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Race Through the Lens:

An analysis of the criminalization of racial minorities in local news content through the
eyes of media professionals

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of the perceptions of media professionals on the crime and race-based content created for mass consumption. The depictions of white individuals and individuals of minority racial/ethnic communities varied through the rates of depictions in criminal positions and the language and visuals used in published stories. Given this variation, it was of interest whether the characteristics of the journalists and producers creating and publishing this content has an effect on the variations between the representations of these communities. In order to best analyze this, a series of five individual interviews were conducted with reporters, editors, radio-show hosts, and producers working for Twin-Cities based publications. All interviews were conducted over the telephone during December, 2017. Using previously collected data, these interviews were compiled by previously identified categories to describe the trends in answers provided- with only five samples included in the study, statistical analyses were not performed.

Several overall trends and points of interest were identified. It was found that violent crime was significantly more likely to be published/shown on television news programs than white-collar/business crimes. This variation was attributed to an increase in the visuals available to be presented during reports. While previous studies had found a significant differentiation in the rates in which mugshots were shown, the professionals interviewed reported that the use of these and similar images were being more strictly standardized and regulated. In order to put these findings into perspective, the Jamar Clark case (Minneapolis, 2015) was used as a case-example for comparison. Throughout the interviews, it was determined that social media use and the race/ethnicity of the news media professional had a level of impact on the content produced.

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Combing through the pages of results on scholarly databases, you can find research on every aspect of news representation, viewer perception, and a plethora of related topics. What can not be easily found, however, is how those creating this content view these issues. As their perspectives can give a deeper understanding of their writing processes and how issues regarding race as discussed amongst professional networks, opinions surrounding these issues vary greatly between not only regions and networks, but between individual journalists. With this in mind, one of the more accurate ways to evaluate how these professional organizations discuss race in their publications is to conduct interviews with members of various networks and positions, and to analyze their responses for general trends. In accordance with the previous research conducted, it seems clear that the way individuals of racial minorities are represented is skewed in proportions of representation, the images used in content regarding crimes committed by people of color, and the language used to describe individuals of color who are accused of wrongdoing.

Literature Review

How Racial Criminalization is Portrayed in the News

A primary cause of racial criminalization may be normalized societal power hierarchies, in which impoverished individuals- many of whom are people of color- are given less status and influence than the rich upper class. A study conducted by Bjornstrom, Kaufman, Peterson, and Slater (2010) explain this power system as a cycle

based on the concepts of 'racial threat' and 'racial privilege,' which directly lead to increased depictions of the victimization of white individuals, and the possible over-reporting of crimes committed by African American individuals. They attribute this system to the hierarchy in the media industry, in which the majority of media-based businesses are controlled by white individuals and cater to the interests of white audiences. Similarly, Dixon described the same phenomenon in the context of the media, representing a sort of 'guard dog'- that is, holding the power hierarchy in place by focusing publicity on the populations least able to fight the stereotypes and biases placed upon them (Dixon, 2015). This study also explains that the focus of news coverage tends to shift between domestic and international coverage during times of change and after major events. One example of these fluctuations is the association between Latinos and undocumented immigration as these issues became more widely discussed. Another example is with the increased association between Muslims or Middle-Eastern individuals and terrorist organizations, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS/ISIL.

Effects of Criminalized View

One aspect of this cycle of criminalization that is often unexplored is the effect this representation has on individuals of the African American community. As the researchers explained:

“Blacks were twice as likely as Whites to be portrayed as perpetrators, six times more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than as officers, and overrepresented as criminals 37% of the time while comprising only 21% of those arrested according to crime reports. Almost nightly, local newscasts by their selection of the night's 'lead' story, portray urban America as out of

control and Blacks as being responsible” (Creighton, Walker, & Anderson, 2014)

As black individuals, specifically youth, view these stories in the media, they may begin to believe they are destined to this ‘self-fulfilling prophesy’ (Creighton et al., 2014). The researchers explain that the stereotypes stemming from these portrayals may lead not only to criminal activity, but to five separate associations based on the stereotypes placed on this community. They refer to these stereotypes as the “five D’s: dumb, deprived, dangerous, deviant and disturbed” (Creighton et al., 2014). These associations can impact the self-esteem and self-perception of these youth and may directly lead to not only criminal activity (or perceived criminality), but to increased drop-out rates, poor school placement and test achievement, increased arrest rates and incarceration, and decreased employment.

With few positive portrayals on a regular basis, it is not surprising that these stereotypes have a direct effect on these young adults/adolescents. This may have an even greater effect when considering that individuals of minority communities are often experiencing stigma and marginalization in other aspects of their lives as well, including employment, educational opportunities, and policies, which may impact the wealth and resources available to impoverished neighborhoods.

While specific statistics weren’t given for victim representation, Dixon (2015) states that white individuals are also often overrepresented in what he refers to as “‘hero’ roles.” He also outlines multiple possible explanations for these separations of representation by race,

- ethnic blame discourse: “white audience members are more susceptible to narratives in which ethnic out-groups are the perpetrators and whites are either the victims or heroes [and/or officers]” (Dixon, 2015, p. 12)
- incognizant racism: “[A previous researcher] claims that incognizant racism is a form of ‘everyday racism’ that influences news practices. He uses the term *incognizant* because most news professionals lack a conscious awareness of racial bias. Instead, years of training, cultural orientation, and institutionalized neglect lead predominantly White editors and journalists to reproduce racially biased news coverage” (Dixon, 2015, p. 12)
- structural limitations and economic interests: “journalists might reproduce ethnic blame narratives because they assume that this narrative pervades the population and would increase ratings. Similarly, incognizant racism suggests that socialization practices encourage journalists to air news product that appeals to large news constituencies, even if it over-represents White victims and officers” (Dixon, 2015, p. 13)

While these findings are not necessarily exclusive to local news, these representations may be more common in regional broadcasts due to their increased focus on ‘urban crime.’ This increase may be due to the ease in which these crimes can be covered and garner responses.

Depiction Variance by Crime Type

It has been documented that blue-collar crime is generally more likely to be covered by news stations than white-collar crime; blue-collar crime is more often associated with black individuals (Dixon & Linz, 2000). Dixon and Linz offer three

explanations for the general focus on blue-collar crime. The first is a matter of accessibility. As blue-collar crime is often local and public, it is easy to identify crimes and victims while the general public is still actively paying attention to the event. This accessibility is also tied to the factor of audience interest; these crimes that are easy to identify are also those most closely tied to the audience by population, and possibly by location.

The second explanation is derived from the information source itself. Most data and direct evidence represented in the news comes directly from law enforcement and other 'official sources,' and which stories are produced will then depend on the amount of information made public by authorities and Public Relations managers/departments. The final factor is more closely related to sparking and capturing immediate interest. As the authors state, "the format of television news encourages an emphasis on the visual and the dramatic" (Dixon & Linz, 2000, p.149-150). As white-collar crime is characteristically non-physical, few visuals are available to present on television news, making the story less likely to garner attention.

"This emphasis on blue-collar crime is more likely to draw attention to black crime in the minds of viewers because Blacks are much more likely to be blue-collar criminals than white-collar criminals. Committing a white-collar crime requires a certain amount of economic power and influence. Given that Blacks often do not have the economic resources that Whites do, they are more likely to be blue-collar than white-collar criminals (Gordon, 1998; Poveda, 1994). White-collar crime is typically committed by white, male, wealthy, and politically powerful offenders. An increase in white-collar

reporting would likely lead to an increase in the number of [visible] white perpetrators, which would result in a distribution of perpetrators that is less likely to emphasize black criminality” (Dixon & Linz, 2000, p. 150).

When arrest rates by race are taken into account, this perpetuation of blue-collar crime directly leads to increased coverage on crime committed by African Americans.

Law Enforcement Representation

Dixon (2015) found that when analyzing news representations in Los Angeles, 73% of officers shown during newscasts were white; in comparison, only 53% of the county’s officers are white. Given the confidence interval and the other data provided, the researchers deemed this difference to be statistically significant. Comparisons for officers of other races showed varying degrees of underrepresentation, however, based on the collected data. While Latino officers were represented significantly more sparsely- representing 16% of officers shown, compared to 30% of those employed- black officers, and officers of non-specified races, were depicted in proportions deemed insignificant in difference from the employment statistics. Specifically, black officers accounted for 9% of those shown on the news while making up 12% of employment, and other races represented 5% for both categories.

Visuals Used in News Media

In addition to the skewed proportions of individuals of racial minorities represented in news stories as criminals, the types of visual representations provided for varying groups may differ. The most specific of these was a 1993 case study that found that African Americans being shown on news programming were up to four times more likely to have a mugshot publicly shown than white individuals, in similar situations. These

statistics are specific to television news, but feasibly could have similar applications in print (Creighton et al., 2014). Additional data found that when portrayed as a perpetrator, black individuals are 20% more likely than white individuals to be shown being physically handled or restrained by law enforcement, and 16% less likely to be identified with a name than their white counterparts. The researchers attribute this lack of provided information to be a form of 'dehumanization,' making the black individual accused less relatable and individual than Caucasian people accused of similar crimes, especially when the crime involves a white victim (Dixon & Linz, 2000).

Network and Viewers' Perception

A 2000 study by Travis Dixon and Daniel Linz cites viewer preferences and reporter demographics to be two of the primary issues leading to the persistence of negative minority depictions in local news. One of the most significant claims Dixon and Linz mention is the focus on 'newsworthiness' (Dixon & Linz, 2000). While the editors and publishers may not be aware, the types of news stories represented vary based on how the news team assumes viewers/readers will take interest in the piece. These assumptions could include the idea that stories with African American perpetrators and (if applicable) Caucasian victims may draw more audience attention. This presumption could also explain the lack of white-collar crime represented in the news. As white-collar crimes are often perpetrated by the wealthy, news stories depicting such crimes are unlikely to be relatable to the general audience, and as such, may receive less overall attention.

One of the most significant results of this previously mentioned hierarchy of power is the effect it has on viewer's perceptions of individuals of minorities. Researchers found

that continued exposure to a certain lens (in this situation, criminal activity) creates a 'cognitive association' between the two (Parrot & Parrot, 2015). They also assert the opposite- when these stereotypes are challenged by decreasing viewer exposure to these depictions, the association could be reduced over time. Another result is the viewer perception of general safety and fear, due to violence-based news stories.

Research shows that as news stations become more focused on image-based and often violent crime, viewers begin to feel more fearful of their communities and those surrounding them (Parrot & Parrot, 2015). Many varying studies have come to widely different conclusions about the correlation between television news and fear, some found that no correlation exists, while others found that only certain populations were affected. Of these, several studies discussed fear among white individuals and women, which was attributed to these communities' general lack of exposure to frequent crime and the minority groups often associated with these events. Other studies found fear increased only in black individuals, with no effects being attributed to white or Latino people. These differences may also be related to the time of the studies, which range from 1977 to 2007. The only statement that held true across the span of most articles presented was regarding fear based on type of media intake. It was found that watching local television news was more often positively correlated with increased fear than reading a locally produced newspaper. This was attributed to the newspaper providing more information and detail (providing context for the story/crime), sometimes with regards to other similar crimes, without the eye-catching and often shocking images shown during television segments, particularly those related to violent crime.

Case Example: Omaha

In order to better put these phenomena into perspective, a 2014 research study detailed crime statistics, depiction, and audience perception in Nebraska- the state deemed the “most dangerous place in America to be black” (Creighton et al., 2014). 4.8% of the population of Nebraska is black; in Omaha, African Americans comprise about 13.7% of the population. Out of the 30 total murders committed in Omaha in 2011, the majority (90%) of the victims were living in primarily African American neighborhoods. Across the state (in 2004) black men were also nearly 7 times more likely to be unemployed than their counterparts. Given this wide disparity in representation, the researchers coded the lead news stories on Omaha’s four major television news channels, looking specifically at the stories broadcasted during the 9:00-10:00 PM news slots, over the course of three months, September-November, 2012. In order to best classify the stories, the researchers narrowed their scope to eight specific crimes and categories of crimes: “Homicide, Rape, Robbery, Assault, Burglary, Larceny, Motor Vehicle Theft, and Arson” (Creighton et al., 2014).

During September, 2012, 101 stories (regarding all content types, not only crime) were found to include an only black (57%) or only white (43%) subject. Of these, about 67% percent were about crime (Creighton et al., 2014). While the distribution of news stories only showed a 14% difference between arrests in the two represented groups, 75% of crime stories (51 total) directly focused on African American men. Results from October were comparable: of the 50 stories fitting the determined criteria, 70% of the crime stories shown were linked to black individuals as perpetrators. Unexpectedly, November results showed the opposite- only 6 of 18 crime related stories were focused

on black men. To explain this shift, the researchers found that this month featured an abnormal lack of focus on crime in general, likely due to the 2012 Presidential Election. When the three months are combined, the total representation of black individuals as perpetrators stood at 69%.

The researchers analyzed the arrest rates and records from this period, using the data search engine available on Nebraska's official government database (Creighton et al., 2014). This search includes basic arrest data, broken down by race, age, or another factor (only one factor can be analyzed at a time) for each county and police department. The arrest statistics for Omaha P.D. demonstrate a far different reality from the statistics regarding lead stories (Nebraska Crime Commission, 2012). For the months of September and October, arrests of black individuals (no gender or crime type specified) represented 37% and 38% of arrests each month (respectively), about 30% lower than the proportion stated in the previous analysis. In November, this number was closer to 35%, about 2% higher than the lead news story distribution. This phenomenon of overrepresentation of black males in crime-based stories is stated to be fairly consistent with previous research articles, though comparison statistics were not provided. The article also directly states that the proportion of white police officers depicted is disproportionately high.

Context: Jamar Clark and Black Lives Matter

In order to establish context for some of the national controversies regarding racial issues and the resulting coverage, the Black Lives Matter movement and the shooting death of Jamar Clark (Minneapolis) are used as a reference point. Black Lives Matter was initially not a movement, but a trending twitter hashtag- a word or combination of words

preceded by a pound sign allowing the phrase to be searched and tracked on social media sites to find similar content. Beginning after the shooting death of Trayvon Martin- a young man killed in Florida in 2012- the group uses social media and protests to raise awareness about the deaths of black men and women that are thought to be contributed to a rise in what they find to be unreasonable rates of police violence (Sidner, 2015). These events extend from protests outside of individual police stations to 'shutting down' major roads and attractions, which is met with mixed reactions- they are often either praised or 'condemned' for their tactics. The group continued to grow following the deaths of Michael Brown (Ferguson, Missouri- 2014) and Jamar Clark (Minneapolis, Minnesota- 2015).

The events began when officers arrived at the location of the shooting- Clark's place of residence. The police stated that Clark was directly interfering with the medical care of a woman, which the Twin Cities Star Tribune newspaper reported to be Clark's girlfriend, who may have been injured by Clark in a domestic dispute ("What we know...", 2015). From there, it has not been clearly established what occurred. Several witnesses stated that Clark was restrained in handcuffs or unable to move when Clark was shot at point-blank range, while officers maintain that he was fighting arrest and had grabbed an officer's firearm (Alsup and Almasy, 2015; Sidner, Almasy, & Berlinger, 2015) The shooting occurred on November 15th, 2015; Clark was declared dead the next day ("The Jamar Clark shooting...", 2016). Beginning two days after the death, protesters began to surround the 4th Precinct in Minneapolis 24 hours a day, and holding larger marches. One march on November 17th led to a stoppage of traffic on the I-94 freeway and led to several protester arrests.

On November 23rd, 2015, five protesters were non-fatally injured in a shooting outside of the 4th Precinct (“3 in custody...”, 2015). Four men, ranging in age from 21-32 years old, were arrested during the week for the shooting- one was later determined to not be related to the crime and was released. It was said that the shots were fired from a group of four (three men and a woman) who arrived at the protest. The four were all identified as being white, and three were wearing masks covering the majority of their faces. A man acting as security tried to escort the group away when they began running and firing shots at protesters who followed them. One of the men was later charged with assault, claiming that he was firing in self-defense after attempting to film the protest and being punched by a protester (Chanen, 2016). On November 24th, about 1,000 people held a march to the City Hall following the shootings, and the arrests of several suspects in the protest shooting were announced (“The Jamar Clark shooting...”, 2016). Protesters have continued to rally into the early spring, fighting not only for the reform of police brutality and physical action, but the prosecution of the officers involved (Furst, 2016). A large part of this fight is to have the court proceedings to be made public, as police shootings are often tried by grand juries, without public access

While this story represents a single incident, an infographic created by the Star Tribune shows the distribution of individuals who passed away after confrontation/interaction with members of Minnesota police forces from 2000-2015 (Bjorhus, Webster, & Hargarten, 2016). They found that while black individuals make up only 6% of the population of Minnesota, they comprised 29% of deaths in this category. By comparison, white individuals represented 82% of the population and 58% of deaths,

Asian individuals represented 4% of the population and 6% of deaths, and American Indians represented only 1% of the population, but made up about 7% of deaths.

Another point of controversy was the media's use of information about Clark's arrest records; while he had a criminal record, the focus of the protests was not to justify his actions, but to protest that he was killed unfairly and without due process, due the circumstances in which police arrived at his home ("Family of Jamar Clark...", 2015). One of the controversies brought forth in the news representation was the continued discussion over Clark's criminal history, and whether it held any relevance in the case. One specific record that has been in discussion was from July 2015, when Clark was arrested after driving a stolen car into the wall of an apartment, with two adolescents in the vehicle ("Officers Punched Jamar Clark..." 2015). He was said to then refuse to be handcuffed, after which he was punched by a police officer; none of the officers present at his death were involved in this previous arrest. There is debate over whether it is appropriate for these previous offenses to play a role in the presentation of this case and whether it was correct for the mugshots from this previous arrest to be used in these articles- immediately after the shooting these were some of the only images being circulated by many media outlets.

On March 31st, 2016 (after the general completion of this project) the Hennepin County Attorney (Mike Freeman) announced that no charges would come to the officers involved in the shooting of Jamar Clark- Officer Mark Ringgenberg and Officer Dustin Schwarze (Golden, Walsh, & Chanen, 2016). The official release of information stated that DNA belonging to Jamar Clark was found on Ringgenberg's firearm. The officers reported that Clark was tackled when refusing arrest and while on the ground grabbed

the the firearm; when threatened with deadly force, Clark reportedly responded that “I’m ready to die.”

Following the report of the final verdict, RayAnn Hayes- Clark’s supposed victim- came forward (Chapman, 2016). She explained that she was never dating Clark and they had never had a dispute- both were friends and she were injured trying to end an argument between two other individuals. Hayes said she never referred to Clark as her boyfriend- as the Hennepin County Attorney’s stated during the official press release- or stated that he had injured her. When he was approaching the ambulance she recalls the paramedics stated that he was trying to break in, to which she responded “No, he’s not. He’s just trying to help me” (Chapman, 2016). She went on to state that this had been her stance and official statement throughout the entire investigation though this was not being reported by media sources. As the article explained, this would mean Clark was killed for resisting arrest when no actual crime had been committed.

Several other stories and events have stemmed from the Clark case, including the following

- The NAACP and ACLU had begun taking actions to sue for the public release of the video footage of Clark's death. The investigation was then privately closed on February 10th, 2016 (“The Jamar Clark shooting...”, 2016).
- MN state representative, Nick Zerwas, now wants to charge the increased costs incurred by the police precinct to the Black Lives Matter protesters (“Minnesota Lawmaker...”, 2016).
- On January 15th, 2016, Sgt. Jeffery Rothecker of the St. Paul police force made a public online comment on a news article stating that he found the BLM protesters

to be 'idiots' and made a brief comment suggesting that drivers should 'run over' the protesters remaining (Gottfried, 2016). He is now on forced (but paid) administrative leave, as BLM leaders call for his arrest, citing his statements to be a form of 'terroristic threats'.

- In December 2015, a large number of police officers were dispatched to the Mall of American in Bloomington, where a BLM rally was planned to be held- this turned out to be a minor event, while a large number of protesters entered the Minneapolis-St. Paul Airport, shutting down large sections of the airport for up to two hours (Woltman, 2015). This event occurred on the same day as 'Black Xmas', a 6-city BLM protest calling for reform and justice.

Methods

Participants

Local media professionals were interviewed about the representation of racial minorities in the content produced to cover stories regarding race, particularly the case of Jamar Clark. Interviews of media professionals from different media outlets were conducted and each interview was structured off of the same basic set of questions; the questions were reordered, rephrased, and follow-up questions were added as necessary; certain questions were omitted if answered in the context of another question or deemed irrelevant given the individual's employed position. For example, a question oriented towards a journalist would be adapted or removed when presented to an editor.

I began each interview by asking the individual what general types of stories they produced and how these were assigned, to create a baseline for how stories regarding race were distributed. For editors and/or producers this was adjusted to ask how they

determined which content was chosen, and how these were assigned amongst their writers. Then, I would ask the person if they were aware of some of the specific phenomena I had researched, giving examples if necessary. I often paired this question by presenting data, such as:

- "Blacks were twice as likely as Whites to be portrayed as perpetrators, six times more likely to be portrayed as perpetrators than as officers, and overrepresented as criminals 37% of the time while comprising only 21% of those arrested according to crime reports" (Creighton et al. 2014).
- "Blacks were four times more likely to include mug shots than stories about Whites accused of crimes [38]" (Creighton et al. 2014).

In addition, I would discuss findings, such as representation rates of officers, and the explicit statement of race in headlines. Each participant was asked if their own work followed these patterns. Each interviewee was also asked whether they viewed this type of representation as problematic in context of what they had seen previously published.

After discussing their own previous work, the subjects were asked they had observed on how race was covered in the context of local and/or national events, *ie.* the death of Jamar Clark, the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, etc. In addition, each was asked- about reports surrounding major controversies in the context of racial inequities- when and how the explicit decision to mention the races of individuals involved was made, and whether recent events changed the way the individual wrote/spoke about race in general. The same question was then presented in the context of stories published by other outlets and journalists, and whether the participant had noticed a change in how these other outlets/individuals made language choices regarding race.

Then each participant was asked what effect they believed their own race/ethnicity had on the way they covered race in the stories they created. The final question involved the types of crimes most often reported- whether the interviewee noticed certain crimes being disproportionately covered, or disproportionately represented by people of color. Each was also asked to state whether they noticed if certain individuals (whether by race or crime) were more or less likely to have a name or mugshot accompanying the coverage.

Each interview was recorded with the explicit permission of the participant, who was informed that the recording would be used solely for my writing purposes, unless further consent for the audio release was given. Each individual was also asked to specify what (if any) information could be used for participant descriptions, and whether express permission was necessary for the use of direct quotes- several participants requested this permission be sought.

I contacted various members of the Twin Cities media outlets. Some were selected based on previous race-based content they had produced, others based were referred by general requests I made, or referrals from St. Catherine University professors, and all participants who responded to my request and continued to return contact were interviewed. All of the information that was clearly answered and covered (some questions were skipped or rephrased) was summarized.

The five participants represent five separate networks and all hold slightly varying positions within these organizations. The names assigned to the participants are generic random names for the purpose maintaining anonymity, alphabetized by interview date for clarity. With these aliases, a short biography is available for each participant:

Person 1: Alex- December 7th, 2015

With 18 years of professional experience, Alex has a wide scope of training and practiced. A licensed attorney with a Juris Doctor degree and Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, Alex has worked as a reporter and occasional guest-anchor for five news outlets, and taught as an adjunct professor at several universities. She now works running a radio show, and acting as a professional speaking coach.

Person 2: Brooke- December 16th, 2015

Active for 15 years, Brooke has worked as a television and/or online news reporter with a total of five different news outlets across several states. She has won multiple awards, including several regional Emmys, and continues to report in the Twin Cities.

Person 3: Charles- December 16th, 2015

Charles is a court reporter for a print-based outlet, who has worked multiple beats since graduating college in 2003. Most of his positions have been focused on the Twin Cities region. Charles is also both Hmong-American and openly gay, which he feels impacts the way he is able to relate to coverage and think about the effects of how stories are presented.

Person 4: Danielle- December 17th, 2015

An executive director/publisher with an independent, Twin Cities based news organization, Danielle has experience working with marginalized communities and marketing. She has spoken publicly about issues of race and justice. Danielle has earned a Bachelor's Degree in both African/African American Studies and Strategic Communications-Public Relations.

Person 5: Eli- December 22nd, 2015

Eli is the both the vice president and editor of a print-based news outlet. Holding degree (no title specified), Eli has held a variety of jobs in his life, including working in seven different newsrooms across several states. Now married with a family, Eli actively works to promote diversity in content.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that all of these professionals are college educated adults, with years of experience each. It is also worth noting that the professionals represent a variety of races/ethnic groups: Brooke and Eli are white, Danielle is African American, Charles is Hmong, and Alex is from Southern Asia.

Results

How Content is Determined

In order to best analyze how content about racial issues are chosen to be covered- and what considerations are made in this coverage- I asked each participant how their stories are assigned or determined, then what considerations they make when choosing to discuss race. Brooke described this process as a combination of pitched ideas (prompted by either herself or the suggestion of another) and assigned content, determined on a daily basis during editorial meetings (personal communication, December 16th, 2015a). She estimates that 60%-70% of her content is of a topic she presented. The topics of these prompts vary, based on her personal curiosity and interest, area events- ranging from breaking news stories to election coverage-, and community needs. Seeing a need for representation in minority communities, she makes a direct attempt to present stories about individuals of a range of demographics. Having worked

in various newsrooms, in various cities in the U.S., Brooke has found that her network allows her the freedom to explore issues related to smaller communities in the Twin Cities, and present stories of importance to these communities; this may differ from other outlets, where content may depend on the perceived interest by the managerial team. She attributes this to her outlet's commitment to represent the communities living within their area of coverage, stating: "Even from a corporate standpoint, our company recognizes that the fabric of our nation is changing and these stories need to be told" (personal communication, December 16th, 2015a).

As a court reporter, Charles covers active trials (personal communication, December 16th, 2015b). However, as with the other interviewees, he describes there is a process for story assignment. This process begins with daily news stories- breaking news or recent events that are expected to be covered immediately. This is similar to the process that Alex was accustomed to as a reporter, though she now has the decision to cover content as she feels necessary or relevant.

As the editor of a print publication, Eli and his staff are in charge of distributing; stories, and reviewing and editing every news piece and opinion work published (personal communication, December 22nd, 2015). Many factors go into choosing the general direction of topics to be written on, which is divided into a series of beats, including lifestyles, sports, and public safety, where the publication is meant to act as a sort-of watchdog. One of the significant decisions made by the publication on a daily basis is what to place on the front page. This decision is made with a variety of factors in mind, including what the team thinks will be interesting to readers, what is different or intriguing, and what offers a balance of positive and negative content.

He also explains that while journalists attempt to be objective when making decisions regarding when to include mentions of race in content, it is impossible for journalists to be without bias, and this has an effect on the process of choosing content.

He explained:

“When it comes to the front page of the print edition, we daily make decisions about- and they are all subjective decisions, every single one these decisions in subjective. Anyone who tells you journalists are objective is misled. Nobody is objective- it is a human impossibility. We try to be fair, we try to be interested, but all these decisions are subjective decisions. And when we try to decide what goes on the front page, we make judgments about what might be interesting, about what might be important, about what might be intriguing, about what’s a balance of things is one the front page...is it all bad news, do we have any good news...how do you mix it up day after day so that what you have presented is, you know, some variety that reflects life.”

-Eli (personal communication, December 22nd, 2015)

While this bias is not generally intentional, it does have a direct effect on the language used in content production. While looking for background information and articles regarding Jamar Clark’s case, the mere titles of many articles could point to the opinion of the writer and how they viewed the case and BLM as a whole. This would be based on both language and phrasing choices.

As a publisher, Danielle’s position differs from the other interviewees. Along with the publications’ other staff- the editorial team and writers (who are referred to as

'storytellers')- she works to develop the stories of interest to the communities they serve and set a general tone and/or vision for the publication. The individual stories they produce change with the populations they represent, telling the stories of communities who are underrepresented, or only represented superficially. One example she spoke about was the representation of the Somali community in the Twin Cities; this population is often covered in one of two contexts: as a threat or as survivors, with little depth and detail for context (characteristics in addition to race). While other publications are slowly working to integrate more of these narratives, she explains that the context produced (in general) is linked to the demand of the publication's consumers. She related this with how she described the publication's mission and purpose. As she explained in our interview, the publication offers a place not to give voices to marginalized peoples, but to 'amplify' the voices they already inherently possess (personal communication, December 17th, 2015).

Danielle explains:

"We already have our voices- that's never been the case- it's having a platform to tell our stories, so we see our role as amplifying those stories. And then also finding a way to connect various voices, because there are a lot of issues that are happening in communities that are manifesting- maybe in different ways, in different communities- but it's the same issue.... it's good to see how our communities are interconnected and also different."

-Danielle (personal communication, December 17th, 2015)

She also describes that this greatly affects the general content of the publication, and the different contexts in which it explains events. Rather than just explaining the event in

question, the publication makes it a point to look deeper into the structures surrounding the events to create a narrative- instead of explaining the single occurrence, the focus could be on explaining what happened to cause this to occur. For example, given that the number of police related deaths per year is on the rise, an in-depth narrative would be focused on the causes of police-related deaths and the societal influences that lead to this, rather than reporting on a single event or incident.

She also explains that their publication is different than many news sources today.

“Media has changed so drastically, media used to be such a watchdog, right? Such a- serving a public interest and holding people accountable, right? So, people often think what we’re doing is radical, or somewhat radical- I don’t really think so. I think we’re kind of just going back to the roots what media should- was. There’s nothing really radical about finding the facts and presenting the various perspectives...”

-Danielle (personal communication, December 17th, 2015)

The fact that they differ from other (non-independent) news providers, does not mean they are diverging from the original definition of a news provider, but rather returning to it.

Blue Collar Vs. White Collar Crime

Another finding in the research was the lack of coverage of white collar crime is often because they are not generally visual. Alex explains that while white-collar crime may have significantly more financial loss attached, they are often more difficult to accurately report, which can lead to few stories being written on them (personal communication, December 7th, 2015). This is only further complicated when Public Relations departments try to prevent press releases, complicating attempts to collect

information on the story. As a result, these crimes often aren't covered. This same exclusion occurs with property and drug related crimes, though they aren't as technically complicated.

Similarly, Brooke explained that it is true that white-collar crime tends to be less frequently covered for multiple reasons. While the available imagery that accompanies white-collar crime are often less 'eye-catching' than those for blue-collar crime, the more significant factor in writing purposes may be the information- or rather lack-there-of. She explains,

"...So the police put out a press release, they put out a mugshot, they- you go to the scene of the crime, and it's just sort of like a tailor made story and there's a story line there where, like, white-Collar crime you might not have that. You don't really have access to like tell it as much... The company's not giving any statement, you can't get in to get any footage, you know not a lot of information is released... so I think the visuals are more challenging to get, I think it's sometimes harder or more complex to dismantle."

-Brooke (personal communication, December 16th, 2015a)

While white-collar crime is prominent and significant, it can be more difficult for reporters to access the information necessary to address the story.

Visuals Used in News Media

One of the issues that was discussed in previous research articles is the rates in which visual images, especially mugshots, are used disproportionately for black individuals. It should be noted that these statistics were produced in studies that may not

be recent enough to be applicable to current media representations as recent events may have changed how race is discussed and regarded.

While she finds some representations of people of color through mugshots and direct statement use to be an issue, Alex expressed that she's noticed an improvement in other outlets: mugshot use has been reduced to an extent and stations are beginning to implement rules regarding when these images can and should be publicized:

"...I know in the past year to three years, various outlets- to different degrees- have tried not to upfront show the mugshot, and I've even noticed lately with some of the Black Lives Matter stories in the Twin Cities, that they're not splashing mugshots as quickly as they used to. Locally some stations have rules, we don't show- they don't show a mugshot until someone's actually been charged, but some stations- even if it's a suspect- and they can get their hands on a picture, they'll show that picture. So, it's pretty inconsistent..."

-Alex (personal communication, December 7th, 2015)

The consensus amongst the participants is that the use of mugshots in content is most appropriate for suspect and fugitive searches, where the police may need this image to receive public assistance in apprehending the individual. In order to combat the inappropriate use of visuals in the last few years, her network has made an explicit effort to only provide descriptions when specific and individual. They also do not apply visual effects to mugshots shown- a phenomenon that Brooke says may be a common occurrence among crime specific programming. These effects include background lighting changes, transitions, and repetitive presentation of the photos, all of which can

have the effect of making the accused/charged look more intimidating or frightening to the viewer.

The use of mugshots at Charles' publication is universal. If possible and applicable to the (crime-based) story, a mugshot will be included if available, regardless of the race or ethnicity of the individual. One of their greatest determinants of the use of mugshots actually is based on available space.

"A lot of things come into play, like... is there space in the paper to run a mugshot or three mugshots, or four mugshots, you know- are mugshots even available? A lot of times mugshots are not- are withheld because police don't want those faces out in the public, if they're still trying to get witnesses to identify them, and I think that's sometime people don't understand sometimes... we sometimes just do not have access to mugshots at all. They're actually like protected under State law..."

-Charles (personal communication, December 16th, 2015b)

This problem then extends past just mugshots. As newspapers have limited printing space, non-essential details may be subject to removal in a variety of situations.

For the publication at which Eli works a mugshot is always shown until there is a change in the case or a court appearance occurs. As with previous interviewees, he also cites one of the only situations in which a direct statement of race should be addressed includes police searches for a suspect or person of interest, so long as other descriptions beyond only race are available.

Situational Requirements

We also discussed considerations for specific language use- especially in regards to when race is warranted to be directly mentioned in an article or broadcast. Alex also states that race is always appropriate to be discussed when it is a primary element in the story or used for necessary purposes, but direct statements in this context may need to be carefully examined, in order to prevent inciting issues and/or violence, such as in situations like the events in Ferguson, Missouri, discussed previously.

Overall, Brooke believes that race requires explicit mention only when it comprises a prominent or central role to the specific article or issue being described. She also discusses the importance of choosing language based on the preference of the majority of that community- while a statement may not be viewed as inappropriate or distasteful to the reporter and a portion of the viewing population, it may be offensive to another population. Additionally, blatant reference to an individual's race may be both unnecessary if a picture or video is available.

“Newsrooms need to be more sensitive when covering these issues, now more than ever. We need to have discussions daily- multiple times a day... when covering these issues. Our community is changing and, you know, these issues cannot be ignored, and so we have a powerful role to educate people and disseminate, and... bring to light the stories that really matter... we just need to also facilitate the conversation and be part of conversation... It's tough and we are striving to be better every day as these issues come to- I think- a crisis, boiling point in our community.”

-Brooke (personal communication, December 16th, 2015a)

Brooke recalled a level of backlash with language choice during the Ferguson, where a portion of reporters described the individuals involved as 'Blacks' and 'Whites'- referring to them primarily as their race, rather than as individuals. Additionally, blatant refer to an individual's race may be both unnecessary if a picture or video is available.

Within the Charles's network, issues of race and whether particular stories warrant a direct mention of race and/or ethnicity are a constant matter of discussion between reporter, editor and manager. As he explains, some events directly call for- if not require- a mention of race. With general crime reporting this varies based on situations. Charles explains a story covered several years past regarding a man who was attacked- members of the public were questioning why race wasn't mentioned as a factor (the victim was Caucasian and the attackers were African American), but it wasn't directly included as the crime was determined to not be racially motivated.

Danielle's publication offers a distinctly different view on race from the others represented. As the publication focuses on the representation of marginalized groups, race is a constant subject and focus, as it exists as part of the narrative of the stories covered. This is especially true when taking into account that the focus is on looking at the larger frames of context surrounding events involving race, and that race and class (and often sexual orientation) always play a large role in these structures. As many of the storytellers and editors are of minority communities themselves, those writing the stories were used to act as a check to assure that language was respectful towards the communities in question.

Jamar Clark

Arguably the most impactful part of the conversation with Danielle was regarding media framing of major events, and the impact this framing can have on the final published work. As much of produced news content is focused around attracting reader interest, coded language can be used to change the way the viewer/reader can understand the position or intentions of the main person of interest in the story. This coded language can come in various forms, including through the careful selection of quotes. When the question was posed whether she personally believed about the general news representation of the death of Jamar Clark was fair, Danielle brought up that some of the stories regarding this topic were following the consumer assumption that the Black Lives Matter protesters were supporting the circumstances in which the police came to be at Clark's house- namely the alleged domestic assault. Several news sites have covered that at the time of his death he was under suspicion in connection with a domestic abuse investigation while BLM's general stated purpose was to protest his wrongful death and lack of right to due process.

“No one from Black Lives Matter was calling- was saying that... what he did was right- there wasn't a sanctioning of his actions, his alleged actions-it was... he should have had his due process in court, he should have had his day in court. The police officer can't act as judge, jury and executioner... And so nobody was really speaking to that, and what was happening- it was people were using the victim in this case as a reason to debunk why there should be a protest...”

-Danielle (personal communication, December 17th, 2015)

She goes onto explain that the causes of the protest itself were often only covered superficially- stating what happened but not why.

As other interviewees explained however, there is more than one way to look at these decisions. Looking specifically at the example of the news content published after the death of Jamar Clark, Charles stated that an effort was made following major events to assure that the language used is appropriate and sensitive. One of the issues that I had heard mentioned (by word of mouth) was the upset caused several outlets' choice to use Jamar Clark's previous mugshot in news stories reporting on his death. As Charles explained, this isn't necessarily always meant to be used to create a certain image or frame around a person, but rather as a substitute until another image becomes available. In the case of Jamar Clark, Charles expressed that this use of a mugshot is problematic once an alternative photo is available, as it is then out of context. Having not been a witness to the shooting itself, he was unsure of the accuracy of the coverage of the event, which he says has been aggressively covered and explored.

When asked about the reports, Eli stated that he had read about the situation surrounding Jamar Clark's death. He explained that while most of the content he viewed was 'fair and accurate'- but this is not to be mistaken for being in-depth and covered from all angles. He explained:

"I'd say that there has been a lot of fair and accurate reporting, which is not to say- I mean this in important- it's not to say that it's been comprehensive. And it's not to say that everything has been examined from every angle. And it's not to say it's all done, and it's not to say that there aren't other ways to approach the thing... For what it has been- for what's out there- I

would say that the coverage has reasonably reflected some of the story. And I would say- just as {amendment} to that- that's always the case, it's always the case about everything. We only ever get a piece of it- you know- and what you try to do over time is understand things more, reflect things more..."

-Eli (personal communication, December 22nd, 2015)

He also provided insight into the use of mugshots in the context of this story.

While stating that the use of Jamar Clark's mugshot is an issue, it is also difficult- if not impossible- to separate the two events (Jamar Clark's death and the alleged assault addressed previously), and that the coverage should have been the same if Jamar was Caucasian. As with Charles's explanation about their network's reports, Eli also states that their use of the mugshot was temporary, as a family-provided image was not yet available. Once a picture (and more information) was released by the family to the Associated Press, this was used instead.

Other Points of Importance:

Social media. As online media is now one most popular ways for news content to be viewed, I was curious to see how these other aspects of media affected the content produced.

Like many of the interviewees, Charles has found the internet and social media to be tools, allowing for audience communication. This can range from general feedback to criticism, and is generally helpful. He also stated that the use of the internet as a place for publishing content is useful, as the site has access to viewer analytics, allowing them

to determine which stories- and types of stories- were most liked and viewed. This can be used to gauge reader interest to take into account for later content.

Unlike some of the other outlets, Danielle's doesn't often receive major backlash on social media sites. This can be attributed to their younger audience (about 25-55), and the fact that much of their interaction and traffic exists through social media site use. Danielle suggests that one possible explanation for the larger amount of backlash that could be experienced by other media sources could be attributed to an overall lack of in-depth, narrative-based coverage.

Reporter race. As the analysis is on media professionals' perceptions of how race is represented, it is important to note that the professional's own race/ethnicity may have a direct effect on how they make considerations regarding race-based content. Alex explains that the effect of reporting on and about these major events don't change the way she personally discusses and regards race, possibly due to her own race/ethnicity. However, they do demonstrate the power news networks possess. She stated, "these events really show the power that media has to bring this story and to bring the narrative forward, and whoever kind of controls the narrative, controls the perception of it all" (personal communication, December 7th, 2015). She also explains that in the last five or so years, the journalists producing these stories have begun to express their own personalities and opinions, which was previously not common.

As a Hmong American, Charles feels that his own racial/ethnic identity gives him insight into the effects of the representation of people of minority groups.

"I think it's definitely something that has given me some insight to race depictions in the media. I think- I hope and I think that it has made me

sensitive to those issues as well. I'm a Hmong American, of course, and that's also a large population here, and I'm trying to apply the sensibility I have as a Hmong American man in the Mid-West... to other minority groups as well."

-Charles (personal communication, December 16th, 2015b)

Earlier research discusses the tendency for minority communities to be asked to account for the actions of a member of that community that commits a severe or heavily-covered crime (Park, Holody & Zhang, 2012). When asked if he'd every noticed this phenomenon, he responded as follows:

"And so I have actually come into a few, relative few problems in my 12 years with the [Publication Name] where a Hmong suspect has been charged with a crime, the paper wants to turn it into a trend story, and I'll say 'well, why are we turning this into a trend story based on one Hmong guy who killed his wife and we have three white guys the same year who killed their wives'. This actually happened a couple of years ago, and I said, 'you know, we- it's easy for us to identify, or to pick out a certain population and turn a crime that happens across all groups as a trend, because... we think it's trendy or sexy or it's gonna be interesting. And sometimes I think media and editors are blind to the fact that these crimes occur across all groups, you know? So I've definitely had these discussions with editors in that sense, and that's a sensibility I try to apply to other groups as well- ethnic groups, racial groups, LGBTQ groups, as well."

-Charles (personal communication, December 16th, 2015b)

He has witnessed this among many of the minority groups in the Twin Cities region.

As a white individual, Brooke received some backlash for covering issues of race. While she often works with underrepresented populations and has been able to create a working relationship with these communities, Brooke that via email and social media, she receives some feedback and criticism from readers upset with her content for varying reasons (personal communication, December 16th, 2015a) explains. Some of these criticisms come from individuals referring to her as 'anti-white' for her discussion of race, while others call her a 'race-hustler', implying that she is taking advantage of minority communities for the purpose of increased viewer traffic. However, this is not to say that she views social media as a negative, as she states that social media provides an outlet for journalists to directly interact with their audience, receive both positive and negative feedback, and to find story ideas relevant to the communities of viewers.

Discussion

General Findings

Looking at the responses for how media professionals determine considerations made in content relating to race and race-based events, the processes seem fairly consistent. Each news network represented- hold for the radio based show- collects stories through a combination of journalist pitches and assigned content. These assigned stories are often a direct representation of the breaking news stories for that day. As different networks allow journalists to have more or less freedom to pursue the stories of their choosing, the content may be more or less in the writer's control.

As Brooke and Danielle indicated, the choice to directly cover events regarding race or stories from marginalized, minority communities can be direct and intentional, with the hopes of giving a fair representation with as much respect for those in question as possible. This could bring about several positive effects. Not only are the creators getting accurate and fair stories that differ from the average content, but the communities are able to be presented outside of the normal stereotypes and binaries they are placed into. This can appear at any varying level, from creating in-depth narratives about the issues faced by these communities to simply being careful of word choice, such as refraining from using phrases like 'blacks' and 'whites', or preventing insinuations that crime rates are a direct result of race or minority communities. In addition, even when coverage is fair and accurate, it is often not in-depth. Multiple participants expressed that one of the greater issues regarding the available representation of many events is a general lack of coverage that talks about the causes of race-related events and the larger narratives surrounding them, which can lead to misunderstandings about the true situations. As political correctness and social justice have become common topics of concern, it isn't unreasonable to expect that most journalists would be able to produce less biased news content than in previous years if aware of issues and making an effort to do so, as information about marginalized communities and the alternative viewpoints are readily available online and through social movements in greater quantities than before.

Depiction Variance by Crime Type

One of notes made in the interviews was the exclusion of various types of crime, particularly white-collar crime and some types of theft. There are multiple reasons that these crimes may not be covered widely in daily news content. One explanation- which

seemed the most likely before the interviews were conducted- is that these types of crime are less visually appealing and have less imagery available: if it can't be made into an interesting video clip (or thumbnail), the story may be less likely to garner attention. The other explanation isn't as often considered. In reality, white-collar crimes are much more difficult to gather information on, both because they are less obvious when they occur and because the businesses/individuals they are regarding have the ability to block press-releases. As earlier described by Dixon and Linz (2000), this puts a direct emphasis on crimes committed by people of minority populations- especially African American individuals- as they may generally be more likely to be linked to blue-collar crime than white-collar crime due to general economic trends. If all types of crime were equally covered, less emphasis may be placed directly on individuals of minority communities. Given the responses presented, this idea of white collar crime being less covered due to the difficulty of coverage seems likely to be commonly true, as outlets are businesses and will likely cover the events quickest and most cost-effective to gather information about.

Visuals Used in News Media

Directly related is the use of various visuals in both television and print-based media. The aspect most emphasis has been placed on here is the use of mugshots, and the association this creates between people of color and crime. As Creighton et al. (2014) explain, in some parts of the country the difference in visual representation rates (via mugshots) between people of color and Caucasians was exponential. By speaking with media professionals currently working in the Twin Cities, it has become apparent that efforts have been made to standardize mugshot use, though the way networks go about this varies greatly. While some networks have made use of mugshots in only necessary

situations, such as manhunts, others have regularized the use of these photos to any crime in which they are available and a more recent image is not.

One aspect not addressed by the research, however, is the limited number of images available- in which a mugshot may be the only photo released for public use. This was apparently the case with some of the public representation of Jamar Clark. While this explains the use of these images, it doesn't necessarily address whether using these images in sensitive cases (ie. the Jamar Clark case) can incite disputes- this would have to be addressed through further research. In addition to mugshot use, further images, such as videos of individuals being restrained or otherwise handled by authorities could also create a divide in representation (as explained by Dixon & Linz, 2000). While this is not to say that mugshots are not often being used in possibly inappropriate contexts, the interviews lead me to believe that the separation in how these images are used are becoming less racially based.

Other Points of Importance

Two other areas addressed came about through the interview content, while not addressed in the previous research articles: social media importance and interviewee race. Social media not only offers great opportunities for creators to interact with and receive feedback from their audiences, but it also opens new opportunities to share their content with larger populations of people and track analytics, in order to determine what content types are the most likely to be widely shared and viewed. This also opens the door for journalists up to possible backlash, as accessibility is greatly increased, but this seems to be much less significant than the possible benefits; this open channel of communication can be used to hold creators accountable for their content creations.

The second aspect, the race of the reporter, is also of great interest, though not particularly surprising. The creators of color that participated reported little change in their perception of race during major events, due to their own identity within minority communities. As they have an inherent understanding of the prejudices and perceptions placed upon their own communities, these journalists of color are able to provide insight into the issues they present. It was apparent in the phrasing and language used in the interviews that the reporters of color were innately aware of how cases regarding race, specifically about the racial/ethnic group to which they belong, with relatively more depth. With the professionals who are white, more variance was noticed- some seemed more keenly aware of the in-depth issues (likely stemming more from research and work experience than personal experience) than others.

Limitations

Being that only five participants could be found within the time frame of this project, the findings are specific to the perspectives of only a handful of professionals, who by demographics are not necessarily representative of the demographics of the majority of news reporters. Therefore, these results/statements are in no way applicable to all professionals employed by these or any news networks. In order to best generalize these results, many more journalists would have to be interviewed, over a variety of networks and positions.

Social media influence as a specific factor was identified and addressed during the interviews and as a result was not researched with the same depth as other aspects of media interaction. Future interview-based studies could be done to further investigate the impact of social media on representation change over time.

My research found slightly less significant results than similar studies, which could be attributed to several factors. The first is human error- as I am not a professional in the field there may be a number of associations that I missed when creating questions and analyzing interviews. Other factors could include the rapid change in media influence, importance placed on political correctness, awareness, and accessibility to diverse viewpoints. It should also be noted that some of the research articles used for literature review may be outdated, as some of the most relevant studies were conducted previous to 2005. Given the constantly-changing nature of media, research may become irrelevant in a short span of time. Also, while many previous studies address the issues covered in this paper, few were pertaining directly the information I needed to gather, and as a result a narrow range of studies were used for background information.

Closing Thoughts

Many perspectives and positions can be taken when discussing issues regarding racial depictions and media- this project represents some of those taken by the creators and publishers of media content, who are directly involved in making decisions about what light these stories are portrayed in. While this project is in no way representative of all media professions- even within the scope of the Twin Cities region- it provides some insight into the thought processes that can be used to determine how content is produced. Given these findings, a larger study- using direct coding of content and analysis of language use- would be helpful in making more solidified conclusions about the truth of media representations of minorities through crime. What cannot be argued is that this remains to be an issue. While strides seem to have been made (if the comparison between previous data and interview stances is accurate), it is clear that problematic

depictions are still rapidly occurring. The case study from Omaha, Nebraska, is direct evidence of this. What can be said is this: positive changes seem to have been made and we can only hope that this trend continues, and the gaps and exclusions will continue to close.

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Note: Resources used for biography information were excluded to conceal the identities of those participating