Printed in Black and White: The *New York Times'* Construction of Black Men and White Police

Officers during Escalated Encounters

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Abstract

In the presentation of news, media often play the role of producer, constructing images and sending messages to their audience. This research project questions how printed media (newspapers) construct the images of black men and white police officers during escalated encounters, and whether these constructions have changed over time. Through a content analysis, this study examines *New York Times* articles pertaining to police encounters with Rodney King (1991), Amadou Diallo (1999), and Michael Brown (2014). Findings show that articles shifted in focus over time from solely the police officer(s) and their conduct to the recognition and support of the black male. The research also discovers that articles increasingly showed black men as non-threatening and passive receivers of action while portraying white police officers in an active manner. The results of this study note the change of the *New York Times'* construction of black men and white police officers in these encounters, which leads to a larger discussion of this particular newspaper's audience and its desire to present messages relevant to its audience. This discussion supports Hall's encoding/decoding theory of the relationship between media producers and their audience in the construction of images.

The American media is one of the most powerful forces in establishing thoughts and ideas, influencing their audiences through the portrayal of specific messages in various forms. Gamson, Droteau, Hoynes, and Sasson (1992) remark that media focus on the "production of images rather than facts or information," and these images are often embedded with hegemonic codes for the audience to interpret (p. 374). This act of production often plays a dominant role in the creation of news stories—choosing what events to cover, the type of image to portray, and the construction of individuals involved. Often, newsworthy stories are dramatic events involving controversial themes such as power, violence, and race. Within the presentation of these chosen stories, producers of news sources construct messages about these themes, including the image of participants.

While there are many forms of media today, newspapers have acted as one of the main producers of images throughout the history of the United States. Newspapers continue to adapt from their original printed form to online versions, which present their construction of social reality. The present research analyzes the *New York Times* and its construction of black men and white police officers during escalated encounters over a period of twenty-four years, from 1991 to 2014. Escalated encounters is defined here as a confrontation between individuals that becomes aggressive and violent, resulting in the harm of the black male on the part of the white police officer(s). Guiding this research were questions about the role of media discourse on constructions of race over time. Based upon data from three specific cases—Rodney King (1991), Amadou Diallo (1999), and Michal Brown (2014)— media discourse about black males and white police officers engaged in escalated encounters have shifted in focus and tone over time. This paper argues that while the media have begun to offer a more inclusive understanding

of all perspectives in news events, news articles still reinforce the hegemonic perspectives of their audience.

<div align="center">**Encoding/Decoding Theory**</div>

Stuart Hall's (1980) theory of "Encoding/Decoding" discusses the power of media in portraying select messages to the audience. Hall defines mass communication as a circuit composed of a sender, a receiver, and a message. Hall (1980) then defines a four-step process to media communication: "production, circulation, distribution/consumption, [and] reproduction" (p. 128). As the sender, media are in charge of producing and distributing information, while the audience consumes and reproduces the information. The information that is being constructed and distributed by the sender is "meanings and messages in the form of sign-vehicles" (Hall, 1980, p. 128). Sign vehicles are codes in the form of images or words. Media use sign-vehicles to relay an understandable message in a particular way so that the audience interprets the message according to the desired meaning of the producer. For example, media send a message that "all criminals are black men" by showing images of black men in handcuffs. The audience receives this message and reinterprets it as "black men are criminals." Hall calls the moments in which the media implant the meaning into the circuit of mass communication "encoding," while the moment the audience receives and interprets the meaning is called "decoding."

Hall discusses how information follows specific guidelines in order for the producers to portray the desired message to the audience. For example, Hall (1980) believes news events must appear to their audience in the "message form," which is a specific image and understanding as constructed by the media source itself (p. 129). Hall illustrates this idea by examining television broadcasting. When creating a program, the television station is in charge of sending messages through media events. They construct the messages by "[drawing on] topics, treatments, agendas,

events, personnel, [and] images of the audience" (Hall, 1980, p. 129). This circulation of

information is a continual process; the messages are established within the society and then

media draws on these previously imprinted messages to create new messages. Thus, Hall (1980)

argues, "the audience is both the 'source' and the 'receiver' of the television message" (p. 130).

This circulation of information is important in establishing the desired message so it may be

meaningfully decoded, or else the message may not have an effect on the audience or the

audience may interpret the message differently.

Hall recognizes television as a medium that provides a form of visual and aural reality,

yet he also recognizes that televised reality does not reflect truth but rather a power discourse.

Media purposely provide a specific viewpoint through a discourse (words or images) to relay a

message to their audience. Therefore, Hall (1980) argues, "Discursive 'knowledge' is the product

not of the transparent representation of the 'real' in language but of the articulation of language

on real relations and conditions" (p. 131). When media create the chosen reality through

discourse, sometimes these codes become so ingrained in society that their reality appears to be

true (e.g. men are "tough"). Certain messages may be "so widely distributed in a specific

language community or culture, and be learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be

constructed…[but] profoundly naturalized" (Hall, 1980, p. 132). Media have the power to instill

beliefs through their creation of codes, which become rooted in the audience's social reality.

Hall (1980) claims that media created codes are polysemic, which means they may have

multiple meanings for the receivers (p. 134). In other words, the producers try to encode a

particular meaning, but the audience may interpret these codes differently based on their

experiences and understanding. While the audience potentially has the power to decode, Hall

(1980) believes the society in which media reside has influence over the audience's

interpretation of codes, which means the codes or meanings may "constitute a dominant cultural order" (Hall, 1980, p. 134). For each code, there is a hegemonic meaning that is preferred by the society or culture in which it is being processed, and the media may encode these acceptable meanings in their messages. According to Hall (1980), those who encode the dominant meanings "can attempt to 'pre-fer' [meanings] but cannot prescribe or guarantee the latter" (p. 135). It is up to the audience members to decode the meanings from the discourse of knowledge they receive, which can be completed in a multitude of ways.

Hall (1980) identifies three different types of decodings: "dominant-hegemonic," "negotiated," and "oppositional" (pp. 136-138). The audience members who are operating within the dominant-hegemonic code extract the same meaning as encoded by the media source in the message because they are already living within the hegemonic codes of a society. The negotiated code is a mixture of interpretation because audience members understand the presence of the hegemonic code, but they choose to apply the code to fit their situation, which sometimes leads to a contradictory meaning from the hegemonic code (Hall, 1980, p. 137). Finally, Hall (1980) claims viewers who utilize the oppositional code disregard the framework in which the hegemonic code has been established and create a new way in which to understand the message (pp. 136-137). These forms of decoding demonstrate how the intended message may not be decoded in the same way as the media source desires.

Hall's theory of Encoding/Decoding can be used to examine media encoded messages about white police officers and black men in newspaper articles. While Hall claims the process is a circuit of conveying and interpreting messages, this research analyzes only the discourse used by media to construct messages about encounters between black males and white police officers. This discourse reflects an established meaning already present in society about each group or

about the encounters between the two groups. Hall's understanding of how hegemonic beliefs are coded into news stories reflect dominant attitudes, or the cultural hegemony of which Hall speaks. This research examines media's encoded messages of the black man and the white police officer during escalated encounters.

Literature Review

Media and Reality of Crime

In the coverage of crime stories, most research recognizes the unbalanced relationship between the media portrayal of crime and crime itself. Generally, the media do not provide an accurate representation of the reality of crime. Sacco (1995) notes, "the volume of news about crime seem to bear little relationship…[to the] actual volume of crime" (p. 143). Jerin and Fields (1994) similarly remark how "crime reporting has increased" while actual crime rates have decreased in recent years (p. 194). Looking at specific forms of the media representation of crime, Sheley and Ashkins (1981) study television newscasts and newspapers to see how they cover crime stories in relationship to actual crime rates. They find that while television and newspapers were not reflective of actual crime reports, newspapers were more closely reflective of crime trends.

Media and Type of Crime

Research suggests that the type of crime, such as violent crimes, influences media coverage. Jerin and Fields's (1994) data of *USA Today* shows that 42% of states' news involving crime were deemed "violent crimes" (p. 190). While Jerin and Fields (1994) do not directly relate these statistics to actual crime rates, studies from both Sheley and Ashkins (1981) and Pollak and Kubrin (2007) do so in their respective locations of study. In both New Orleans and Washington D.C., newspapers and newscasts reported violent crimes at a higher frequency than

real crime rates and police indexes (Pollak and Kubrin, 2007, p. 69; Sheley and Ashkins, 1981, p. 499). Research concludes that violent criminal encounters are more often represented in news stories even when their actual rates are low.

Media Coverage of Race and Crime

Research focused on the media coverage of crime based on race shows clear patterns. Buckler and Travis (2005) determine that a crime involving a minority suspect had "significant independent effects on whether a news item was published" (p. 12). Sorenson, Manz, and Berk (1998) find that *The Los Angeles Times* was 1.25 times more likely to report homicides involving people of differing ethnicities than involving those of the same ethnicity (p. 1512). This shows a focus on of inter-ethnic crime reporting, which is most often between the majority race and a minority ethnicity. Specifically investigating the amount of crime coverage between white and black individuals, Buckler and Travis (2005) discover that homicides involving African Americans as suspects were 4.8 times more likely to be covered than non-minority suspects (p. 12). Bjornstrom, Kaufman, Peterson, Slater (2010), and Dixon and Linz (2000) find similar disparities in the representation of blacks as suspects compared to whites in crime stories. Dixon and Linz (2000) state, "Blacks were more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators of crime on television news (37%) than to be arrested, according to crime reports (21%)" (p. 145). This research demonstrates that black individuals are more often shown as suspects or perpetrators regardless of actual statistics.

Several studies, however, have revealed opposite findings, claiming that media representations of blacks are improving. Dixon, Azocar, and Casas (2003) notice while there was a disparity in the representation of white Americans and African Americans in television network news programs, neither white Americans nor African Americans are over-represented as

criminals when compared to crime reports (p. 512). Similar research conclude the coverage of crimes committed by white and black perpetrators were reflective of the demographics of the area (Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Dixon, 2015). Dixon's (2015) most recent findings of the proper representation of blacks in the coverage of crime news suggest, "Black depictions have greatly improved" in the media coverage of crime (p. 11).

Research by Entman (1994) and Romer, Jamieson, and de Coteau (1998) explore news coverage of blacks in various genres of stories to see whether the focus of stories pertained to black crime. Entman (1994) find that out of all of the stories involving blacks in the nightly news programs, the highest percentage of stories related to crime with 27.6% (p. 512). Within these findings, 77% of the crime stories involved a violent or drug-related crime (Entman, 1994, p. 512). Comparably, Romer et al. (1998), in a study of select Philadelphia stations, find that stations covered crime news stories regarding persons of color at twice the rate of them being involved in other news stories, and they too were more likely to be shown as perpetrators of both violent and non-violent crimes (p. 295). These studies indicate that the media contributes to the popularly believed relationship between blacks and crime through their focus on crime stories.

Research on the influence of the media in portraying race and crime has investigated the way in which news stories are presented and how the race of the perpetrator affects the presentation. Sheley and Ashkins (1981) find that sources such as police reports, television news, and newspapers often described the image of a criminal as being a black male (p. 501). For Buckler and Travis (2005), articles about homicides involving African Americans were longer, meaning race of the suspect or offender affected the amount of news coverage the event received (pp. 12-13). Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) observe that black criminals were more likely to be described as dangerous when compared to similar stories for whites and Hispanics (p. 412).

Additionally, they find that crime stories involving a black perpetrator showed the mug shot two times more often than a story involving a white perpetrator (p. 411). In two studies, Entman (1992, 1994) examine both "visual and verbal representations of blacks and whites" in crime stories and claim that "Chicago television news programs…depict blacks…as more physically threatening" (pp. 341, 346). Entman suggests that the negative portrayal of blacks in crime allows for specific images to emerge about black individuals. When describing the suspects, Entman (1992) argues that blacks were more often shown poorly dressed than whites and were unnamed in mugshots (pp. 350-51). Similarly, black suspects were more likely to be shown in the custody of the police officer than white suspects (Entman, 1992, p. 351; Entman, 1994, p. 513). Overall, previous research demonstrates racial bias in the way in which crime is covered by the media and reflect the power of the media to create an image of the criminal.

Media Construction of Race and Roles within Crime

Research pertaining to the media portrayal of race within the roles of crime (victim, police officer, and suspect/perpetrator) reveals a significant underrepresentation of minorities as victims. When generally speaking about the victim of crime, studies have shown that 'vulnerable' victims; such as women, children, and elderly individuals; resulted in greater news coverage (see Peelo, Francis, Soothill, Pearson, & Ackerley, 2004; Sorenson et al., 1998). Sorenson et al. (1998) extend this image of the harmless victim to include specific races and found that for homicides involving Asian or white victims were overrepresented, while homicides with Hispanic or black victims were underrepresented (p. 1511-1512). Bjornstrom et al. (2010) reveal similar results between the portrayal of white and black victims in national news programs. Studies examining race and roles in crime find that blacks were more often portrayed as the suspect than as victims or police officers while whites were more often shown as

victims or police officers than criminals (see Romer et al., 1998; Chiricos & Eschholz, 2002; Dixon et al., 2003; Dixon, 2015).

In studies specifically examining the presentation of blacks and whites in the role of police officers, Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) as well as Dixon and Linz (2000) found a racial disparity in that whites were more often shown as police officers than blacks. Dixon and Linz (2000) show that for every one black officer shown on the news, four black perpetrators are shown, while whites are more than twice as likely to be shown as police officers than as perpetrators (p. 143). This is a noticeable discrepancy, and, as Dixon (2015) states, "Whites have consistently been shown to appear in a 'hero' role on television news," (p. 12). The media have aided in the construction of these race-defined roles by creating an unrepresentative portrayal of news stories to reflect these social constructions.

Overall, the research suggests several patterns related to media coverage of crime as well as the media's construction of crime in terms of race. Media do not always accurately reflect true crime ratios of the area they cover and the type of crime may affect the amount of coverage a story receives. Previous research shows that race often contributes to the media's coverage of the criminal, which shows the criminal as someone who is of a minority race and is considered dangerous to the public. In the media, roles often appear to correspond with specific races, such as black individuals are criminals while white individuals are victims and police officers.

While it is important to note how these roles relate to race in the media, it is necessary to understand more fully how the media construct the white police officer in comparison to the black suspect. The present research aims to fill this gap by comparing the way in which the media construct both individuals in highly reported escalated encounters. Another significant gap in the research is the lack of historical comparison. Previous research examined newspapers or

television broadcasts over the course of a few years, but none took a larger historical approach. Similarly, while some researchers added to their previous studies to understand temporal change, such as Entman (1994) and Dixon (2015), the present study will do so within the same research project by examining three different stories over a course of twenty-four years. This study will fill gaps in the present research by not only comparing the media coverage of the criminal to that of the police officer, but also in examining this idea over a historical period of time.

Methodology

For this study, a historical comparative content analysis was conducted of news stories' portrayal of white police officers and black men in escalated encounters. The three cases purposefully chosen for this analysis are the beating of Rodney King (1991), the shooting of Amadou Diallo (1999), and the death of Michael Brown (2014). In Los Angeles, Rodney King was pulled over by a group of police officers for speeding, and several then kicked and struck him over 50 times; this event was caught on camera. Four police officers from a Street Crimes Unit in New York City shot Amadou Diallo 19 times in front of his own apartment building in the Bronx. Finally, Officer Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown six times after a confrontation on a city street in Ferguson, Missouri. These cases were selected for this analysis because they each received significant national media coverage.

The primary units of observation are *New York Times* (NYT) articles of these events. A widely read national newspaper, the *New York Times* is owned by the Ochs-Sulzberger family (NYTCO, 2015). As of October 2014, it has 639,887 weekday paper subscriptions and 1,181,160 Sunday paper subscriptions, while online circulation has been 1,379,806 weekdays and 1,321,207 for Sundays (Zebian, 2014). The NYT was chosen as the unit of observation not only because of its national status, but also due to the online access to past articles.

Articles pertaining to Rodney King and Amadou Diallo were obtained using the Library

of Congress's access to NYT archives in July 2015, while the most recent articles of Michael

Brown were obtained directly through the NYT website in September 2015. For each event, the

victim's name was used as the primary search term in obtaining articles. The sampling frame was

narrowed to cover specifically the date of the event to six months following the event. This

search included only news articles, not editorials or highlights. Once this sampling frame was

established, there were a total of 78 articles for Rodney King, 171 articles for Amadou Diallo,

and 126 articles for Michael Brown. From these populations, an equal number of forty articles

for each event were randomly selected for the content analysis. If a randomly selected article

from the current list did not directly relate to encounter, individuals, or aftermath, then another

article was randomly selected in its place.

This content analysis examined the media's discourse regarding the white police

officer(s) and the black male involved in the escalated encounter. The content analysis included

both quantitative and qualitative sections. Demographic information— the race, age, education

level, and class of the black male and white police officer(s) (if stated) as well as the time of day

the encounter took place, the location of the encounter in the city, and the result of the

encounter— were coded. Specific information regarding the article itself, such as length,

inclusion of a picture (and description), and location within the printed newspaper were also

recorded in this study. Information about the writers—name, sex, and perceived race—was also

documented. In order to determine the perceived race of the journalists, their names were entered

into an online search engine.

In addition to this quantitative information, a qualitative analysis based on themes and

rhetoric was performed for the title of the article and the article itself. Themes included the

primary topic of the article ("Encounter," "Post-event Investigation," etc.), person of focus, and primary perceived tone of the article ("Pro-Police," "Pro-Citizen," etc.). Open coding was conducted to understand the discourse about the black male and the police officer(s) involved in the encounter. There was also an analysis of the verb usage to establish which individual(s) was more often described as committing actions in the event as opposed to receiving actions. Once this first round of open coding was completed, a second round of coding was conducted to more specifically understand the patterns regarding the NYT's discourse about the black men and white police officers and their conduct during escalated encounters.

Findings

Data from the quantitative and qualitative coding of newspaper articles about escalated encounters between police officers and black men demonstrates historical shifts in the presentation of the white police officer(s), the black male, and the media's approach to constructing these encounters. Table 1 shows the location of the articles within the printed *New York Times* (see Appendix A). Most articles appeared either in the national (50.8%) or metro (25.8%) sections. Additionally, the number of front-page news articles increased over time. Rodney King's beating in 1991 appeared in only three front-page articles, while Michael Brown's killing in 2014 was featured in 14 front-page articles. This increase in articles appearing on the front page may suggest increased media and public awareness of incidents that may have formerly been considered as local.

Table 2 (see Appendix B) analyzes the primary topic addressed within the articles for each of the three encounters. Few (5.8%) articles focused on the background of either the black male or police officers involved in the encounter. Instead, the articles examined the event within the context of the public backlash (50.8%), trial (19.7%), or investigation (15%). The articles

about Brown and Diallo concentrated on the society's response to the event more so than the articles about King. The number of articles dedicated to the investigation of each case gradually declined over time, thus indicating a greater interest in perceptions of the encounter and the individuals' actions within the encounter than with the final outcome.

The data in Table 3 finds a significant shift over time in the main person of focus in the articles. Generally, the focus was on the police officers in 47.5% of the total sample of articles (see Appendix C). This pattern holds for both the cases of King and Diallo, with 27/40 and 25/40 articles focusing on the police officer(s), respectively. Such articles often included an analysis of the police officer(s)' actions as well as featuring these encounters to discuss larger questions of police enforcement. By contrast, only 19.7% of the articles focused primarily on the black male. Most notable, however, is the significant change of focus between the two earliest incidents and Brown's encounter. The majority (24/40) of articles about Brown gave equal dedication to both the police officer and black male, with less focus on either one individually. This result marks a change in the media's construction of the narrative of escalated encounters between white officers and black men.

The primary perceived tone of the articles also change focus over time, as shown in Table 4 (see Appendix D). The largest number of articles criticizes police action (36.7%), followed by neutral articles (25.8%), and lastly "Anti-Citizen" articles (.8%). None of these tones show any significant shift over time. What has changed is an increase in articles that explicitly support either the black men or the police, 21.7% and 15%, respectively. "Anti-Police" and "Pro-Citizen" categories addressed whether the article primarily criticized police and their actions throughout the encounter or whether it supported the citizen by describing his background or their family's mourning. "Pro-Police" articles supported police action rather than condemning

the actions of the black male. While the majority of the articles about Diallo (17/40) and King (15/40) were "Anti-Police," the focus shifts to primarily "Pro-Citizen" for articles relating to Brown (15/40). Over time, there are increasing numbers of articles that are exclusively pro-citizen and decreasing exclusively pro-police.

Also analyzed was the media's portrayal of the individuals involved in the three encounters. The first notable finding was whether the articles named the individuals involved in the encounter. While all articles named the black male involved (Rodney King, Amadou Diallo, or Michael Brown), the same pattern did not hold for the police officer(s). The police officer(s) more often went unnamed in 56.7% of the articles. While a majority of the articles for King and Diallo did not name the police officers involved in encounter, in 31 of 40 articles about Brown, the police officer, Darren Wilson, was identified. For this specific incident, Wilson's name was not released until public pressure mounted. The first articles printed did not include Wilson's name, but once his name was released to the media it was used in almost every article.

The data was coded for the identified race of King, Diallo, and Brown as well as the police officers involved to determine if a chronological difference in the language occurred. The majority of the articles defined the citizens as "black" (55.8%). For example, Rodney King, who had the most articles that defined the citizen as "black," was often identified as a "black motorist." It should be noted that most articles pertaining to Amadou Diallo defined him not by a specific racial status, but by his immigrant status, describing him as an "immigrant from West Africa." For the police officer(s), a little more than half (55%) of the articles did not mention the police officer(s)'s race while 45% identified them as "white." Both the mention of race of the citizen and the race of the police officer changes little over time.

The discourse pertaining to the black men and the police officers during the encounter suggests a historical shift over time. Table 5 (see Appendix E) shows that the black men in the encounter were described as either "unarmed"/"unresisting" or "threatening"/"aggressive." Included in the "threatening"/"aggressive" code were articles that addressed the supposition that the black men were in possession of a gun, therefore appearing more "threatening." All three men were described as "unarmed" or "unresisting" (46.7%). The description of the black man as not threatening was specified in more recent years, with the highest portion involving Brown (33/40 articles). For example, Michael Brown would be identified as "unarmed" but acting in a "threatening manner." Similarly, the discourse of the police officer(s)'s actions is portrayed as either an "excessive" or "justified" use of force during the encounter, as Table 6 shows (see Appendix F). However, most articles (53.5%) did not define their actions in either of these ways. When analyzing the two constructions of use of force, 31.5% of the articles portray the police officer's actions as police brutality. This implies that the media is less likely to describe police force during escalated encounters with black men. When comparing the rhetoric regarding the amount of force, the most recent encounter suggested that officer Darren Wilson used a justified amount of force against Brown instead of excessive force. These articles suggest that Officer Wilson was "fearing for his life" and, therefore, acted within his means of force. This could either be due to an attempt in recent years to protect police authority or it may be a reflection of the specific event itself as more of an active struggle between the individuals rather than the other cases, which were more one sided.

Articles in the sample also coded for the primary verb and subject usage regarding both the black male and the police officer(s) involved. If the article described the police officer(s) or black male primarily in an active voice, such as the police officers "struck" or "shot" the black

male, it would be coded as "active." If articles presented the individual as a subject in a removed,

passive voice (e.g. "hit by police officers" or "Amadou Diallo was shot") or if the individual was

the object of action, then articles would be coded as "passive." Articles were marked to be

"equal" if both were equally used. Table 7 (see Appendix G) shows that black men were

primarily the receivers of actions in 88.3% of the articles. Of the three incidents, Brown was

more often shown as active, which could be due to the often addressed "struggle" between

Brown and Officer Wilson. Table 8 (see Appendix F) examines this same verb usage for the

police officers. While they are primarily shown as active (62.5%), 31.7% of the articles

described the officers as passive. A shift over time is also noted; articles have generally

portrayed the police officers as the active subjects in more recent encounters. Overall, black men

are more likely to be portrayed as passive victims of white police officer actions.

In summary, several significant findings were found regarding the *New York Times'*

portrayal of black men and white police officers during escalated encounters. The number of

first-page articles regarding these encounters has grown over time. Most articles examined the

public backlash or the trial of the encounter, and there was a shift in focus from solely the police

officer(s) to equal dedication to the black male and police officer(s) over the three cases. A

similar change occurred in the perceived tone of articles from "Anti-Police" to "Pro-Citizen."

There were no significant historical findings regarding the identification of the police officers or

the mention of race for both parties. In the discourse of the black male and white police officers,

the black male's actions became more defined as non-threatening over time while the police

officers' actions remained unmentioned or justified. The most notable findings surrounded the

subject and verb usage for both individuals involved; black men were often seen as the passive

receiver of the white police officer(s)'s actions, with the police officer(s)'s actions becoming

more pronounced over time. These findings suggest the media's growing focus on the actions of

the police officer in an attempt to more equally and accurately portray both parties involved in

escalated encounters.

Discussion

The findings suggest the *New York Times'* increased awareness of minority perspectives

and social injustice over time, which may have occurred as the newspaper's publishers respond

to the audience's views and attitudes. While the media encode messages, the readers also decode

these messages in unintended ways that become digested by society. The Ochs-Sulzberger

family has owned the *New York Times Company* since it was founded in 1896, but this company

has not portrayed the same ideology over its long history (NYTCO, 2015). The publishers of this

media source, as well as others, have a vested interest in the messages they produce for the

stories need to reflect the perspectives of the current readers or readership will fall. A 2012 PEW

Research Center survey analyzed the demographics of NYT readers. With regard to political

leaning, most readers had a liberal (36%) or moderate (35%) ideology as opposed to a

conservative ideology (22%) (Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, & Keeter, 2012, p. 39). This political

ideology may reflect the NYT's young audience of primarily 18-29 (32%) and 30-49 (31%) year

olds who are well educated (56% college graduates) and economically advantaged (Kohut et. al.,

2012, pp. 35-38). The type of individual who reads the *New York Times* likely influence how the

publishers address stories of controversial nature, such as those addressed in the present research.

Readership of newspapers in the United States has significantly declined over the past

twenty-five years, especially due to the increased access to forms of news media online

(Communications Management Inc., 2011). While the *New York Times'* printed circulation has

decreased significantly since the 1990's, the company has directed its focus to online news

articles to regain subscribers and attract its young audience. As a result, the NYT's overall

readership has remained constant between 1995 and 2015 (Doctor, 2015). While the media

format has changed over the years, the NYT's ownership still presents specific messages in

stories that will directly attract its readers.

The increasing presentation of multiple sides of one story reflects the NYT publishers'

attempts to remain relevant to its current audience. Since its primary readers are liberal and

moderate, its recognition of social inequality and criticism of unfair police practices provide a

stance with which its readers agree. The NYT actively engages with its readers and their current

views. Due to this relationship with the audience, the NYT is often considered more liberal.

Therefore, when addressing the racial discourse between black men and white police officers, the

NYT encodes the black men as victims and it recognizes the structural imbalance of power.

Issues of racial tension, social injustice, and the criminal justice system are constructed as

notified topics because of the perceived unequal distribution of power in American society,

which is more easily promoted by those of liberal leanings. While there may not have been a

change in the ownership over this time, there has still been a shift in ideology within the

company, which has changed its encoded message in order to remain attractive to liberal readers.

Several studies discuss the relationship between media sources and their audience. Tsfati

(2003) argues that this relationship is based on trust (p. 77). While "audiences depend on the

media for information about what society thinks," Tsfati (2003) maintains that if audiences are

skeptical about a particular media source, they will less likely agree "with the media's

presentation of public opinion" (pp. 69-70). Tsfati (2003) believes the media encourages the

current dominant perspective in society, which, depending on the amount of trust or skepticism

the individual has for a particular media source, can influence one's own thoughts on the reality

of events. Similarly, Morris (2007) examines Fox News's relationship with its own audience. According to Morris (2007), Fox News was established to attract those who believed mainstream media presents a liberal biased perspective (p. 710). Morris (2007) claims that choosing news sources involves a personal perception of media bias, for those "who perceive bias in the mainstream media are more likely to use Fox News as their primary source of news" (p. 713). Additionally, Morris (2007) asserts that those who have a general distrust in news programming and the media will also be more likely to watch Fox News (p. 715). Fox News attracts a certain type of people because its main purpose was to counteract "slanted" news programming and to appeal to conservative viewers' political stances and interpretations of events.

The described relationship between the media and their audience in the presentation of information reinforces Hall's (1980) theory of Encoding/Decoding. The NYT and other media encode messages that are then decoded by the audience, but at the same time the audience influences the media sources to reproduce the interpretation of events held by viewers. The NYT is considered more liberal not only because of the messages it distributes but also because of the receivers (the audience) who accepts their messages and reinforces the same hegemonic attitudes. It presents a diverse understanding of events and acknowledges issues of injustice and disparity within structures of power because those reflect the views of its readers. The media serve as a reproduction and implementation of the audience's beliefs and understandings within a specific reality. Therefore, in today's society, various media outlets, such as the *New York Times* and Fox News, present information and perspectives not necessarily to portray the news in an unbiased manner, but to remain more attractive to their primary audience, who will more likely accept the images they present. This research concludes that media producers relay messages that correspond with their audience's beliefs to continue the encoding/decoding relationship.

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Appendix A

Table 1					
Location of Articles within the *New York Times* by Escalated Encounter					
Encounter	Section				
	National	Metro	Front Page	Other	TOTAL
Rodney King	36	1	3	0	40 (33.3%)
Amadou Diallo	0	30	8	2	40 (33.3%)
Michael Brown	25	0	14	1	40 (33.3%)
TOTAL	61 (50.8%)	31 (25.8%)	25 (20.8%)	3 (2.5%)	120 (100%)

Appendix B

Table 2							
NYT Articles' Main Topic by Encounter between White Police Officer(s) and Black Male							
Encounter	Topic						
	Post-Event Backlash	Trial	Post-Event Investigation	Encounter	Background of Persons	Other	TOTAL
Rodney King	15	9	10	4	2	0	40 (33.3%)
Amadou Diallo	23	5	6	1	3	2	40 (33.3%)
Michael Brown	23	9	2	3	2	1	40 (33.3%)
TOTAL	61 (50.8%)	23 (19.2%)	18 (15%)	8 (6.7%)	7 (5.8%)	3 (2.5%)	120 (100%)

Appendix C

Table 3 Main Person of Focus in NYT Articles by Escalated Encounter					
Encounter	Person of Focus				
	Police Officer(s)	Equal dedication	Black Male	Other	TOTAL
Rodney King	27	7	4	2	40 (33.3%)
Amadou Diallo	25	3	11	1	40 (33.3%)
Michael Brown	5	24	8	3	40 (33.3%)
TOTAL	57 (47.5%)	34 (28.3%)	23 (19.2%)	6 (5%)	120 (100%)

Appendix D

Table 4						
Primary Perceived Tone of NYT Articles for each Escalated Encounter						
Encounter	Primary Perceived Tone					
	Anti-Police	Neutral	Pro-Citizen	Pro-Police	Anti-Citizen	TOTAL
Rodney King	15	11	5	9	0	40 (33.3%)
Amadou Diallo	17	11	6	5	1	40 (33.3%)
Michael Brown	12	9	15	4	0	40 (33.3%)
TOTAL	44 (36.7%)	31 (25.8%)	26 (21.7%)	18 (15%)	1 (0.8%)	120 (100%)

Appendix E

Table 5				
NYT Articles' Discourse of the Black Male during Escalated Encounters				
Encounter	Discourse			
	"unarmed"/ "unresisting"	Not mentioned	"aggressive"/ "threatening"	TOTAL
Rodney King	5	32	3	40 (29.6%)
Amadou Diallo	25	14	8	47* (34.8%)
Michael Brown	33	7	8	48** (35.6%)
TOTAL	63 (46.7%)	53 (39.3%)	19 (14.1%)	135 (100%)
*7 articles are double-counted as both "unarmed" and "threatening"				
**8 articles are double-counted as both "unarmed" and "threatening"				

Appendix F

Table 6				
Discourse of Police Conduct within NYT Articles of Escalated Encounters				
Encounter	Discourse of Police Conduct			
	Not Addressed	Police Brutality/ "Excessive Force"	Justified Force	TOTAL
Rodney King	21	17	2	40 (31.5%)
Amadou Diallo	19	20	8	47* (37%)
Michael Brown	28	3	9	40 (31.5%)
TOTAL	68 (53.5%)	40 (31.5%)	19 (15%)	127 (100%)
*7 articles are double-counted because they included discourse of both police brutality and justified force				

Appendix G

Table 7				
Primary Verb Usage for Black Male in NYT Articles of Escalated Encounters				
Encounter	Verb Usage			
	Passive	Active	Equal	TOTAL
Rodney King	36	2	2	40 (33.3%)
Amadou Diallo	39	0	1	40 (33.3%)
Michael Brown	31	7	2	40 (33.3%)
TOTAL	106 (88.3%)	9 (7.5%)	5 (4.2%)	120 (100%)

Appendix H

Table 8				
Primary Verb Usage for White Police Officer(s) in NYT Articles of Escalated Encounters				
Encounter	Verb Usage			
	Active	Passive	Equal	TOTAL
Rodney King	23	16	1	40 (33.3%)
Amadou Diallo	25	13	2	40 (33.3%)
Michael Brown	27	9	4	40 (33.3%)
TOTAL	75 (62.5%)	38 (31.7%)	7 (5.8%)	120 (100%)