

# Race and Contention in Twenty-First Century U.S. Media

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## Chapter 13

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### **Black Studies in Prime Time**

Racial Expertise and the Framing of Cultural Authority

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# 13 Black Studies in Prime Time

## Racial Expertise and the Framing of Cultural Authority

*Seneca Vaught*

In 1903, writing nearly 50 years before the advent of television, W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in his widely read *Souls of Black Folk* of Blacks “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (Du Bois, 1999, pp. 10–11). Du Bois’s metaphor foreshadows the ongoing predicament of the ability and authority of Blacks to engage in systematic critiques of their own social dilemmas. The veil became a metaphor not only for how Blacks came to see themselves, but for the inability of a broader American society to truly see African Americans as they really were.

Since mainstream analyses of Black issues are almost always channeled through Non-Black gatekeepers, Black and Non-Black audiences are often confronted with racial crises through the filter of White interpretations of legitimate inquiry. This is complicated by the so-called lack of “qualified” minority journalists who enter the profession due to structural barriers (Meyers, 2013; A. Williams, 2015). However, many credentialed and qualified Black experts in academia and alternative media exist who can, and have, challenged these sanctioned interpretations (Jacobs, 2000; Moody-Ramirez & Dates, 2014). More than 100 years after Du Bois originally wrote on the problem of perception, Black Americans have become ubiquitous in media venues and are increasingly called on as interviewees and contributors to stories on Black issues. However, despite these historical changes, a veiled assessment of race continues to inhibit a contextualized understanding of the Black experience (Markovitz, 2011) through the marginalization of Black academic input—particularly from the perspectives of Black Studies intellectuals. Black analysts, commentators, and strategists are visible in the political economy of cable network news, but intellectually sophisticated news media-driven discussions of racial issues remain scarce (Markovitz, 2011). The presence of Black “talking heads” should give us pause about how expertise on racial matters are defined and what this means for our understanding of race in the “post-racial” era (Lewis, 2016; Moody-Ramirez & Dates, 2014).

This chapter explores an extension of Du Bois’ concern in the age of mass media by analyzing the results of incorporating Black analysts, employed in network and cable news, into panel discussions of three recent

racialized events: the discrimination lawsuit against Paula Deen, the George Zimmerman trial, and the grand jury verdict of Darren Wilson in the Michael Brown shooting. No area is more valuable in tracing the problem of racial expertise than the post-crisis coverage window following major racial incidents. In recent years, modern news organizations have lacked the intellectual depth of analysis to make meaningful contributions to advance the public's understanding of racially contentious events. The average American viewer's understanding of contemporary social issues has certainly evolved in the last 50 years to be more inclusive, but the critical factors that precipitate racial crises seem to be more mysterious today than they were 100 years ago. Even during the height of urban unrest during the 1960s, the Kerner Commission in 1969 concluded that the outbreak of violence had roots in causes deeper than isolated episodes of police misconduct—a holistic analysis that seems almost entirely absent from the framing of racial crises in the present (Byerly & Wilson, 2009; Jacobs, 2000, pp. 5–7). While audiences cannot blame contemporary news media alone for the decline in the public's understanding of the complexity of racial matters, critical viewers must critique the way media organizations have undermined critical dialogues on race through their framing of expertise.

### **Overview of Relevant Literature**

Previous discussions by scholars have considered issues surrounding the selection of expertise in the news but do not attempt to address how these questions relate to discussions of race (Albaek, Christiansen, & Togeby, 2003; Kruvand, 2012; Libit, 2008; Steele, 1995). Entman and Rojecki (2000) explored Black representations in network news, and found that networks have used certain traits to characterize and frame Black subjects and their relevance to certain topics. They argued that Blacks could provide useful perspectives—when not “ghettoized as experts” on topics of drugs, gangs, Martin Luther King, Jr., and “Black issues”—if networks chose to include them. Perhaps most relevant to questions raised in this chapter, Entman and Rojecki found that of stories concerning Black issues in a 1990–1991 sample, some 33 Black experts were consulted in addition to some 27 Whites. Blacks were called on as experts on matters outside of the “race beat” less than 15 times, compared to White experts quoted more than 700 times (Entman & Rojecki, 2000, pp. 67–68).

In addition to the problem of the expert, one sees how the idea of the news panel itself could pose problems for the critical examination of racial themes. The news panel format has emerged amid a broader trend of blatant partisanship in cable network news. Its presence prompts us to inquire about the “nature and effects” of news in all of its forms (Coe et al., 2008). Gans (2004) examined the impact of these new developments in their formative stages, and pointed out that the news panel format was problematic due to its emphasis on argumentation over elucidation. Furthermore,

different perspectives gleaned from different sources and levels of authority are necessary to the functioning of a democracy (Gans, 2011).

Additionally, recent criticisms have collectively argued against the validity and relevance of Black Studies professionals as racial subject matter experts (McWhorter, 2009; Riley, 2012). Black Studies are often disregarded as being pitifully parochial, brazenly polemical, and persistently pessimistic. The public's caricature of the discipline as being trapped in the 1960s and unqualified or irrelevant to current social conditions also poses a serious problem. While many of these arguments are based in a lack of familiarity with the diverse aims, impact, and literature of the discipline (Rojas, 2011), these perceptions are compounded by the aforementioned concerns regarding the problem of the Black expert, the isolation of Black expertise on racial matters, and the challenge of finding a proper format for in-depth news analysis.

These varying challenges also frame an important paradox. Major U.S. news networks have increasingly turned to the race beat during and following the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States. Two highly cited works in the *Journal of Black Studies* (Teasley & Ikard, 2010; Walters, 2007) critically interrogated the new politics of race and what the expertise of Black Studies could contribute to the so-called post-racial commentary. On the other hand, as Squires and Jackson (2010) contend, news media suppressed coverage of racial dynamics in campaign tactics, a decision that foreshadowed a serious lapse in later political analysis and precluded the advent of a post-racial state of affairs.

How is racial expertise determined in these matters and why? Given the increase of specialists with academic expertise in the discipline of Black Studies (Bailey, 2000; Wilson, 2005), has this resulted in more research-driven discussions of racial issues in major media outlets? Or, have major news networks elected to use non-authoritative Black perspectives on racial issues from other vantage points? In this chapter, I argue that the coverage of Black issues but the exclusion of "certain kinds" of racial experts for others contributes to the "ghettoization" of racial scholarship and underscores the power of dominant values and ideologies in constructing public discourse on Black life. Critical appraisals of the historical, cultural, political, and economic assumptions on these issues have been thoroughly examined and documented in Black Studies literature, yet are ignored by the mainstream media—even as the authority of other so-called experts is invoked (Bailey, 2000; Reed, 2010; Rojas, 2011; Teasley & Ikard, 2010; Thomas & Blackmon, 2015; Walters, 2007).

### **Piercing the Veil while Colorblind: Is Inclusion Enough?**

Black academicians rooted in the Black Studies tradition often employ an epistemological framework that directly challenges colorblind ideologies of popular opinion. Allen (2001) raised important questions about the kind of criticisms leveled at Black Studies and the broader context of their significance in society. Brown's (2007) assessment of Black Studies is, on one level,

about the disappearance of Black Americans and Black Studies from university life. Another equally important argument of the essay contends that the absence of critical Black voices on college campuses has seriously limited the ability of universities to deliver an authentic educational experience to *both* Black and White students.

As a warning to news organizations, simply substituting a Black person as a placeholder for the same intellectually bereft “color-blind” assumptions of the American mainstream undermines journalistic norms of professionalism and the responsibility to educate viewers with accurate information. While a color-blind approach to news stories may be the default framework for mainstream audiences, it most certainly does not adequately reflect the material conditions and insights of racially adept viewers and most Black Americans (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Regardless of schools or disciplinary approaches, the vast majority of Black Studies professionals view race as a central and defining characteristic of the American experience.

A less sophisticated discussion of race is taking place on mainstream network and cable news than even a decade ago. Black scholars in academia have also bemoaned a parallel phenomenon in higher education. For example, Curry (2010) has explored a similar phenomenon in American philosophy that helps us to better understand challenges with race in the media. According to Curry, a theoretical engagement of race from Black perspectives was sorely lacking in American philosophy and continues to undermine critical comprehension of the Black experience. The default approach, in Curry’s assessment, has been underscored by “random reflections of White thinkers on race” and environmental stances that reinforce epistemological overlap rather than engaging concepts well developed and established “within the cultural genealogy of their own thought” (p. 44, 58).

Similarly, news outlets are engaging less in discussing the politics of power in substitution for the practice of representation. In other words, some media institutions have discovered that they can sidestep critical discussions about power and privilege if they showcase culturally diverse talent. In doing so, many have reverted to an intellectually impotent multicultural intervention that pauses racial progress to reinforce existing stereotypes and inequalities. These practices are not new, but they are particularly frustrating given the racial optimism and transcendence of Black political candidates in the so-called post-civil rights era (Zilber & Niven, 2000). The journey to get more Blacks in front of newsroom cameras has been a long struggle that should not be downplayed. Chappell (2007) found a period of decline of African Americans in the broadcast news workforce from 1990 to 2006. The decline was so precipitous that it prompted Jesse Jackson and the Rainbow PUSH Coalition to call for more Black TV News anchors at their 2006 conference.

In 2008, the research center Media Matters published a study on the lack of gender and ethnic diversity during prime time. In 2014, a new study found that Blacks in newsrooms were in decline overall, with exceptions in leadership spots in television news directorships (Anderson, 2014; L. Williams, 2013).

The politics behind the search for qualified Black anchors and journalists were probably less related to the quest for well-rounded and multifaceted perspectives for audiences but more governed by the numbers game. Like other organizations, news agencies recruit Black talent to head off public criticism during vital news events, especially when a cultural angle is necessary.

Taken at face value, one would assume that the diversification in politics and media are representative of a shift in the racial climate of the nation but this is far from the truth. In reality, the kinds of representatives chosen—in media and in politics—are representative of the politics of racial contention in the United States. Paradoxically, as there is increasing news coverage of Black issues in American politics, discussions of race have become less sophisticated. By less sophisticated, I am referring to a precursory conclusion on the public consensus regarding racial matters without critically interrogating the short and long-term rationale behind these positions. For instance, coverage of racial issues tends to emphasize color-blind notions of egalitarianism without critically engaging what justice means in specific regional, cultural, and historical contexts.

### **A Certain Kind of Expert: The Black Studies Scholar in the News**

What does the presence of Black journalists and anchors in the so-called post-racial era tell us about structural issues in mass media and its impact on ideas of expertise and racial knowledge? Clearly, given the broader political resonance of race in rather complicated ways, there must be an equally compelling message that the news media present. Perhaps one key lesson is that the exclusion of particular racial experts and the inclusion of others are indicative of corporate attitudes, public shifts in media consumption, and the political economy of news media. Is it enough for networks to simply cover racial events in the news? Are there broader questions about curatorial and editorial processes that are neglected in media analyses of racial crises?

One of the issues that make this study so relevant are the many different types of panels that news programs use. If the purpose of panels is to provide greater analysis and in-depth discussions on a topic from a variety of perspectives, it appears that many of the panels fall short of this goal. Kovach and Rosenstiel have argued that as the reportorial aspects of news have shrunken, viewers are increasingly subjected to a type of speculative discussion commanded by “activist experts” (2010, p. 85). The expansion of punditry in cable news has increasingly turned to the business of “analysis,” using expert panels to both escape and challenge the interview and single-expert-based coverage of traditional news programming (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011). Producers may have discovered that they can appeal to a certain type of audience by framing controversial issues through an expert panel—often selected much more for their charisma and viewer appeal than professional credentials.

Jacobs and Townsley (2011) have also found that the rising role of academics, especially from elite institutions, has contributed to the diversity

of political commentary in print media. What does their data hint about the role of racial expertise in the space of opinion? How can panels present audiences with a certain level of analysis when so many of panels are comprised of self-declared experts on racial affairs without the academic credentials to validate such claims? But how is racial expertise validated? Some might argue that panel experts are valued because of their proximity to the event; that their closeness grounds the legitimacy of their argument. As this relates to racial analysis, who would be in the best position to articulate the complex and seemingly contradictory developments of the racial conflagrations that have so often characterized this nation?

To approach these questions, this study examines three high-profile racial incidents from 2013 and 2014 on six major news outlets (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC), to better understand the racial dynamics at play in evaluating the role of race experts in news media. This study selected particular events that represented the apex of coverage for breaking news stories in which critical race literacy would play a key role in both the coverage and analysis of the story. The samples focus primarily on coverage during the prime-time news slot (7:00–11:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time). However, some early daytime and morning shows that emphasize the expert panel format in their coverage have also been included to provide a broader exploration of racial commentary. Eighteen unique shows with 32 Black appearances as experts, analysts, or discussants out of some 66 discussants appeared in the sample.<sup>1</sup> Out of the 34 Black discussants (excluding anchors and hosts) who appeared on the six network shows examined, only 4 experts of the 34 panelists (11.8%) possessed academic expertise in racial subject matter. Out of those 4 Black Studies scholars, two of the same experts appeared three or more times on other panels. In other words, two Black academic experts accounted for more than half of the appearances of all scholarly Black experts on television during this period.

Although the public is getting broader exposure to Black insights in moments of racial crises, it is receiving a limited view with regard to Black academic expertise. The lack of public exposure to Black expertise on news panels not only inhibits racial dialogue, but it also indirectly undermines academic expertise in a racially distinct way. This is not to say that non-scholarly voices on racial matters are unimportant, but rather certain types of voices account for much more of the airwaves on these issues than others.

Expert panelists on legal issues, law enforcement, and public relations may yield important professional insights on racial matters, yet the scope of analysis in these panels often forays into frontiers well beyond their authority. This is particularly troubling because of the widespread availability of Black scholars with deep expert knowledge regarding the areas in question. Table 13.1 illustrates this by outlining the major coverage of race crises stories in 2013 and 2014. Of note is that network channels offer little coverage during prime time as it relates to issues of race in the panel format. On the other hand, cable news programming offers a substantial amount of panel discussion during the prime-time viewing hours.



Table 13.1 Overview of Selected Expert Panels during Coverage of Racial Events in 2013 and 2014

	ABC	NBC	CBS	FOX	CNN	MSNBC
<b>Paula Deen, June 2013</b>	<i>The View</i> June 26, 2013 <b>Whoopi Goldberg</b> , Barbara Walters, Elizabeth Hasselback, <b>Star Jones</b> , Joy Behar	<i>Today</i> with Matt Lauer June 26, 2013 (no comparable panel)	No comparable panel identified	<i>On the Record with Greta Van Susteren</i> June 25, 2013 (H) Greta Van Susteren, Ted Williams, Gloria Allred	<i>CNN Live</i> with Don Lemon June 29, 2013 Buck Davis, Wendy Walsh, <b>Kelly Goff</b> , *Tim Wise, *Marc Lamont Hill	<i>All In</i> with Chris Hayes June 23, 2013 (H) Chris Hayes, <b>Seaton Smith</b> , Nancy Giles, *Jelani Cobb
<b>Zimmerman verdict, July 14, 2014</b>	<i>This Week</i> July 14, 2014 Dan Abrams, <b>Pierre Thomas</b> , Paul Gigot, Tavis Smiley	<i>Meet the Press</i> July 14, 2014 David Gregory, Rich Lowry, Al Sharpton, Bill Richardson	<i>Face the Nation</i> July 14, 2014 Bob Schieffer, <b>Ben Jealous</b> , *Michael Eric Dyson, Daryl Parks, Mark Strassman, Mario Diaz-Balart, Mike Kelly, Dick Durbin	<i>Hannity</i> July 1, 2014 <b>Rod Wheeler</b> , Anna Yum <i>Hannity</i> July 16, 2014 Live panel <i>Hannity</i> July 17, 2014 Juan Williams, Leo Terrell	<i>Piers Morgan Live</i> July 12, 2014 Alex Ferrer, *Marc Lamont Hill, Jo-Ellan Dimitrius, Jayne Weintraub CNN(A) Don Lemon, *Marc Lamont Hill, Wynton Marsalis	<i>Jansing and Company</i> July 16, 2014 *Marc Lamont Hill, Alexis Stodghill
<b>Darren Wilson grand jury, November 24, 2014</b>	<i>This Week</i> Martha Radditz November 30, 2014 <b>Donna Brazile</b> , Bill Kristol, Cokie Roberts, Bret Stephens	<i>Meet the Press</i> November 23, 2014 Rudy Giuliani, *Michael Eric Dyson <i>Meet the Press</i> 11/30/2014 Deval Patrick, Helene Cooper, Andrea Mitchell, Sherrilyn Ifffl, David Brooks, *Charles Ogletree, Ben Carson	<i>Face the Nation</i> August 17, 2014 (H) Bob Schaeffer, Cornell William Brooks, *Michael Eric Dyson, Ruth Marcus, Michael Gerson	<i>Hannity</i> November 18, 2014 <b>Derk Brown</b> , Bill Johnson, Bo Dietl	<i>Situation Room</i> November 10, 2014 (H) Wolf Blitzer, (A) Don Lemon, Tom Fuentes, John Gaskin, Sunny Hostin	No comparable panel identified

Notes: Panelists with names in bold indicate a person racially identifiable as Black in an American context. The notations (H) and (A) are abbreviations for the following: (H) head anchor; (A) anchorperson. An asterisk (\*) denotes a scholar holding Black Studies credentials by training, association, or appointment.



## Summary of Panel Coverage of Racial Episodes

### *The Paula Deen Incident: Heartfelt Apology or Coded Appeal*

In August 2013, months following a deposition where it emerged that the food mogul admitted to using racial slurs, Paula Deen embarked on an apology tour to salvage her wounded public image, which prompted many sponsors to cancel partnerships and endorsements (Macht, 2013). Ironically, MSNBC's *NOW with Alex* reported a favorability poll conducted by Public Policy Polling (PPP) that found Deen rated more favorable than Martin Luther King, Jr., among Georgia Republican voters (Kim, 2013). News networks employed the panel format to probe for deeper meaning.

Panelists on ABC's *The View* discussed whether Deen should be forgiven. The Black panelists, Whoopi Goldberg and Star Jones, accepted the notion of forgiveness but Jones repeatedly mentioned that the use of the n-word did not make one a racist but rather the context and one's life history. Previous comments by Deen regarding a plantation-styled wedding and her urging of accusers "to cast the first stone" if they had never said anything they regretted raised skepticism about the sincerity of the apology (Macht, 2013).

The prime-time panels turned to the experts to probe for deeper meaning. MSNBC's *All in With Chris Hayes* hosted an all-Black guest panel that included commenter/writer Nancy Giles; comedian Seaton Smith; and Jelani Cobb, an African American Studies professor at the University of Connecticut. The panel varied in sentiments from Smith urging for forgiveness and focus on substantive racial matters like policing, to Giles emphasizing the dilemma that Black-on-Black usage of the n-word caused, to Cobb discussing the historical and geographical context for White-Black relations in the South. Though no particularly poignant analysis emerged, the spectrum of Black views on the crisis was clearly demonstrated.

Two days after the story gained traction on MSNBC, Fox News opted for a lawyer's panel that pitted civil rights attorney Gloria Allred against a Black defense attorney, Ted Williams. Williams took up the side of Deen, arguing that the use of the word may have been a bad choice but that the context and her cultural background should be considered. Allred emphasized that Deen had not really apologized enough and that too many Blacks had died on account of that term in the past to take this case lightly.

The Paula Deen fiasco brings many of the concerns of racial expertise to the fore. The increasing public perception that a degree from the sciences, law, or a medical profession is a "trump card" over degrees in the humanities and social sciences (Kohn, 2011) is certainly noted in the exchanges on this issue. Out of all the panels examined, the most informed analysis of the Paula Deen incident was when Black Studies public intellectuals such as Jelani Cobb and Marc Lamont Hill appeared on CNN and MSNBC. Viewers were able to gain critical insights into not only opinions of what happened, but explanations for why people felt betrayed, angered, or outraged by Deen's comments.

Additionally, the inclusion of a variety of experts with academic expertise in Black Studies illustrated that there is no singular Black perspective on these issues, but a spectrum of vantage points, each with a distinct rationale. Conversely, the Fox panel tended to focus on the nuances of argumentation and the public relations side of Deen's comments, further demonstrating why racial misunderstanding persists even amid intensified race coverage.

### *Post-Verdict Zimmerman Panels: Debating Justice or the Disregard for Black Life*

In mid-July 2013, the news cycle was punctuated by high-profile coverage of the Zimmerman trial. George Zimmerman was a man patrolling the neighborhood of Twin Lakes as a self-appointed watchman following a burglary in the community. On the night of February 26, 2012, he sighted Trayvon Martin walking through the community around 7:00 p.m. He approached the youth and the series of events that followed are still debated to this day. Zimmerman allegedly attempted to stop Martin after being told by authorities to stay in his car. Shortly afterward a struggle ensued. We will never know the full story because we only have Zimmerman's account to rely on; yet we do know that Martin was shot and killed as Zimmerman pleaded self-defense based on a controversial statue known as "Stand Your Ground." According to Reuters (2013), more than 10.6 million viewers tuned in to watch the jurors return a verdict of not guilty on charges of second-degree murder and manslaughter.

CNN developed a special program titled "The N-Word: Is it Ever Okay?" to help viewers process the racial language that had become such a key issue in interpreting the broader meaning of the Zimmerman case, as well as the previous Paula Deen incident. The network included African American Studies professor Marc Lamont Hill, jazz musician Wynton Marsalis, journalist Safiya Songhai, and actor Levar Burton. Most of the panels relied on legal expertise to justify or explain the verdict and relied on Black panelists and Black Studies experts such as Hill to clarify why African Americans responded so differently to the verdict. Analyses of what this instance meant for Black lives in America and its parallels in a racial past were largely absent from all these discussions. Recent research from scholars with subject matter expertise in Critical Race or Black Studies present a deeper understanding of the Martin episode than most Americans audiences were exposed to via televised panels. For example, Thomas and Blackmon (2015) presented an introspective analysis of the influence of Martin's shooting on the racial socialization practices of African American parents. While most audiences are unaware of what racial socialization practices are, the structured and systematic analysis provided by these authors revealed an intricate knowledge of the workings of race and its impact in measurable ways.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the authors show the complex challenges of African American parenthood that

were almost entirely absent from discussions in the news but very relevant in providing context for the incident.

### *Michael Brown Shooting: Cops under Pressure or People under Siege*

Shortly after the intensity of the Zimmerman panels had subsided, another crisis appeared on the national news cycle out of Ferguson, Missouri. An adolescent by the name of Michael Brown had been shot dead in the streets of Ferguson by police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014. At the time, unconfirmed reports relayed that Brown had been shot even though he had his hands up in the air at the time of shooting. The event escalated over several weeks through social media, especially Black Twitter,<sup>3</sup> as hashtags #handsupdontshoot and #Blacklivesmatter became a rallying cry to online activists.

The network television channels in this sample struggled to cover the event with an adequate level of analysis. On the one hand, ABC and CBS attempted to characterize what seemed to be an outbreak of police violence directed toward young Black men. Yet they also insinuated that certain aspects of Black youth culture provoked, if not encouraged, these lethal episodes. NBC pitted Rudy Giuliani against academician Michael Eric Dyson on the problem and misconceptions of Black-on-Black violence. In all of the cases selected, the Mike Brown panels seemed the most constrained either by format or by limitations of panelists to engage deeper meaning from the developments in question. Black Studies perspectives provided by Michael Eric Dyson and Charles Ogletree provided broader social and legal context for the incident while most of the other panelists opted for elucidation of emotions of respect for police authority or disbelief at the mounting number of racial crises in the past two years.

Perhaps more so than any of the other cases, the coverage of Michael Brown revealed how relevant the perspectives derived from Black Studies are to news coverage. Had media outlets turned to a cadre of African American Studies experts, who specialize in race and criminal justice, they would have benefited from a well-developed and thoroughly documented body of literature that has examined the racial tension between policing and African American youth. What makes the Black Studies research emphasis somewhat different than other perspectives offered in criminal justice, law, and the social sciences is the ability for scholars to offer an interdisciplinary critique on the Black experience in which race rises as a central and fundamental issue rather than a peripheral one. Legal scholarship written from a Black Studies paradigm (e.g., Butler, 2004; Mauer, 2006; Miller, 2010) demonstrates that racial context is not a spurious factor in criminal justice as so many experts claim, but that it is central to decoding the meaning of policing and punishment within the context of the Black community.

## Branding Racial Crises

The mere inclusion of Black voices in mainstream media is not enough. Excluding racial experts from a Black Studies paradigm risks diminishing the complexity of racial matters and perpetuating existing power structures built off racial hierarchies. A relationship exists between the types of racial experts who are invited to panel discussions regarding racial matters and the underlying messaging of the news “brand.” This matter is not only relevant to assessing the viewer demographics of a given network but also in examining how pundits influence public discourse. Previous studies have explored the phenomena of cable news and its impact on partisanship, but perhaps we need to consider more carefully the role of panels in shifting, informing, and channeling the public perception and discourse of racial incidents in particular. Jacobs and Townsley note that the single-host format engages panels with “a more diverse range of media intellectuals” but often use pre-determined points of view to arrange inquiry that underscores the political views of the host (2011, pp. 241–242). This is further complicated by the exclusion of certain types of experts who may challenge the moral certitude of the hosts—such as academics and other purveyors of complex historical narratives (Jacobs & Townsley, 2011).

As more students graduate with degrees in Black Studies we seldom hear the critical and highly relevant perspectives that scholars trained in these interdisciplinary approaches can provide in mainstream media. Instead, these critical voices are exiled to alternative media and the blogosphere. Patton (2012) illustrated the new approaches and interdisciplinary perspectives that have characterized the rise of new stars within Black Studies. The article focused specifically on Northwestern University doctoral candidates but became somewhat of a bellwether article for the field. Far from one-dimensional racial ideologues, the article painted a picture of cooperative and multi-racial coalition builders willing to tackle serious social issues, such as the difficult dialogues on race and ongoing challenges to justice in the wake the Trayvon Martin shooting.

MSNBC appears to have a clear edge in employing Black Studies academic expertise in racial matters. Its inclusion of Melissa Harris-Perry and other high-profile Black academics reveals a commitment to analysis beyond the politics of representation. Fox News, on the other end of the spectrum, relied more so on legal analysis with no academic expertise on racial matters during panel sessions of these racial crises. These decisions on expertise align more or less with the dominant themes in the Fox brand and the expectations of its audience.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps the most troubling are the networks in between (CNN, ABC, NBC), whose inclusion/exclusion of racial experts seemed to follow no clear pattern. It is one thing for racial issues to be discussed *ex parte* in an arrangement that is explicitly understood by a viewer base, but it is another thing altogether for the constellation of authority to be configured in a way that appears completely random.

Entman and Rojecki (2000) found that “the news embodies the effects of tacitly obeying norms and following cultural patterns of which journalists are only imperfectly aware, and of responding to pressures from elites and markets which news organizations are disinclined to challenge” (p. 77). What this means for the deployment and employment of the Black expert is complex. As news organizations follow established norms and cultural patterns, they become complicit in reinforcing and commoditizing the very racial attitudes at the core of their coverage (Cashmore, 1997; Lewis, 2016; Rome, 2004). In each of these cases, we can see how Blacks experts are called upon to be racial representatives; but specifically in the coverage of Michael Brown, we can see how deep contextual knowledge and academic expertise can transform the meaning of a particular crisis.

## **Conclusion**

From this analysis, it can be concluded that despite the presence of minorities, particularly African Americans, in the mainstream news media, major news organizations seem reluctant to seek perspectives from African American specialists with Black Studies credentials as an authoritative voice on racial issues. Despite criticisms of a full-blown “race hustle,” from various positions on the political spectrum, the academic expertise of Black Studies specialists remains marginalized as an irrelevant voice on major racial issues of the day (Crouch, 1995). Some would argue that the inclusion of greater numbers of Black Studies academicians would further undermine objective analysis because these experts have a particular cultural and political ax to grind.

However, this is one of the major problems with the coverage of racial crises. By preempting the discussion of these issues from an empirically grounded Black vantage point, one actually validates prevailing norms in race relations that are far from objective. As Allen (2001) criticized the academy for purporting to be neutral while advancing racial agendas, we can make similar criticisms of the news media during the years of Obama’s presidency. A desire for race-neutral analysis does not make it a post-racial reality.

The inclusion of Black voices and the coverage of racial crises by major news networks are certainly a welcome trend but have proven to be quite paradoxical. In many cases, an uninformed Black guest or anchor can reinforce normative racial ideologies rather than challenge implicit racial biases and structured inequalities. While viewers cannot ascertain how or why race experts are selected, they can understand how the inclusion of certain types of Black opinion and the exclusion of other forms of racial expertise contributes to an increasingly polarized racial climate.

The lack of academically qualified Black expert panels reflects an explicit disregard for the intellectual dimensions and seriousness of racial issues. Many of the prime-time news shows that would never use

entertainers, athletes, or comedians as an authority for legal analysis, medical commentary, or science coverage, consistently do so for issues centered on race. By transforming every racial crisis into a sound off for uninformed public opinion, they contribute to a discourse evaluated by the level of loudness over the degrees of intellect. This is not to say that only experts have something meaningful to contribute to discussions on race; but given the professionalism and accuracy implied in the practice of journalism and the high standards applied to other topics (such as foreign policy, legal cases, election coverage, and science and medicine), it appears that the gift of the veil and second-sight remains yet to be truly understood.

## Notes

1. Black Studies scholarship has long challenged dominant paradigms for a biological basis of Black identity (Diop, 1991; Du Bois, 1999; Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Instead engaging self-disclosed criteria that presume static categories based on genetic or ethnic heritage—as many casual observers of race tend to emphasize—scholars advocating a Black Studies paradigm have emphasized the commonality of unique forms of oppression in the racial experiences of African-descended people. In this tradition, “Blackness” among Black Studies scholars has not historically been based solely upon complexion, lineage, and phenotypical characteristics but a commonality of experiences and culture stemming from an external imposition of otherness. Using a distinctly American approach to Black racial identity based on historical and popularly perceived characteristics rather than self-disclosed criteria, I categorized each of the panelists as Black or Non-Black. The criteria for inclusion as a person with adequate expertise in racial matters were determined by the following: (1) professional training or academic credentials from a program in Black Studies or a comparable unit (Africana Studies, Africology, Pan-African Studies, African American Studies, Critical Race Studies, etc.), (2) a current or past academic appointment in a departmental or programmatic unit or Black Studies, or (3) a body of research or engaged scholarly community work that includes peer-reviewed interdisciplinary critiques of the role of racism in Black communities.
2. According to Thomas and Blackmon, “Racial socialization is defined as the process by which African American parents raise children to have positive self-concepts in an environment that is racist and sometimes hostile and includes exposure to cultural practices, promotion of racial pride, development of knowledge of African American culture, and preparation for bias and discrimination ...” (2015, p. 76).
3. “Black Twitter” is the cultural and technological eponym for the disproportionately large number of African Americans who discuss cultural and political events on the social media platform Twitter. Black Twitter, as it is called, has come to be an important source for analyzing trending topics of interest in Black America. For more information, see work by Brock (2012), Sharma (2013), and Florini (2014).
4. Works that have discussed the Fox News brand and its implications are too numerous to explore in this study. For further reading consult Iyengar and Hahn (2009), Chan-Olmsted and Cha (2007), and Morris (2005).

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