes known as structural or institutional racism, has been defined as "systems and structures that have procedures or processes that disadvantage African Americans," as well as "the complex interaction of culture, policy and institutions that holds in place the outcomes we [Black people] see in our lives" (Yancey-Bragg, 2020).

After Whitfield contacted Sinclair Broadcast Group, which owns KATV, a vice president issued an apology and met via Zoom with the Central Arkansas Association of Black Journalists (CAABJ), a local affiliate of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), to apologize further (Brantley, 2021). CAABJ is based in Little Rock, which has a 41.2% Black population ("U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: Little Rock city, Arkansas," n.d.). During the meeting with CAABJ, members stressed and called for action. Several members suggested that the station should terminate the television personalities. John Seabers, group manager for Sinclair, called the episode "abhorrent" and "juvenile" (Brantley, 2021). Sinclair regional news director Blaise Labbe, an African American man, said he was "pissed off" about the "stupid" incident and asked, "How in the hell could this happen?" (Brantley, 2021).

KATV suspended May and Brandt, and Sinclair fired general manager Nick Genty.

Later, KATV reinstated the anchor and meteorologist, and both apologized during an on-air broadcast on October 7, 2021. In October 2022, Genty became a Disaster Program Specialist with the American Red Cross Missouri Arkansas Region 7 (LinkedIn, n.d.). In their apologies, Brandt and Sinclair noted they were unaware of the racial and cultural implications of donning the wigs and were trying to be entertaining. May said he "appropriated a look that was not just unprofessional, it was insensitive and it was offensive" (Brantley, 2021). Brandt called his actions objectionable: "This incident has taught me to be more aware of cliches and stereotypes and the damage they can cause" (Bowden, 2021).

What kind of attention did the TV station's case receive from media outlets? How did the news of the suspensions and firing play in other local media? This study is an attempt to address those questions and more. Grounded in framing theory, the multimethod approach includes a content analysis of articles and videos from newspapers, television stations, magazines, YouTube, websites, and blogs to identify news frames used by media outlets that covered the story over three weeks between September 16, 2021, and Sunday, October 10, 2021.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Byrd and Tharps (2014) write that, as with all things Black, the roots of the Afro lie in Africa. Black Power activists of the 1960s wore Afros to symbolize their revolutionary struggle against White oppression, global capitalism, and imperialism. Seeking to reclaim the African diaspora during the Civil Rights era in the United States and eschew European aesthetics, Black Power activists viewed 'conking and straightening ...[as] emblematic of internalized self-hatred' (Dash, 2006, p. 31). Afros, activists argued, signified defiance against the system and

association with the movement, while straight hair represented conformity with systems of oppression.

According to Craig (2022), as increasing numbers of activists adopted the Afro, the media disseminated these images and by 1966, the Afro was firmly associated with political activism. Televised images of Black Panther Party members wearing black leather jackets, black berets, sunglasses, and Afros projected the embodiment of Black radicalism. Afros became part of a cultural beauty standard that grew out of racial and political struggle and sent a powerful message of change to American society (Walker, 2007).

Alternate Opinions about the Afro /Natural Hair vs. Mainstream Images

On the other hand, American society was not receptive to such bold changes. One of the most notable cases of backlash occurred in 1971 when an ABC affiliate fired a well-respected news reporter, Melba Tolliver, for wearing her hair in an Afro while covering the wedding of the daughter of President Richard Nixon (Russell, et al., 2013). The backlash against Blacks, particularly women, sporting natural hairstyles continues to persist in the contemporary workplace. “For T.V. personalities to appear outside the ‘norm’ goes against the TV zeitgeist if you will,” Renee Ferguson, a retired reporter for WMAQ in Chicago, said during an interview with The Maynard Institute (Newsone, 2010). “When my news director at Channel 13 in Indianapolis told me my Afro scared White people he was reflecting his concern for advertising revenues that paid our salaries” (Newsone, 2010).

At least 14 states have passed laws to protect Black people from backlash about their Afros and other natural hairstyles in schools and workplaces. The CROWN Act, which stands for “Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair,” prohibits race-based hair discrimination because of hair texture and protective styles (“About — The official CROWN act,” n.d.).

Framing. According to Baran and Davis (2021), framing and frame analysis were developed by sociologist Erving Goffman to “provide a systematic account of how we develop and use expectations to make sense of everyday life situations and the people in them” (p. 347). According to Goffman, the media influences the development and use of frames. Framing theory argues that frames shape audience perceptions learned from media content (Baran & Davis, 2021) and can influence public opinion by activating stereotypes that readers/viewers might bring to an issue (Larson, 2006). Media framing is central to U.S. culture and influences thoughts and actions (Ortega & Feagin, 2016). Assumptions about society are embedded in the dominant culture, which is then circulated through newspapers, magazines, music, social media, television, film, and radio (Ortega & Feagin, 2016). McCombs and Shaw, in their development of agenda setting, considered framing as part of the second level of agenda setting (“Agenda setting theory,” 2019). If the media tells the audience what to think about and not what to think, how the media frames the issue will have an effect on how the audience thinks about the issue and the importance attached to it (“Agenda setting theory,” 2019).

In an analysis of framing as a media effects theory, Scheufele (1999) raised a series of questions social scientists should consider when approaching the issue of media framing. They include: What factors influence how journalists or other societal groups frame certain issues?; How does it work, and what frames do journalists use?; What media frames influence the audience's perception of certain issues and how does this process work?

In his landmark study, Entman (1993) discussed how journalists embed frames within a text and thus influence thinking. He defined the term by noting that “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a

particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation” (p. 52). Entman (1993) also asserted that frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. If a single frame dominates coverage of an event, the audience member’s learning will be guided by that dominant frame (Baran & Davis, 2021).

According to Zhang (2021), the media tends to adhere to color-blind racism when race might be a factor in a story. In a study titled “Media Frames of Color-Blind Racism: A Content Analysis of the Charlottesville Rally,” Zhang (2021) compared how CNN and Fox News presented the “Unite the Right Rally.” The study of one week of online stories revealed similarities in reporting the rally regardless of the target audience. The findings suggest the media uphold color-blind ideology and underplay racial conflict (Zhang, 2021).

Over time, scholars have consistently identified a set of standard frames found in the news. These frames guide readers’ and viewers’ interpretation of the event and have been identified as conflict, horse-race, strategic, economic, moral, thematic, and episodic (Baran & Davis, 2021). Researchers can use rhetorical and technical devices to identify frames in news stories (Linstrom & Marais, 2012). Rhetorical devices can include word choice and “the presence or absence of certain keywords” (Linstrom & Marais, 2017, p. 31), while technical devices can include elements of news coverage such as headlines, subheadings, layout, and visuals (Linstrom & Marais, 2017).

In addition, researchers also have relied on standard frames created by Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) and refined by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) to evaluate news media coverage. They include human interest or human impact, economics or economic consequences, moral values or morality, powerlessness, attribution of responsibility, and conflict (Linstrom & Marais, 2017, p. 31). Human impact focuses on “descriptions of individuals and groups affected by an issue” (Neuman et al., 1992) or is defined as “bringing a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem.” Attribution of responsibility is “presenting an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for causing or solving to either the government or to an individual or group” (2000, in DeVreese 2005, p. 56). Conflict involves presenting the story as an issue “between individuals, groups, institutions or countries” (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000).

Researchers with the Project for Excellence in Journalism and Princeton Survey Research Associates (1999) identified 13 possible frames they believe journalists commonly use: straight news, conflict, speculation, horserace, policy exploration, wrongdoing/injustice, trend, personality/profile, reality check, consensus, reaction/response, process, and historical. The Princeton Survey Research Associates (1999) defined some of the most frequently used frames thusly:

Straight news account: No dominant narrative frame other than outlining the basic who, what, when where, why and how

Conflict Story: A focus on conflict inherent to the situation or brewing among the players

Consensus Story: An emphasis on the points of agreement around an issue or event

Conjecture Story: A focus around conjecture or speculation of what is to come

Outlook: How the current news fits into history

Reaction Story: A response or reaction from one of the major players

Reality Check: A close look into the veracity of a statement made or information given

Wrongdoing Exposed: The uncovering of wrongdoing or injustice

Based on the review of the literature, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do headlines address the racial implications of the Afro wig incident?

RQ 2: How did media outlets targeting a Black audience frame the Afro wig incident?

RQ 3: How did local/regional and national/international media frame the coverage of the Afro wig incident?

METHODS

Case Study Approach

As the research questions indicate, the goal of the case study was to investigate how different news organizations handle the same story. Framing allows researchers to compare and contrast news organizations' and journalists' use of rhetorical and technical devices when telling a story. The use of framing also allows the researchers to identify patterns in storytelling and presentation as well as potential biases of news organizations and journalists.

Researchers examined articles and video clips from online news outlets for this case study. Because Americans have been more vocal in recent years about specific events related to racism, researchers can employ a case study approach. Campbell et al. (1984) define this method as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (p. 23). Zhou and Sloan (2011) note that case study approaches are practical because of "the degree of context that is provided by a thorough review of relevant history and current events and people shaping the phenomenon of interest" (p. 269). Zhou and Sloan (2011) note that because case studies apply to specific situations, they can offer detailed contextual descriptions, perspectives, and insight.

Because LexisNexis was not available at the time, researchers used alternative electronic databases including ProQuest Central, The Christian Science Monitor, Ethnic Newswatch, International Newstream, Regional Business News, New York Times, Newspaper Source, Telecommunication Database, U.S. Newstream, and the Wall Street Journal. Those searches yielded five results via ProQuest. Following the initial search, Google was used, which garnered the remaining 49 results. Researchers searched for these keywords: "KATV," "Afro wig," "Sinclair Broadcast," and Barry Brandt and Chris May, the names of the news anchor and meteorologist. The original search results yielded 69 articles and videos. After eliminating duplicate artifacts, researchers analyzed 54 articles and videos from newspapers (N=12), magazines (N=2), television and radio stations and their websites (N=7), blogs and other websites (N=30), and YouTube (N=3). Media outlets published the articles and videos between Thursday, September 16, 2021, the day the newscast aired, and Sunday, October 10, 2021. This time frame represents about three weeks after the original broadcast, including the weekend.

Researchers based the coding scheme for the analysis on the frames and their definitions identified in previous news framing research analyzing headlines, subheadlines as well as story text.

Researchers used the following items in coding:

- rhetorical devices, including the presence of keywords such as race, racism, cultural appropriation, and commodification;
- technical devices, including layouts and visuals such as embedded tweets, photos, GIFs, and memes;
- media outlets, including websites for radio stations, television stations, newspapers, blogs, and entertainment magazines;
- primary focus/audience, including Black, independent, or business; and

- region of the country, including local, regional, national, or international.

Researchers used the following definitions for coding:

- Local media are news outlets in Arkansas.
- Regional media are outlets that specifically use this term in the ABOUT section on their websites and are located in the states that border Arkansas, including Oklahoma, Missouri, Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas.
- National media are outlets outside Arkansas or its bordering states, as well as mainstream media outlets with nationwide distribution.
- International media are any outlets headquartered outside the United States.
- Media targeting Black audiences include outlets owned by African Americans, such as Black Enterprise and Urban One, and media not owned by African Americans but seek an African American audience, like Cumulus Media's radio stations that play hip-hop, rhythm-and-blues, and gospel music.

The headline and subheadline examination included an analysis of rhetorical devices used to describe the nature of the incident including the presence of racial descriptors and words such as Afro, Afro-like, and wig. The analysis of headlines also included the predominant frame used. Recognizing that all news frames are not applicable to every news story, the frame list was narrowed to the most relevant and those that are most prominent in news coverage, according to the literature. Two researchers conducted intercoder reliability on approximately 15% (N=8) of the articles to narrow down the specific frames to include in the coding process. Their independent a priori coding yielded 75% agreement on the frames to be employed in the final analysis of news items. The first set of five was narrowed down to three frames: human interest/impact, attribution of responsibility, and conflict. The second set of 13 was narrowed down to seven frames: straight news account, consensus, conjecture, outlook, reaction story, reality check, and wrongdoing exposed.

One researcher coded the news articles. Two other researchers examined headlines.

RESULTS

RQ 1: How do headlines address the racial implications of the Afro wig incident?

The KATV Channel 7 Afro-wig incident received media coverage across various platforms in the United States, Canada, and the UK. The analysis of the rhetorical devices in headlines suggests that these news outlets framed the incident as a story involving race. A total of 52% (N=28) of all publications and websites in the study, as well as 91% (10 out of 11) of those entities targeting Black audiences (see method section on how those outlets were identified), mentioned the race of the meteorologist and anchor. For example, one headline in a local publication referred to the Afro wig incident as “race-related furor” (Massey, 2021), while a press release from the Council of American-Islamic Relations welcoming the firing of the TV news director referenced “racist incidents” at the station (Allison, 2021). Others used the subhead to inform readers the wig incident was not isolated. A story published by the *Washington Post* and also found at theprovince.com included the following headline and subheading: “Two TV Reporters Suspended, boss fired after Afro-like wigs worn on air; The Fallout was swift and severe, exposing TV station’s ongoing struggle to combat racism.” A story on Newsone.com had a similar headline: “White Reporters Suspended for Wearing Afro Wigs During Live Broadcast; While it may simply have been a poorly executed joke, this isn’t the first instance of racial

issues over at KATV.” Another *Washington Post* headline stated, “Diversity training did little for TV station.”

Forty-nine of the 54 (91%) news items included the word wig in the headline, with 39 of 54 (72%) specifically using Afro or Afro-like wig as a descriptor. When examining the variables in tandem, results show that 27 of 54 (50%) headlines mentioned the wig and the race of the anchor and meteorologist.

Most headlines analyzing an incident rooted in race and racial insensitivity can be assigned a straight news frame seeking to address the who, what, when, where, why, and how (the five Ws and H of news). There were a few exceptions to the straight news account, with some news organizations using a controversy/conflict frame. An *Arkansas Times* headline read, “KATV removes news director following wig controversy and complaints from Black Journalists.” A story appearing on Arkansasonline.com, 4state.news, and nwaonline.com included this headline: “KATV Anchor, Meteorologist apologize for controversial wig incident.” One story included the subhead: “Black Journalists Criticize Wig Incident.”

Researchers identified two more frames while examining rhetorical devices in the headlines: attribution of responsibility and human interest. The human interest frame applies to several headlines as copy editors included words and phrases that would pique readers’ interest to delve into the story more for details surrounding the incident. For example, several headlines included words like gag, celebrate, and ’70s themed. The BET.com headline read: “White Arkansas TV Anchors Suspended for Wearing Afro Wigs on Air; It was a gag to celebrate cooler temperatures in the state.” An *Arkansas Times* headline read: “Return to 70s’ gag on KATV gets frosty reception from viewer and apology.” TheDailybeast.com also used the word gag in its headline. Meanwhile, Insider.com’s headline included the “return to the 70s segment.” Similarly, the following headline appeared on Dailymail.com.UK: “Two White Arkansas News Anchors suspended and boss fired after they wore Afro wigs on air to celebrate temperatures dropping into the 70s.”

RQ 2: How did media outlets targeting a Black audience frame the incident?

Media outlets targeting a Black audience primarily framed the story from a position of conflict “between individuals, groups, institutions or countries” (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000) and wrongdoing exposed, which refers to “the uncovering of wrongdoing or injustice” (“Framing the News The Triggers, Frames, and Messages in Newspaper Coverage,” n.d.). Regarding wrongdoing, more than 20 Black media outlets used the same syndicated story that included this lead: “You’d expect those in media to have a clear understanding of the rights and wrongs when it comes to racial insensitivity” (Higgins, 2021). The opening paragraphs also noted that the White reporters showed that “a job title can’t disguise ignorance” (Higgins, 2021).

Conflict primarily focused on the individuals and groups aspect with activist Dr. Anika Whitfield, a Black woman who wears her natural hair (“Anika Whitfield,” n.d.). Whitfield took her complaints to the parent company when she did not get a response from the local TV station itself. Other conflicts included references to meetings with regional members of the National Association of Black Journalists and the Central Arkansas Association of Black Journalists, which is based in Little Rock where the TV station is located. The conflict and wrongdoing frames were enhanced by the use of rhetorical devices using keywords questioning how two White anchors could “do something so stupid” during this “era of Twitter dragging and racial awakening” (Starr, 2021).

RQ 3: How did local/regional and national/international media frame the coverage of the incident?

The Afro wig story was covered by the national media (n=46), the international media (n=10), the local media in Arkansas (n=9), and the regional media (n=4) in Oklahoma and Missouri. The national media included mainstream publications such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Post*, as well as trade publications such as the *Columbia Journalism Review* and *Ad Week*. The national media also included out-of-state publications and Kentucky, South Carolina, and Maryland stations. The international media included publications such as *The Daily Mail* in the UK and the *International Business Times*, which publishes editions in the United States, the United Kingdom, India, and Australia.

The international media primarily used the human impact and human interest frames in their articles. Human impact focuses on “descriptions of individuals and groups affected by an issue” (Neuman et al., 1992) or is defined as “bringing a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem.” Another dominant frame with the international media was outlook, which involves “how the current news fits into history” (“Framing the News The Triggers, Frames, and Messages in Newspaper Coverage,” n.d.).

Regarding the human impact/human interest frame, some international publications focused on the impact and effect on viewers in general rather than the African American community in particular. For example, the *International Business Times* noted in a lead that the Afro wig stunt “didn’t go down well with the viewers.” The publication later added the word “many” to note why that was the case: “didn’t go down well with many of the viewers as they felt the concept hinted at racial discrimination” (Ghosh, 2021). They also used rhetorical devices such as “controversial cosplay,” “fraught forecast,” and “cultural Afropropriation,” a play on the word cultural appropriation. Another publication used other rhetorical devices, noting in the lead that “viewer reception was chilly” (WorldNewsInfo.com, 2021).

The attribution of responsibility frame dominated the Arkansas media, which included a mix of newspapers and blogs based in Little Rock. Attribution of responsibility is “presenting an issue or problem in such a way as to attribute responsibility for causing or solving to either the government or to an individual or group” (2000, in DeVreese 2005, p. 56). In this case, that responsibility went to individuals who were a part of the Sinclair group: the manager of the parent company, a television station spokesperson, and both anchors.

Regarding causing the problem, Chris May noted in his 1-minute, 49-second live, on-air apology with Brandt that he “did what many of you have said I did: appropriated a look that was not just unprofessional, it was insensitive, and it was offensive” and that he “caused many people, many African-Americans in particular, to feel pain” (Brantley, 2021). In terms of solving the problem, May and Brandt both noted that they would work to regain or earn “trust” now that Brandt is “aware of cliches and stereotypes and the damage they can cause” and that May has been led “to more closely examine myself and the station to more closely examine its mission and purpose in covering our entire community” (Brantley, 2021).

A KATV spokesperson noted in a statement that “swift action was important to hold the responsible parties accountable” and spoke of “implementing further training for sensitivity and workplace conduct, in line with our commitment to ensuring events like this don’t happen again” (Brantley, 2021).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

While the incident at KATV Channel 7 received coverage from across the nation and the world, the coverage by local and state media outlets was sparse; no competing TV stations in the market appeared to report the incident. In addition, the two most prominent radio stations in the Little Rock market that target Black audiences did not appear in the search results, nor did the local NPR affiliate. In questioning why these local broadcasters decided the incident was not newsworthy, one answer might be related to the dynamics at work in a local media market. Employees at competing stations being friends and/or colleagues, sharing similar social circles, cross-ownership, content, and other partnerships between media companies, may play a role. In a similar incident in nearby Jackson, Mississippi, an anchor who worked as a meteorologist was fired for racial insensitivity in March 2023 (Frost, 2023). None of the other television stations in the Jackson market covered the story, but the story did appear in at least two Mississippi newspapers (Reports, 2023), including the statewide newspaper (The Clarion-Ledger, 2023).

Results for RQ1 show that most headlines mentioning that the anchor and meteorologist wearing the wigs are White signal that race was an essential factor in the story. This seems to indicate the majority of media outlets that picked up the story did not downplay the racial component. This finding contradicts Zhang (2021), which suggested that the media underplayed the racial conflict at the “Unite the Right Rally” in Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017. Those findings suggest that the media adhered to color-blind racism with race-related stories (Zhang, 2021). With the Afro wig story, it is important the media outlets confronted the issue head-on given the time in which this incident occurred: America re-engaging in race/racism discussions following the death of George Floyd in 2020. The headline framing of the incident using the straight news, attribution of responsibility, and human interest angles are important because the media outlets avoided sensationalism, allowing the audience members to make their own judgments about the incident as well as the actors’ motivations and contrition. This supports Baran and Davis (2021) assertion from Goffman that framing and frame analysis help people make sense of people and situations in their daily lives.

The use of the wrongdoing frame by outlets targeting a primarily Black audience is not surprising given that these outlets have a tradition of advocating for the Black community. Historically, these outlets have attempted to hold up a mirror to America so she can see herself as she truly is while keeping the audience informed. Exposing wrongdoing or immorality on the part of White perpetrators at the detriment of Black people is a long-standing tradition in advocacy journalism, which defines much of the news media targeting a Black audience. This advocacy journalism dates back to the days of Freedom’s Journal, the first Black-owned and operated newspaper in the United States, and remains today through a myriad of outlets such as TheRoot.com and TheGrio.com.

In terms of RQ3, the results suggest that human impact and human interest frames were used because international media outlets cannot localize a story in the same manner that local journalists can and need to frame their stories in a manner that appeals to what larger audiences have in common, such as the impact of the issue of racism on people of color across the globe and the emotions associated with actions deemed as racist. The RQ3 results further suggest attribution of responsibility was primarily used by the local media because doing so allows their audience to know that they have some integrity, professionalism, and ethics, by reporting on who or what caused a problem and what was done to solve

it. The local coverage quoted the perpetrators' apologies and focused on the fall-out in terms of the meetings involving KATV management and CAABJ to show readers, listeners, and viewers that the station took the complaint more seriously, particularly in follow-up stories that highlighted the suspensions of the anchor and meteorologist and the firing of the news director. This aspect of local coverage indicates how the media frames can impact public opinion by activating stereotypes (Larson, 2006) and influencing thoughts and actions (Ortega & Feagin, 2016).

In the artifacts analyzed, although some media outlets covered the incident as a straight news story with race being an important component, others did not provide the historical context of the Afro and its significance to Black culture. While natural hair, including the Afro worn by Black media professionals, women in particular, was seen as a threat to mainstream audiences and TV station advertising revenues, some of the mainstream audience accepted a gag insensitive to Black viewers' historical roots, traditions, and sensibilities.

It is worth noting that *The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law*, a style and usage guide for journalists known as The AP Stylebook, cautions about including race unless it is absolutely necessary; in this case, journalists deemed it necessary.

Here's what the AP Stylebook says in its race-related coverage entry:

Reporting and writing about issues involving race calls for thoughtful consideration, precise language, and an openness to discussions with others of diverse backgrounds about how to frame coverage or what language is most appropriate, accurate and fair..... Identifying people by race and reporting on actions that have to do with race often go beyond simple style questions, challenging journalists to think broadly about racial issues before having to make decisions on specific situations and stories. In all coverage — not just race-related coverage — strive to accurately represent the world, or a particular community, and its diversity through the people you quote and depict in all formats. Omissions and lack of inclusion can render people invisible and cause anguish (“Associated Press Stylebook,” n.d.)

Additionally, in 2022, the AP Stylebook added an “inclusive storytelling” chapter, which emphasizes the importance of using “thoughtful and precise language” and “necessary context and background” (Meir, 2022). Here's what the AP Stylebook says in its inclusive storytelling entry: Among the considerations: the stories we choose to convey; the sources we talk with; the images we select; the framing, approach and specific words we use; the details we include or don't include — and the understanding that all of those various parts of a story can be seen and interpreted very differently, depending on a person's background and experiences (“Associated Press Stylebook,” n.d.)

Although not a news media outlet, the Council of America-Islamic Relations (CAIR), “the nation's largest Muslim civil rights and advocacy organization” (Allison, 2021), saw the Afro wig incident as important enough to issue a formal statement to “stand in solidarity” with everyone challenging “forms of bigotry” (Allison, 2021). “These incidents demonstrate a culture of anti-Black racism at the station requiring appropriate action,” said CAIR National Communications Coordinator Ismail Allison. “We welcome the firing and hope it sends a message to the larger community that bigotry will not be tolerated or excused” (Allison, 2021).

CAIR's statement illustrates a question Scheufele (1999) asked about media framing: What factors influence how journalists or other societal groups frame certain issues? The racial climate of 2021 can

be considered a factor that caused the group to frame the issue in a manner that, based on Entman (1993), defined a problem and made a moral judgment.

Some media outlets and commenters focused on decor, attire, and historical events that could have been used to celebrate the 1970s era without running the risk of cultural appropriation. This finding relates to Entman (1993), which discussed how journalists embed frames that may influence thinking. In this case, the media framing of the Afro-wig story prompted readers to suggest remedies. For example, Lewis (2021) said: “Why is it that Black people have to always be the butt of White people’s jokes? Why didn’t he come out in a Maxi dress, midi skirts or ponchos? They all came out in the 70’s and everybody wore them. They could have even mentioned Watergate. No, he had [to] go to Black people.” Blavity Team (2021) noted that “disco decor” might have been used, while Edwards (2021) cited “bell-bottoms, tie-dye T-shirts or a peace symbol” as being appropriate. Noting the commodification aspect of the Afro wig gag, Kate (2021) gave these 1970s fashion tips: “Yup, those weather fellas shoulda stuck with the wide striped bell bottoms and floral print polyester shirts with big collars, which they could have gotten at the costume shop where they got the wigs (or from my boyfriend in 1973).”

Finally, in a more light-hearted attempt at alternatives Starr (2021a) posted technical devices of photos of two men’s and one women’s platform shoe with goldfish in the heel posing this question: “So these were out of the question?”

Media outlets choosing to run the story speaks to its importance in creating a dialogue about race-related issues in this period of racial reckoning. With a few exceptions, those outlets did not sensationalize the issue and approached the story as a straight news account addressing the traditional who, what, when, where, why, and how questions that all news stories must answer. A third lesson is that consistent news frames are used by journalists regardless of the topic. As the results indicated, frames such as conflict/controversy, attribution of responsibility, and human interest were most often used. Finally, the way some audience members responded to the media coverage, such as by making recommendations and moral evaluations, further underscores McCombs and Shaw’s assertion that media framing affects the importance an audience attaches to an issue.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The primary limitation of this paper is the number of articles used. It is important to note that 15 urban radio stations targeting Black audiences used the same exact story but those items were not used in the final analysis. Because only 54 articles were analyzed, researchers were cautious in drawing sweeping conclusions from the research. The incident received more coverage While that one article appeared across multiple media websites, those sites considered the story meaningful enough to post. Regarding future studies, an in-depth analysis of the comments on stories posted to websites could provide more insight regarding contemporary attitudes about race, people’s interpretation and acceptance of commodification and appropriation of Black culture, and their ideas about cancel culture. A line of inquiry to follow is how Blacks and Whites – male and female, young and old – view these issues. Comparing similar cases where anchors have been reprimanded and/or fired for insensitivity might reveal patterns in news coverage and frames used to cover those stories. One example is Whoopi Goldberg’s suspension from *The View* in February 2022 over her controversial remarks about Jews (Brathwaite, 2022).

In addition to examining the coverage of Goldberg's suspension, researchers can analyze the frames in the coverage of professional basketball player Kyrie Irving's social media post about Jews in October 2022 (Mullin, 2022). They also could study the news coverage of a photo revealing that Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones was present during the protest of integration at Little Rock Central High School in 1957 (Maraniss & Jenkins, 2022). LeBron James called out the media for what seems to be a double standard regarding Whites versus non-Whites treatment in the media for controversial statements or actions as in the cases of Irving and Jones (Irving, 2022). Comparing the framing and coverage of those events might well shed light on whether James' assertion rings true.

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