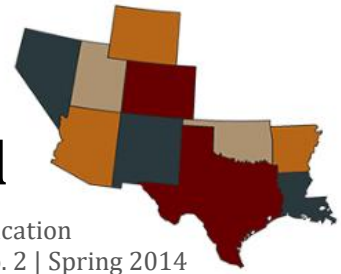


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Portrayals of a Presidential Statement on Race: The Barack Obama-Trayvon Martin Connection in 25 Daily Newspapers

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This study analyzed daily newspaper coverage of President Obama's July 19, 2013 statement on the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of unarmed Florida teenager Trayvon Martin. The story was the most high-profile incident of 2013 where race was a major issue. The 25 front pages that made up the purposive sample represented a range of newspaper types including 13 metropolitan newspapers, seven community newspapers and five with the largest circulations in the nation. The analysis showed that the storyline most newspapers used in reporting on the statement by the nation's first bi-racial president was one that made the connection between Obama and a 17-year-old African American boy from Florida who was gunned down as he wore a hoodie and carried a bag of Skittles. Fifteen of the 25 newspapers chose to use Obama's words Trayvon Martin "Could Have Been Me" in their headline.

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**Portrayals of a Presidential Statement on Race:
The Barack Obama-Trayvon Martin Connection in 25 Daily Newspapers**

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In his first term in office, President Barack Obama, the nation's first bi-racial president, rarely used his office to make statements about race. But, during July of 2013, in the first year of his second term in the White House, that all changed with an unexpected ad to reporters on the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of unarmed Florida teenager Trayvon Martin. This July 19th presented an opportunity for the news media to cast before readers and viewers yet another conversation on the issue of race.

Obama's remarks came just 50 years after President John F. Kennedy gave a televised address on civil rights on the night of the June 11, 1963 integration of The University of Alabama and only hours before Civil Rights Worker Medgar Evers would be gunned down in the driveway of his Jackson, Mississippi home. Obama's remarks followed 15 years after President Bill Clinton called for a "national conversation on race."

Instead of establishing a seven-member advisory board that would produce a report to the American people as President Clinton did, Obama in his July 19, 2013 remarks identified three areas for action: 1) work to reduce mistrust of law enforcement; 2) reconsider state and local laws (i.e. "Stand Your Ground") to see if, in fact, they encourage altercations like the one involving Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman; and 3) look at ways to think about how to bolster and reinforce African American boys.

As President Obama delivered his unscripted comments, press photographers and videographers documented his every move in hopes of capturing on film what Henri Cartier-Bresson would classify as, "the decisive moment" (Cartier-Bresson, 1979, pp. 11-24) for the next day's newspaper. Rather than the remarks themselves, this paper focuses on how a sample of newspapers across America in communities large and small, urban and rural, documented the historic statement by the nation's first bi-racial president. The photographic report and text from

the front pages of 25 of the nation's newspapers offer intersection points of discussion about race, culture, and visual representation. They also challenge one to consider how these issues influence outsiders' perspectives of the news event.

Literature Review

To begin a study of news coverage of President Obama's July 19, 2013 statement, one first needs some understanding of how the press covers the U.S. President and how the U.S. President depends on the press. A rich tradition of scholarship on the relationship between the news media and White House aids in understanding the way the news media would cover a particular presidential statement. Even though President Obama did not take questions in this particular event, the formal nature of statement can be examined as part of the literature on the presidential news conference as a so-called "pseudo-event." Then, because the presidential statement focused on race, such a statement should be contextualized in the tradition of newspaper coverage of race that dates back several decades. Here, in addition to examining how newspapers have covered race, this study considers how scholars have investigated the nation's first bi-racial president in terms of race.

President & Press Relations It's been said that the White House story is the President, who he is, what he does and what his program actions and goals are (Grossman & Kumar, 1999). As the office of President of the United States has grown in power, public activities and public relations strategies have been increasingly important. What presidents do and what presidents say are both automatically considered newsworthy by the nation's press (Schaefer, 1999). Indeed, the president's power as communicator-in-chief is at least as far-reaching as his authority to negotiate treaties, to dispatch groups, and to impose his veto on legislation (Broder, 1987).

Based on his observations of the interactions in the newsrooms of the *New York Times*, the Washington bureau of the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, Sigal (1973) identified the significant impact of the press upon the President. Newsmaking is a consensual process between reporters and their sources. As Sigal (1973) explains, officials disclose information largely as a by-product of their own bureaucratic politics in an effort to maintain support for a particular course of action (p. 181). Broder's (1987) experience as a national political correspondent and columnists for *The Washington Post* allowed him to go even further in speaking specifically about The White House. Broder argued that what he called "clique journalism" or the form of the craft practiced was journalistic corruption prompted by the close working relationship between journalists and public officials.

*Press Conference or Statements as Pseudo-Events*¹ More than a half-century ago, Boorstin (1961) was credited with coining the term "pseudo-event" to describe staged and scripted events that were counterfeit versions of actual happening, a part of his criticism of the packaging of politics and celebrities. As Beasley (1984) found in her study of Eleanor Roosevelt's press conferences, all press conferences are "pseudo-events" because they are staged to capture journalistic attention. Even though press conferences began under Woodrow Wilson and were conducted by Presidents Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge, Roosevelt's husband

¹ *Pseudo-Event* is a board term developed by Daniel J. Boorstin in *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (Boorstin, 1961) to explore "extravagant expectations" society in the United States (I would argue this has become a global phenomena) has assigned to the media to shape our world. In these expectations society, "create(s) the demand for the illusions (pseudo-events) with which we deceive ourselves (p. 5). Boorstin posits, "The ... making of our illusions—"the news behind the news"—has become the most appealing news of the world (p. 5).

Fifty-plus years since Boorstin made these observations pseudo-events have become a vital tool of Politian's and newsmakers to get their message out with very little investigation from media. Cathy Packer observes, this lack of scrutiny from the media is in part because the pseudo-event "satisfies both the needs of an event's organizers and journalism's insatiable appetite for news" (Packer, 1998,1 p. 388). "Media Events," "Photo Ops," Staged News," and "New Conferences," are all components of a pseudo-event.

is said to have begun the "second and contemporary" period of the presidential press conference (Cornwell, 1960).

For President Obama, the George Zimmerman acquittal in the murder of Trayvon Martin provided Obama an opportunity to utilize the “bully pulpit”² (Goodwin, 2013, p. xi). This “pseudo-event” under the guise of a news conference, afforded Obama the opportunity to create news by delving into the hot button issue of race. He controlled the messages, the context in which photographs were made, and even the tone of the images. This is the essence of a “pseudo-event,” an activity that is: 1) not spontaneous; 2) where the news maker(s) are planted primarily for the immediate purpose of being reported about or reproduced; 3) ambiguous in relations to the reality of the issue being discussed; 4) and is often a self-filling prophecy (Boorstin, 1961, p. 11-12). Toure’ writing his commentary about the Obama news conference notes:

Validating black pain, asserting that profiling is real and saying that history is not an excuse but an honest part of why we are in the place we’re in are dangerous stuff when one party depends on a multiracial coalition and the other is almost entirely white and the demographic trends of America show whites becoming a minority within a few decades. (Toure', 2013)

Although this news conference was presented as an opportunity to address the “American” public about an important issue, the tone and images of Obama were designed to illustrate that one African American (the president) understood and identified with the plight of the African American in general and the African American male in specific.

Race in American Newspapers It took a Presidential Commission to call attention to the

² Former President Theodore Roosevelt is attributed with coining “bully pulpit” to “describe the national platform the presidency provides to shape public sentiment and mobilize action” (Goodwin, 2013, p. vi).

role the media played in violent disorders that brought destruction to predominantly black sections of dozens of American cities in the summer of 1967 and the spring of 1968. The National Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Commission and named after its chairman, Otto Kerner concluded that media failed to analyze and report adequately the racial problems in the United States. Indeed, understanding the so-called “black invisibility” didn’t start in the 1960s, but research has shown that it was the case throughout the 20th century (Johnson, Sears, & McConahay, 1971). A study of seven North Carolina dailies following the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954 provided evidence that the issue of segregation received little attention in the Southern press (Carter, 1957). Only four of the papers took an identifiable editorial stand on the desegregation question in the newspaper issues studied.

Several studies have sought to assess whether there were improvements in newspaper coverage of blacks and their problems following the civil rights era. An analysis of newspaper coverage was conducted in papers from the Youngstown, Ohio *Vindicator*, *New York Times*, *The Atlanta Constitution*, *The Boston Globe* and *The Chicago Tribune* (Martindale, 1985). Findings revealed that three of the four leading papers increased their attention considerably to black problems in the 1970s. Still, protest activities were treated as isolated conflicts, without providing any background or historical context.

In another study, Pease (1989) compared newspaper coverage of minorities in 1987 to that of 1965, three years before the Kerner Commission Report. While most of the minority news in the *Columbus Post-Dispatch* was event-oriented, a reactive rather than proactive philosophy, there was a noteworthy shift from “ambulance-chasing” spot news of minorities toward the kind of process news suggested by the Kerner Commission. Still, Pease’s (1989)

research indicated that coverage of minorities had made little progress between 1965 and 1987 in Columbus, Ohio in exposing the greater Columbus population to the concerns of racial minorities in the Buckeye State's capital.

The efforts by those in the newspaper industry to diversify their ranks in hopes of diversifying their content began, in earnest, in 1978 with the American Society of Newspaper Editors' annual reporting of diversity in the nation's newsrooms with a goal of parity with the American population by 2000. Some critics of this effort argue that an ongoing media crusade for diversity has made American journalism weaker, particularly on complex stories involving race, gay rights, feminism, affirmative action and immigration (McGowan, 2001). In her recently released study of the Society's 30-plus-year-old program, Mellinger (2013) chronicled the efforts on the part of the American Society of Newspaper Editors to reform newsroom hiring. Her historical account of this effort suggested that an exclusively race-focused, census-based model cannot disrupt the institutionalized and exclusionary professional norms that constructed segregated newsrooms to begin with (p. 178).

Research on Race and Obama From his handling of controversies involving race to his rhetoric on race and even how one says his name, there is ample scholarship in the communication field linking the issue of race to President Obama. Orbe & Urban (2011) introduced a special issue of *Communication Studies* exploring Barack Obama as communicator, politician and cultural icon by declaring "Race Matters" in the Obama Era.

Delivered before he was elected, Obama's "More Perfect Union" Philadelphia address in 2008 has been thoroughly analyzed by rhetoricians and other communication scholars (Dilliplane, 2012; Rowland & Jones, 2011; Terrill, 2009). In the first of those treatments to appear in the literature, Terrill (2009) called attention to the double consciousness, double vision

and doubled attitude in the president's remarks. Rowland & Jones (2011) suggested Obama succeeded in his March 2008 speech not because he contextualized the problem of race in a sacred religious narrative, but because he linked it to the American dream. Meanwhile, Dilliplane (2012) made a series of arguments about why the presentation by Candidate Obama was viewed as a key rhetorical moment in the 2008 presidential campaign.

One major point that Dilliplane makes that is most relevant for this study is the role of the news media as target audience because the news media were the primary means through which people were exposed to political information. To that end, Candidate Obama had to calibrate his message, as it would be interpreted by white media professionals as well as black journalists, commentators and leaders (p. 134). The news organizations would examine how he would balance the "black perspective" with the "white perspective."

In one of the first book-length studies on the Obamas and the mass media, Moody & Dates (2013) critically assessed the ways in which media focused on race, gender, religion and politics in framing perceptions of the President and First Lady during Obama's first administration. They found that race was the most salient issue addressed in mass media messages about the Obamas. While mainstream media messages were balanced, vacillating between good and bad portrayals of the Obamas, citizen-produced messages often included traditional racist and sexist ideologies. Social media outlets served as a new avenue for spreading historical stereotypes and messages of hatred (Moody, Dates, 2013).

The Case: Trayvon Martin, George Zimmerman and Race

In understanding the significance of President Obama's July 19, 2013 statement, it is important to briefly review the details in the February 26, 2012 shooting death of 17-year-old

Trayvon Martin, by 29-year-old Neighborhood Watch Volunteer George Zimmerman, a white Hispanic whose mother is Peruvian. Zimmerman claimed the shooting, which followed an altercation with Martin, was in self-defense. Police in Sanford, Florida did not initially arrest Zimmerman. But, after the release of seven 911 recordings in the case and a national campaign for his arrest, Zimmerman was charged with manslaughter. Speaking on March 23, 2012, Obama's remarks drew national attention to the Zimmerman case and gave voice to many African-Americans who saw a racial injustice. "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon," the president said then. Zimmerman's trial began June 10, 2013. He did not testify in his own defense. On July 14, 2013, after 16.5 hours of deliberation, the jury of five white women and one Hispanic woman found Zimmerman "not guilty." A variety of protests began in cities across the nation, and the case was a "trending" topic on social media.

Relevant Theories

Traditionally scholars have utilized a number of theories in communication to provide a framework in which to explore the media, the use of photography, and/or the visual image and its effects on society. Walter Lippmann (1922), a newspaper columnist in the 1920s, researched the power of photographs put forth from the media to the public. His concern for the picture and its ability to influence public opinion is illustrated in his opening chapter, "The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Head".

Throughout seminal text, Lippmann pushes the power of media and rightly observes that "pictures have always been the surest way of conveying an idea, and next in order, words that call up pictures in memory" (p, 154). Lippmann's analysis about the power of the media as an

important vehicle to transmit images and omit others, influenced developing perspectives about one's awareness to information and the effect it has on one's agenda.

Max McCombs and Donald Shaw's agenda setting theory was heavily influenced by Lippmann's early work. These approaches (Lippmann, 1922; McCombs, Shaw, & Weaver, 1997) explore how the media influences what the public thinks about, and leads to the essence of what Erving Goffman refers to as "framing analysis" or "framing (Goffman, 1974, p. 11).

Framing theory is influenced by agenda setting and can be viewed as another side of the same coin. Like agenda-setting framing is concerned with understanding the media's effect in society. Goffman posits that framing allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms (Goffman, 1974, p 21). Framing theories have been utilized in studies looking at visual intelligence and perceptions (Barry, 1997); to the public life in media (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2010); and to visual analysis of various media events (Fahmy, Kelly, & Kim, 2007; Messaris & Linus, 2010; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011).

Although agenda setting and framing are valuable theoretical frameworks to understand the media and its various roles in society, but these approaches omit many of the cultural and racial nuances that may be present when considering a topic such as the George Zimmerman case in the death of Trayvon Martin. To account for this omission, this study incorporates Clifford Geertz's (1973) interpretive theory of culture and Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation. Both approaches rely heavily on the social science tradition of anthropology and its care for culture. For example, Hall's practical and visual approach toward culture notes the following:

Culture, it is argued, is not so much a set of things—novels and paintings or TV programs or comics – as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is

concerned with the production and exchanges of meanings – the ‘giving’ and ‘taking’ of meaning – between the members of a society or group.... Thus culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world, in broadly similar ways. (Hall, 1997, p. 2)

Geertz highlights his approach within a cultural anthropologic framework and his interpretive approach views culture as a symbolic system that evolves from “humanities’ interpretations of the world” (Geertz, 1973, p. 29). In these two perspectives addressing culture and its meaning, photography is used as a tool for the observer to focus on the signs, symbols, meanings, and interpretations. For this study of analyzing the photographs in 25 newspapers, Hall and Geertz offer a fresh perspective of analysis and an interpretive lens of visual culture. Moreover, Dan Millar rightly observes it assists researchers with their to “connect visual with the stories” (Millar, 1998, p. 519).

Research Questions

As has been noted decades ago, what a newspaper prints is a function of the events that “make the news,” the material channeled to the paper by wire services, and other new sources and pressures for publicity exerted by organized groups (Carter, 1957). Given what we know about the power of visuals in presenting a news story, especially on one’s front page, this study sought to understand what role photojournalism depicting President Obama and Trayvon Martin played in capturing the connection between the two black men. Previous research has found the news media, even years after the Kerner Commission’s criticism of their coverage of the problems of black Americans, have failed to cover African American issues and problems in any consistent manner (Martindale, 1985; Martindale, 1990; Pease, 1989). Next, this study sought to evaluate the 25 newspapers for the relative importance of the president’s statement on race based

on its location on the front page and based on the number of columns devoted to the story's presentation. The study also examines to what extent do stories about the president's statement on race include other sources besides the president?

R1: What role did photojournalism depicting President Obama and Trayvon Martin play in capturing the connection between the two black men?

R2: What was the relative importance of the president's statement on race based on its location on the front page?

R3: What was the relative importance of the president's statement on race based on the number of columns devoted to the story's presentation?

R4: To what extent do stories about the president's statement on race include other sources besides the president?

Beyond these specific research questions, one should consider the representation of the President's July 2013 address in the 25 newspapers true. Is one able to gain a clearer perspective of this news event from the photograph(s) that ran in the nation's newspapers? And how might we better understand some of the complexities brought to bear when issues of race and accurate representation are entered into the conversation?

Methodology

This study analyzed daily newspaper coverage of President Obama's July 19, 2013 statement on the Trayvon Martin case as it appeared on the front pages of 25 newspapers on Saturday, July 20, 2013. As a method that can be used to examine communication message attributes, content analysis helps also in understanding the substance and form of the media messages (Stroud & de Macedo Higgins, 2009). In this case, the interest was the attributes associated with the presentation and form of the news stories on the front-page of the newspapers and the substance of the messages in terms of type of news stories and sources within the story.

According to the Freedom Forum's Newseum Web site, newspapers from around the world submit their front pages to the Newseum via the Internet to be part of *Today's Front Pages*.

Exactly how many front pages are made available changes daily because some newspapers fail to submit their front pages by a given date.

In this study, a purposive sample of 25 front pages was drawn from the *Today's Front Pages* web site based on three criteria: 1) Inclusion of the Obama story; 2) Inclusion of photo; and 3) Representative nature of the news outlet in one of three categories: elite national newspaper, metropolitan daily or community daily. Such a sample is chosen with the knowledge that it is not representative of the general population, but includes subjects selected on the basis of specific characteristics or qualities (Wimmer & Dominick, 2000). This technique of choosing front pages from the Newseum *Today's Front Pages* site has been used before in a visual analytical study (Fahmy, Kelly & Kim, 2007).

To facilitate further analysis of the stories, full text of all 25 stories featured on the front pages (and their accompanying sidebars) was obtained either from the newspaper's web site or an online newspaper database. A professional journalist and graduate student coded each of the 25 stories for "photo," "location," "number of columns," "type of headline" and up to six of the actual sources explicitly mentioned. The photos were analyzed based on whether they included the following categories: "Obama only at press room podium", "Photos of Obama and Trayvon", or "Obama Closeup with emotion." For location, each story was coded for location based on whether they appeared "above the fold," "below the fold" or "inside the newspaper." Stories coded as "inside" were promoted usually with a photo or headline on the front page, but the full text appeared inside the newspaper. The "number of columns" was simply total number of columns across the page on which the story ran. To summarize the way in which the

headlines were written, each story's headline was coded as either focusing on "time to soul search," "Trayvon could have been me," "Call to action" or "neutral." A "neutral" headline did not highlight any of the specific content of President Obama's address. Instead, it just stated that the president spoke or gave a statement. In addition to these codes, Monday-Saturday circulation data were collected for each of the 25 newspapers and owner of the publications.

Findings

The 25 front pages that made up the purposive sample represented a range of newspaper types including 13 metropolitan newspapers, seven community newspapers and five with the largest circulations in the nation. A list of all of the newspapers included in the study and their owners at the time of publication³ appears in Table 1. Both Gannett and Tribune each had four front pages in the sample. Two of the newspapers were from the Daytona, Florida-based Halifax Media Group, which recently acquired the New York Times Company Regional Group, making it the 12th largest media company in the United States.

The sample included multiple front pages from competing news operations in both the New York market and the Tampa-St. Petersburg, Fla. market. In New York, the *Daily News*, *New York Times*, *Newsday* and *New York Post* all carried stories about the president's unexpected remarks on the verdict in the George Zimmerman trial. Meanwhile, in St. Petersburg, Fla., the *Tampa Bay Times* and *Tampa Tribune* both showcased the story on their front pages.

Although not a major part of this study, sidebars or secondary stories were found in the presentations by one-third of the front pages that were analyzed. In fact, all of the newspapers from the state of Florida "packaged" their coverage of the Obama remarks with their ongoing

³ Note: Two of the newspapers, *The Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post* were sold AFTER July 20, 2013.

stories about the protests over the "Stand Your Ground" law. Elsewhere, the *Quad City Times* included a story about a local rally to memorialize Trayvon along with an Associated Press item from Washington. In Detroit, local leaders were included in a reaction sidebar story written by local reporters at *The Detroit News*. Not all of the "sidebar" stories were about Trayvon Martin. For instance, The (Asbury Park) *Press* in New Jersey included a "sidebar" story about silent protests against gun violence. The content and photos of all sidebars were not available, and thus, were not included in this study.

In response to the first research question on the role of photojournalism in depicting President Obama and Trayvon Martin, photographic presentations were analyzed based on which strategies the photo editor or page designer used to compose and present the president's statement. Most of the 25 newspapers chose the close-up photo of President Obama with a dejected or downtrodden look on his face. Both Getty Images and the Associated Press distributed images from the news conference. The majority of 16 papers showing only Obama chose this emotional picture, some enlarging it to make it the dominant element in the layout. Only four of the newspaper front pages included photos of both Obama and Trayvon Martin. *The New York Post* used a file photo of a younger Barack Obama alongside Trayvon Martin. Its cross-town competitor, *The Daily News* also used both black men in their presentation, with Martin wearing a hooded sweatshirt, like the one he was wearing the night he was killed. The picture of President Obama was from 1978, his senior year in high school.

The fact that most newspapers chose not to include both men's photos likely has a lot to do with the amount of space available for the story presentation. Even though 14 of the 25 played the story above the fold, indicating support for the second research question, that the president's statement on the outcome of the George Zimmerman case was of great importance,

most newspapers did not devote more than one column to the story. In response to the third research question, only 1 newspaper took the Obama race statement story across five columns on its front page. *The Des Moines Register* presented a story from its sister publication *USA TODAY* across the width of the page. *Newsday* and *The (New York) Daily News*, both tabloids, allowed the story to cover the full front page.

When 25 news stories were analyzed for their inclusion of sources other than the President, the majority of the stories stopped at just three sources. The most frequently included second and third sources were Trayvon Martin's parents, who released a statement following the July 19, 2013 address and Robert Zimmerman, Jr, the brother of George Zimmerman, who was complimentary of the President in his remarks. A total of 10 of the 25 front pages were stories generated by local community-based reporters, while six of the front pages utilized copy from the Associated Press and six included stories from a Wash., D. C. bureau affiliated with the newspaper chain of which the newspaper is a part. The remaining papers ran a story from *USA Today* or *The Washington Post*.

In response to the fourth research question on the extent to which the stories about President Obama's statement on the George Zimmerman verdict include other sources besides the president, the 25 examples analyzed show that where a newspaper relied on wire copy or stories from traditional bureau reporters, the source pool was limited. Half of the papers in this case included only comments from what some might call the "usual suspects," White House Press Secretary Jay Carney and the "other side," represented by Robert Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin's parents.

With a circulation of just 91,000, *The (Asbury Park) Press* distinguished itself as one of the ten newspapers in the sample that used a local reporter to present the story of President

Obama's remarks. With a provocative headline-- "Is it safe to be a young black man in America?" and a 1,478-word story, the *Press* focused on the issues raised in President Obama's speech. The New Jersey-based news organization answered the call issued some 45 years ago by the Kerner Commission to "analyze and report adequately the racial problems in the United States." The publication positioned African American males in their local community at the center of their story, which coincided with Obama's July 19, 2013 statement. Reporters Nicquel Terry and Alesha Williams Boyd interviewed mothers whose sons could have been Trayvon Martin. One of the mothers told the story of her son being stopped and searched along one of the Jersey beaches. A local race relations professor and local minister were also interviewed for this enterprise story that placed the focus on the hopelessness that many African Americans felt in 2013 when they were treated unfairly in situations where no one else looks like them.

Discussion

For decades, the news media were partly to blame for the nation failing to address its "race problem." Blacks and their issues were invisible on the pages of the nation's newspapers for much of the 20th century (Johnson, Sears & McConahay, 1971). Now with a U.S. President who is African American, whose words and actions are both automatically considered newsworthy by the nation's press (Schaefer, 1999), one might expect that "black invisibility" should be no more.

The storyline that most newspapers took in reporting on President Obama's July 19, 2013 statement was one that made the connection between Obama and a 17-year-old African American boy from Florida who was gunned down as he wore a hoodie and carried a bag of Skittles. Fifteen of the 25 newspapers chose to use Obama's words "Trayvon Martin Could Have Been Me" in their headline. That was the best way to connect the nation's first bi-racial

president to what has arguably been the most high-profile story of 2013 in which race was a major issue.

A Breakout

Three of the twenty-five newspapers (New York Newsday, the Orlando Sentinel, and the Tampa Bay Times) are highlighted in this section. Each of these newspapers used an image of the president in different ways.

New York Newsday

New York *Newsday* made one of the boldest attempts to visually entice the reader to enter the conversation by publishing a full-page photograph of a pensive president pursing his lips. A headline quote, “COULD HAVE BEEN ME” serves as a secondary visual element, perhaps leading the reader to ask a few questions: Who could have been me? What could have happened to the president? and Why is it important for one to understand the dynamics of the situation?

Some of the answers are realized when we see the third visual component of a youthful Trayvon Martin is shown. This is an important intersection of several elements: 1) A pensive and reflective president, 2) a youthful Trayvon Martin, 3) both are African Americans, and 4) the statement quoted previously. Each of these elements in and of themselves offer very little to advance the conversation. But in this case,

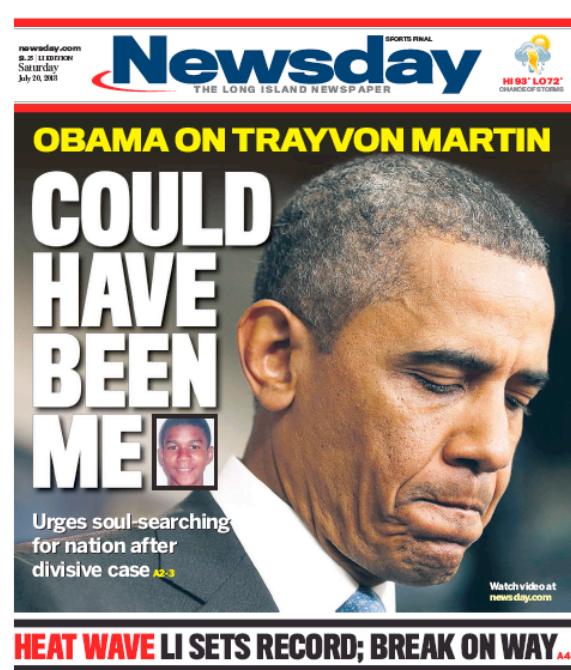


Figure 1 New York Newsday front page published July 20, 2013.

the photographs become what Roland Barthes rightly points out: “photographs are signs which don’t *take*, (but) which *turn*” (Barthes, 1982, p. 6).

For Barthes, the photograph is more about its reference points. As points of data, photographs are analyzed by their viewers for initial points of interest [i.e. one might look at a photograph because of its aesthetic characteristics or subject matter. They will then examine the image for new information]. In the *New York Newsday* case, when the two photographs of African Americans are converged with a bold headline on a single front page, all four elements offer a powerful commentary.

Orlando Sentinel

The Orlando Sentinel, a newspaper located just twenty-five miles from the epicenter of the Trayvon Martin case, chose to take a more conservative photographic approach. The *Sentinel* published a quarter column mug shot of the reflective president. For an outsider, one may question the seemingly photographic downplay of the president’s news conference.

However, the *Orlando Sentinel* made a bold statement by introducing the racial element into the

conversation. Of the 25 newspapers surveyed, very few actually addressed the issue of race. As we seen *New York Newsday* case study, the paper was very direct in the photographic report, but did not introduce the racial element. They allowed the reader to operate in their own particularities.



Figure 2 A partial view of the Orlando Sentinel front page on July 20, 2013.

The *Orlando Sentinel* focused the narrative on President Obama and not on Trayvon Martin. While the photo report seems to lack the power of other newspaper presentations, their approach is helpful for informing the public and advancing the conversation.

Tampa Bay Times

The *Tampa Bay Times*, like the *Orlando Sentinel*, is located in Florida. Unlike the *Sentinel*, the *Tampa Bay Times* addressed the President Obama news conference from both a local and national photographic perspective. Boyzell Hosey, said director of Photography/Multimedia notes, regarding their report, “It was a very calculated and distinct decision to provide a front page that reflected what was happening to our readership in the state of Florida” (Hosey, 2013). Unlike *New York Newsday*, the *Tampa Bay Times* had a local event regarding the Trayvon Martin case with potentially national implications.

The “Dream Defenders,” a student organization, had begun a sit-in at the state capitol. During the news conference, the Dream Defenders were protesting the Martin verdict and requesting that Florida Governor Rick Scott call a special legislative session to review Florida’s “stand your ground” law. Hosey observes, “The events were all linked to Trayvon Martin, all of the events were all about Trayvon Martin” (Hosey, 2013). “What we (the editors that were making decisions about the front page) were trying to do was to come up with a front page that spoke of the news and was pertinent to our readers here in Florida” (Hosey, 2013).

When asked about the one and a half column



Figure 3 New York Newsday front page published July 20, 2013.

photograph of President Obama looking down, Hosey said they selected a photograph that established the mood of the conversation. Acknowledging some of the visual challenges in covering a press conference, Hosey said:

President Obama did not need to be large on our page, but he needed to be just as impactful, and you can have impactful photos at smaller sizes. It depends on how it is presented and the context of the entire package ... the top of the page, above the fold, anchoring an additional story telling photos. (Hosey, 2013)

Hosey's observations give insight into some of the conversations that take place in our country's newspaper(s).

In sum, while diverse in their photographic report, all three newspapers made attempts to draw out various aspects of President Obama's news conference. Some chose to highlight the photographic elements and allow readers to find themselves in the context, while others decided to bring out the racial implication of the press conference. Yet, still another newspaper decided to balance the local and national photographic report in a package for its local readers. Wherever one situates him/herself in consuming front pages, it is important to again consider Susan Sontag, who asserts,

Photographs furnish evidence.... A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened. The picture may distort, but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what's in the picture. Whatever the limitations or pretensions of the individual photograph, a photograph—any photograph—seems to have a more innocent, and therefore more accurate, relation to visible reality than do other mimetic objects. (Sontag, 1977, pp. 5-6)

The Photographs and Selections

Each time a news event is covered at the White House thousands of photographs are taken. Harry Walker, photo director of McClatchy-Tribune Photo Service, a news wire service

that comprises about 60 contributing newspapers, reflected on the President Obama news conference offering: “For that particular event, it is fair to assert that several thousand photographs were taken from amongst the 12-30 still and video photographers” (Walker, 2013). Many of these photographs were never seen, because the photojournalist serves as a type of “gatekeeper” (Fahmy, Kelly, & Kim, 2007). The photojournalist’s multifaceted job is to assess the context, take photographs of the assignment, edit the photographs from the location, and transmit the most relevant storytelling images to their respective newspapers or wire agencies. For this news conference Walker notes the photos were, “very standard images for this type of event” (Walker, 2013). Walker’s insight begins to offer some perspective into the photographs that were presented on the nation’s newspapers. Let’s look briefly at the anatomy of the event.

In a press conference the news is generally shaped by the words spoken from the person at the podium, not by the photographic content of the situation. Thus, the news conference is often noted as a photographically “sterile” environment. The photographs produced are generally pictures of record (Crane & Angrosino, 1992, p. 16) of a “talking head.” While pictures of record, the photographs used are meant to illustrate a particular mood and context.

In this particular case the “talking head” was the President of the United States, who happened to be the first African American to hold the office. The news value of his presence was shaped by his reflective insights that he (the president) could have been Trayvon Martin 35-years ago. The president was attempting to connect with his racial and culture heritage, while identifying with the African American experience through the lens of the Trayvon Martin death. In these moments of transparency the president notes, “Those sets of experiences inform how the African American interprets what happened one night in Florida, and it’s inescapable for people to bring those experiences to bear” (Obama, 2013).

The cultural and racial perspective offered by the president became the news. Capturing this ambiguous theme is the challenge for the photojournalists. In his introductory chapter on photojournalism, Brian Horton, an associated press senior photo editor, rightly observes J. Pat Cater's realization that, "with (a) camera, you (photojournalists) are the eyes of your readers and your viewers and you have to take them there" (Horton, 2001, p. 16). Kenneth Kobre (2010) notes, "these situations (press conferences and public meetings) test the photographer's creativity". As such, the opportunity to make photographs that are telling, revealing, and spontaneous are a lot more challenging.

The Pages

Photography theorist Susan Sontag once presented that "Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire" (Sontag, 1977, p. 4). In the Obama news conference, hundreds of photographs moved on the wire. These images varied from a reflective president pursing his lips, to the standard, non-emotional, hand-raised talking president. The photographs put forward photo vignettes not just of the news conference, but also of the national conversation on race and culture. For Roland Barthes (1999), the photograph or, "the image is re-presentation... (and) ultimately (a) resurrection" of the context in which it was made. In analyzing these pages it might have been helpful to explore what issues regarding race, culture, and identity are resurrected by the photographs shown.

When at the 25 front pages are examined more closely it is observed that the photographic report was as ambiguous as the photojournalists trying to document the issues brought out in the news conference. Some newspapers chose to publish half column images of

the president while others chose to run a full bleed photo. Still others tried to provide a comparison of the president and Trayvon Martin by using historical photographs of each in their youthful years. Yes, other newspapers chose to photographically step away from the presidential news conference as a lead photograph and publish images of either Trayvon Martin or a local news event. As a result, all of these presentations gave readers in their respective markets conversation points to consider with their own particularities.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Studies

Like any academic study, this one was not without its limitations. No claim can be made from this purposive sample that it represents all of the nation's newspapers. Focusing on a single story across just several newspapers allowed for depth of analysis both in terms of story content and visual presentation. However, the small number of examples--25 out hundreds of daily newspapers--hinders one from drawing too many conclusions.

However, as researchers committed to understanding multiple issues in journalism, photojournalism, and the media, one should also not dismiss that many of the nation's newspapers chose to partake in the racial conversation by bold presentations with photographs, headlines, and graphics. These visual elements, while part of a whole, can aide the reader in identifying or at least understanding how these newspapers viewed this important issue.

Stuart Hall's (1997) theory of representation was used in this study to analyze the various photographs in this case study newspapers. One important benefit of Hall's theory is his inclusive, cultural perspective. He aims to identify important issues that may be overlooked by majority populations, by prompting the greater public to identify various "systems of representation" (p. 17) in the newspaper coverage. These systems may be cultural, racial, or

even socioeconomical. It is in these systems that the researcher and practitioner alike can identify, “different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging, and classifying concepts and establishing complex relations” (p. 17) between the multiple elements of newspaper design and content analysis. This further emphasizes the point that, “meaning will change from one culture (or group of people) or period to another” (p. 61).

Future research might structure a different sample that would allow for comparisons between news outlets evaluated previously for their coverage of race. The region or location of the newspaper could also be considered. The comparisons across media markets might also yield some interesting findings, as would interviews with some of the producers of the pages.

Another point for future research might be that of analyzing the various interpretations gained by photographers in the White House Press Corps. These photographers document numerous pseudo-events at the White House for their respective news organizations. Understanding the photographers’ cultural, racial, and ethnic perspectives can aid researchers in understanding why certain photographs are taken and disseminated for publication while others are not. Keeping in mind Geertz’s observation that, “a good interpretation of anything takes us into the heart of that of which is the interpretation” (Geertz, 1973, p. 18). This study should serve as an important next step to understanding the dynamic of a pseudo-event such as President Obama’s speech and the implication in the photographs that are published.

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Table 1 Newspapers Analyzed

	Newspaper	Owner
1.	<i>The Hutchinson News</i>	Harris Enterprises
2.	<i>Des Moines Register</i>	Gannett
3.	<i>Quad City Times</i>	Lee Enterprises
4.	<i>The Chicago Tribune</i>	Tribune Co.
5.	<i>The Star News</i>	Halifax News Group
6.	<i>The New York Times</i>	New York Time Co.
7.	<i>The Wall Street Journal</i>	News Corporation
8.	<i>The New York Post</i>	News Corporation
9.	<i>New York Daily News</i>	Daily News LLP
10.	<i>Newsday</i>	Cablevision
11.	<i>The Herald News</i>	Gatehouse Media
12.	<i>The (Asbury Park) Press</i>	Gannett
13.	<i>Las Vegas Review-Journal</i>	Stephens Media
14.	<i>The Detroit News</i>	Media News Group
15.	<i>The Boston Globe</i>	New York Times Co.
16.	<i>The Courier Journal</i>	Gannett
17.	<i>The Tampa Bay Times</i>	Times Publishing Co.
18.	<i>The Tampa Tribune</i>	Media General
19.	<i>The Miami Herald</i>	Tribune
20.	<i>The Orlando Sentinel</i>	Tribune
21.	<i>The Washington Post</i>	Washington Post Co.
22.	<i>The Desert Sun</i>	Gannett
23.	<i>The Daily Post</i>	Price-Pavlich
24.	<i>The Los Angeles Times</i>	Tribune
25.	<i>The Tuscaloosa News</i>	Halifax News Group