

# White Protests, Black Riots: Racialized Representation in American Media

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As many political figures have recently noted, there is a significant racial disparity in American news media's coverage of riots: black rioters are portrayed as dangerous criminals, but white rioters are simply a group of rowdy demonstrators. This article shows the historical roots of this phenomenon by analyzing newspaper coverage of riots in Detroit (1967) and Kent State University (1970) in the first week after each riot began. This research helps establish a pattern of news media's racialized representation in the context of urban riots. Upon analysis, it is clear that news media villainize black rioters and victimize white rioters, and that these characterizations impact public response. News media thus create different understandings of ultimately similar behavior depending on the rioters' race—and have for at least the past 50 years.

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In the wake of the 2015 Ferguson and Baltimore riots, critical media outlets began analyzing the way mainstream news media present race in such events. Not long after those riots, a nonprofit documentary studio called Brave New Films created a video which featured clips of media coverage from recent riots, some with white rioters and some with black rioters. Brave New Films' founder Robert Greenwald summarizes the video:

Just look at the language around Keene State: “students,” “youthful debauchery,” “kids.” Then compare to the language of Ferguson and Baltimore: “thugs,” “criminals,” “offenders.” Or take the word, “gang.” Black people wearing the blue of their sorority, Zeta Phi Beta, were reported to be in a gang. Groups of white men can wear matching jackets and murder nine people and injure 18 more in broad daylight, and the media will still describe them as a “social club” [a reference to the 2015 biker shootout in Waco, TX].

There is thus a rhetoric around riots that appears disparate depending on rioters' race. Essentially, news media did not portray white rioters to be as threatening as black rioters even though their actions were the same—or in this case, worse.

My question regarding this media disparity was whether it has any historical precedent. There is substantial research on depictions of race in media coverage, but none so specific with regard to reports of rioting. This paper compares two riots from the turbulent end of the 1960s: the Detroit riot of 1967 and the Kent State shooting of 1970. I gathered all newspaper coverage from the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times* in the first seven days after each riot began—63 articles related to the Detroit riot and 82 to the Kent State shooting—and compared coverage through close analysis. This paper will argue that the basic principle is nothing new: news media present black rioters as dangerous, irrational criminals, while white rioters receive a much

more sympathetic characterization—a phenomenon that has seemingly been prevalent in American media for at least the past fifty years. Through its different narratives of rioting, this coverage reinforces broader research on race in media that influences readers' perceptions about race and shapes discussion on how to approach solutions to the problems that rioting presented the cities of Detroit and Kent.

The rhetorical patterns that media outlets like Brave New Films identify, along with those I found within past riot coverage, align with scholarly research in media studies that contextualizes the ways news media can impact racial judgment through their reporting. Statistically, crimes perpetrated by black males are more likely to be reported than crimes perpetrated by white males; moreover, crimes involving black victims are less likely to be reported than crimes with white victims (Dixon and Maddox 1555). Media coverage thus plays a very important role in developing, or reinforcing, racial stereotypes by highlighting black crime and diluting white crime. Going further, language within those articles is equally important as the frequency with which those crimes are reported. News media engage in *priming* when they reactivate existing stereotypes about racial groups in their coverage with certain associated key words or phrases (Arendt 831). When news coverage repeatedly primes readers with negative stereotypes when covering a certain group, people are more likely to internalize this bias as truth, especially for already-biased people who use such stories as confirmation (Dixon and Maddox 1556). The more people see stereotypically negative portrayals of black people in the news, the less likely they are to support pro-black

policies (Ramasubramanian 509). Given the ways news media can influence race relations, it is important to recognize patterns that can lead to biased judgment.

### **The Detroit Riot**

Right before 4 a.m. on July 23, 1967, police raided an after-hours “blind pig” pub in Detroit’s 12th Street District, a primarily black neighborhood that was known to the rest of city for its poverty and crime rates. A party celebrating two black soldiers’ return from Vietnam packed the pub with 73 patrons, all of whom police arrested (Rucker 12). When rumors spread among bystanders that police had beaten some of the arrestees—not an uncommon occurrence in the 12th Street District—an outraged crowd began throwing rocks into store windows, looting, and eventually setting buildings afire, sparking five full days of rioting. The Detroit riot quickly escalated into one of the most severe in U.S. history. Detroit’s mayor, Jerome Cavanagh, quickly called reinforcements from police, state troopers, and the Michigan National Guard. Two days later, President Johnson sent in Army forces to help quell the violence. After five days, 43 people were dead, more than 7,200 were arrested, and the city estimated \$22 million in property damage alone (*Report* 106).

A federal investigation conducted after a year of nationwide rioting, popularly known as the Kerner Report, later determined that underlying conditions rioters faced—poor socioeconomic conditions, strained race relations, and ineffective policing—was the true cause of the Detroit riot; mending those conditions was the solution to preventing future urban strife. However, few would grasp this concept in

the initial aftermath of the Detroit riot. Instead, these rioters would be portrayed as the city's enemy, and their grievances would be all but ignored. News coverage that obscures important facts in favor of racialized and emotional portrayals of this riot would make the Kerner Report's conclusions seem quite out of place.

### **Leading Coverage**

The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* printed identical Associated Press reports to break the news of the Detroit riot, which set a precedent for the rest of the week's coverage. *The New York Times* headline reads "Detroit is Swept by Rioting and Fires" above a large image of National Guardsmen in full uniform, donning helmets and semiautomatic rifles. The *Los Angeles Times* headline "TANKS IN DETROIT: Rioting Spreads Uncontrolled" is positioned above a photograph depicting a crowd in the middle of an urban street, debris lining the sidewalk. The accompanying articles match the severity of these papers' headlines and images to establish a city under siege. The first column reads: "Thousands of rampaging Negroes firebombed and looted huge sections of Detroit.... Violence spread uncontrolled over most sections of the city. Destructive fury swept along [miles-long areas]. A warm, sultry wind fanned scores of fires, and at least one area the fire raged in a solid sheet for more than 10 blocks" ("Tanks"). The very first reports of the Detroit riot thus begin at the height of drama, describing a chaotic, frightening scene. From the description above, it would appear that a battle was unfolding in one of the United States' largest cities—especially with words like "firebombed" and "destructive fury." Further, with a description of "uncontrolled violence"

from "thousands of rampaging Negroes," along with pictures of white National Guardsmen in military uniforms to combat them, these newspapers depict a confrontation between races.

Warlike imagery continues to portray an attack on white Detroiters. *New York Times* writer Gene Roberts notes that "the city's white residents ... saw a city that looked—in many areas—as if it were a set for a World War II movie" ("Troops Battle"). Not only does this statement equate the riot to one of history's deadliest wars, but it assumes that only white residents are affected by black rioters, further promoting the idea of a black/white confrontation. In reality, the riot was most destructive in black neighborhoods, and rioters and looters were not discriminating regarding whose buildings they destroyed. Nonetheless, the idea of race hostility continues.

### **Representative Anecdotes**

If news media described the Detroit riot as a war zone, then there must have been some antagonist waging this war. Unsurprisingly, the enemy was black. As hyperbolic language characterized the nature and scale of the riot, so did it characterize the rioter. Typically, newspaper reporters made sweeping generalizations about rioters. Of all 63 newspaper articles, only twice did reporters actually interview a rioter or looter. These two dramatic interviews, though they only described two men, would essentialize all rioters with the same unfavorable characteristics, priming readers with many negative stereotypes about black people that would affect their judgment of them.

*Los Angeles Times* writer Ray Rogers interviewed a young black man who identified himself as a sniper during the riot. He

observes that the sniper spoke about white policemen “angrily as he rubbed his long powerful fingers together,” so that an audience might literally imagine a storybook villain pondering his evil plan. Rogers claims that “the war” would not end until rioters “kill all of us.” The sniper discussed throwing Molotov cocktails and bragged about the way he “got” two officers with his sniping. Then he remarked with a laugh: “And them stupid cops fired all over the place except the place where I was.... It was beautiful, baby, so beautiful that I almost cried with joy.” Rogers portrays this man’s simultaneous rage and joy in an unsettling way that defines the sniper as a clear enemy.

The *New York Times*’ Earl Caldwell provides a similar characterization of a Detroit rioter. Caldwell notes the “hostility in the young black faces” that he observed, adding that “the bitterness came out of their eyes.” One “Negro youth” tells him, “We’ll burn this whole stinking town down.... The brother ain’t playing no more.” Caldwell observes that “the muscles in his thick arms jumped as he talked.” Not only is this man verbally threatening a continued attack on Detroit, but he appears physically—uncontrollably—dangerous as well. Most apparent in Caldwell’s description of the rioters he spoke with, though, is their blackness. Caldwell primes his readers with the word “black” or “Negro” almost every time he refers to these men, reiterating that *black* men are the ones who are increasingly bitter and dangerous—that *black* men are the enemy waging war against the city.

Rogers and Caldwell establish through their interviews a clear picture of an enemy that reflects the public scare upheld—and perhaps created—by news media. They depict this enemy as black, physically

dangerous, uncontrollably angry, and with evil, destructive intentions that he is proud and almost excited to carry out. There are no additional interviews or any other such personalized portraits of a rioter. Rogers’ and Caldwell’s are the only rioters who are allowed to describe their motives, and their motives are villainous. Hence, the two young men described and interviewed serve to epitomize all rioters—who are consistently described with these same negative qualities—so the interviews function as *representative anecdotes*.

A representative anecdote, as theorized by Kenneth Burke, is a form of dramatism that serves to “form [a person’s] vocabulary for the discussion of human motives” (59). In this case, it will provide a model for newspaper readers to understand the actions and motives of the average Detroit rioter. The representative anecdote defines the combination of negative stereotypes about black rioters with which news media will consistently prime their readers. The major components of the anecdote are blackness, irrationality, frivolity, rage, and violence. Importantly, the characterization of rioters through this representative anecdote will become the foundation for people’s response to the Detroit riot.

Blackness is the most important, defining characteristic of this representative anecdote. Early newspaper reports made it apparent that black rioters were targeting white Detroiters, but many reports of integrated rioting later emerged. However, while media narratives describe black looters in great detail, descriptions of white looters usually stop after a simple mention. Readers are thus left with only a vague notion that white rioters exist, but without a real image of what they might look like.

This phenomenon was reiterated decades after the riot when Dixon and Maddox's research showed that stories about white perpetrators were underreported in comparison to black perpetrators (1555). For example, Gene Roberts' description of looting portrays a chaotic scene of exclusively black looters:

Looters were grabbing everything in sight regardless of its value. One Negro boy, who appeared to be under 12, raced away from a florist shop with his arms full of gladiolas.... A stout Negro woman strained under the weight of a mattress.... Dozens of middle-aged Negroes could be seen staggering along the streets with bottles in their hands. It was clear, too, that the looting cut across class, as well as racial, lines. One well-dressed Negro filled up the trunk of a new Pontiac convertible with shoes, shirts and suits. ("U.S. Troops")

Roberts claims that looting cuts "racial lines," but doesn't offer any description of a white person rioting; instead, he only illustrates black looters. His detailed description shows much variation between age, gender, and class, but not race. Further, this reporter's focus on only black looters, highlighting the arbitrary and almost useless nature of what they take, diminishes the riot as something fickle and unreasonable.

This frivolous behavior of some rioters, which the media described to bolster rioters' irrationality, is another component of the representative anecdote. The *Los Angeles Times*' D.J.R. Bruckner offers a romantic characterization: "The fires were the fairy lanterns in the garden of their delight; for them, the burning was a wild holiday"

("Welfare"). Similarly, Gene Roberts wrote that "some Negroes obviously considered the riot a summertime frolic. At 3 AM, two Negro couples perched on a fence ... alternately kissing and watching firemen battle a major blaze" ("U.S. Troops"). By these accounts, rioters act with blatant disregard to societal norms, reveling in the violence they created.

In a way that seems to contrast with this frivolity, but reinforces rioter irrationality, media figures further intensify rioters' irrationality by characterizing them as uncontrollably angry. Detroit's Police Commissioner, Ray Girardin, said that "Negroes ... were drawn into the looting almost by an impulse they couldn't control" (Roberts, "U.S. Troops"). Michigan's Governor George Romney similarly maintained that "a sort of looting fever seized many Negroes that I'll bet never stole anything in their lives before" (Roberts, "Detroit's Police").

These officials' attempts at explaining riot behavior imply that rioters could not resist violence. Such statements take agency away from the rioters by simply claiming that some uncontrollable "impulse" had overtaken them, thus disregarding the possibility that rioters were rational actors in this situation. Further, Romney and Girardin do not call Detroit rioters "rioters"—they call them "Negroes." While it was true that Detroit's rioters were mostly black, this word choice implicates an entire race as irrational and unable to control violent urges. With this characterization, anger and bitterness become an internal characteristic of the rioters, so *who they are*—not their situation—becomes the cause of the riots. Thus with the continual media priming—shown to influence perception of an

entire race—of the qualities outlined by the representative anecdote, black people are epitomized as a dangerous *group*.

To exacerbate this concept, several editorial pieces quoted Frantz Fanon, whom reporters called a black psychologist, to characterize Detroit rioters. Fanon, while studying black subjugation in European colonies, wrote that “violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self-respect” (Shannon). Black men could achieve their “psychic wholeness only by committing acts of violence against the white masters whom they wish to supplant” (Shannon). This “psychological” explanation increases the threat of the black rioter, adding a deeper dimension to the rioter’s physical violence in the representative anecdote—as though such violence is a genetic part of these black rioters.

The idea of group-based categorization that Mastro and Kopacz discuss helps contextualize the implication of the characterization found through our representative anecdote. When someone is portrayed as a group member—here the word “Negro” serves as a basic, consistent racial designation—audiences are more likely to view the situation as one between an ingroup and an outgroup (309). The more different the outgroup’s behavior is to the ingroup’s perception of itself, the more negative the judgment about the entire group will be (309). The Detroit riot, to a readership that values the rule of law, is full of black rioters who blatantly reject it—moreover, they are delighted to make such rejection a public display. Thus judgments about these black rioters become judgments about black people as a whole, and media coverage here shows that they act irrationally and unreasonably in

the face of violence.

### ***Racialize Rioters, Deracialize “Solutions”***

The response to the riot, including suggestions by political and media figures on how to end it, closely aligns with the rioter narrative created by news media. The qualities of the representative anecdote all serve to irrationalize rioters and delegitimize any real motivation for their action, leaving the focus solely on the threat they pose to other Detroiters. It is this threat that politicians in the media highlight when discussing how best to handle the situation. However, despite the fact that blackness was a definitive factor in creating the representative anecdote describing rioters as a violent enemy waging war on white Detroit, many political figures choose to distance themselves from overt racial language, instead reframing riot behavior to simple terms of criminality. The strongest example comes from the President himself:

The fact of the matter, however, is that law and order have broken down in Detroit, Michigan. Pillage, looting, murder and arson have nothing to do with civil rights. They are criminal conduct.... We will not tolerate lawlessness. We will not endure violence. It matters not by whom it is done, or under what slogan or banner. It will not be tolerated. This nation will do whatever necessary to do to suppress and to punish those who engage in it. (“Johnson TV Talk”)

This statement was part of President Johnson’s first address to the nation regarding the Detroit riot. As Johnson removes race from picture completely, he brands rioters as simply criminals and focuses

solely on their suppression.

Governor Ronald Reagan offers harsher words than Johnson, condemning the “riots of the lawbreakers and the mad dogs against the people” after denying any relation to civil rights (Davies). Here, Reagan captures the essence of the representative anecdote: angry aggressors acting with senseless violence are the “mad dogs against the people.” But removing race from the riot is not about being “neutral” in a situation with high racial tension. The reframing of rioters into simply and only criminals leaves little room for debate when it comes to advocating a solution to this problem. Repressing poor and suffering ghetto residents seems inhumane—but repressing lawless and violent “dogs” seems completely logical. Arguments like this would excuse the police and National Guard’s excessive use of violence against black rioters as a legal necessity.

D.J.R. Bruckner of the *Los Angeles Times* reinforces Reagan’s statement, also adopting the warlike language so common in descriptions of the Detroit riot: “What happened in Detroit last week was not a race riot. After the first two days it was not a riot at all.... It was full-scale urban warfare conducted by the alienated and dispossessed against the society in which they live” (“Welfare”). The problem Bruckner describes, the “alienated and dispossessed against the society in which they live,” is accurate: an overwhelming lack of support for Detroit’s crime-ridden, mostly-black ghetto areas is the primary cause of the riot. However, race cannot be ignored here *because* of the news media’s riot coverage. Although a tough stance on crime would be a logical response to criminal behavior, given the amount of stereotype priming that reinforced the negative characteristics of the representative anecdote in reports of this riot,

attempts to remove race from the equation seem useless. In reality, it is simply not just criminal behavior. Nonetheless, the appeal to condemn “lawlessness” at all costs would hardly be challenged.

If media priming influences perceptions about race, then those perceptions influence support for policy decisions that affect these groups. The more people see stereotypically negative portrayals of black people in the media, the less likely they are to support pro-black policies (Ramasubramanian 509). So although the Kerner Report argued definitively that addressing problems within black communities would be more effective than suppressing those communities, people instead argued, overwhelmingly, that swift and violent suppression of rioters should be the main course of action. Without question, news media portrayals of black rioters contributed to this reaction.

Although some political and media figures did advocate for structural change in Detroit to avoid future riot conditions, suppression of criminal rioters took precedence—a solution that logically follows the news media narrative of angry, dangerous black criminals. Even a reporter who criticized the simplification of rioters as mere criminals still claimed that they must be treated as such, saying they must be “repressed by force, firmly and unequivocally.... The absolute, prime requirement is the restoration of order ... and the application of as much force as is necessary to restore it. Without order there can be no progress” (“The Agony”). Virginia Senator Robert Byrd asserted that “these insurrections should be put down with brute force. Adult looters should be shot on the spot.... There’s only one way to deal with rioters bent on destruction of property of life—swiftly and mercilessly” (“CRISIS”).

### ***Agentless Deaths***

For many rioters, Byrd's desires became their reality. By the end of the Detroit riot, 43 people were dead. Civilians were responsible for only six deaths, but the police, Army, and National Guard were responsible for 29 (Bergesen 263, 269). (The remainder are recorded as accidental.) It appears that black rioters might not be as violent as this newspaper coverage had made them seem.

Media reporting on death remains basic and sporadic. When updating the casualty count, the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* simply listed a number of those killed in the day of reporting and again in total. The height of information about the deceased includes a person's name, age, race, and cause of death. Against the detail with which news media described rioters' violent lives, it breezed past their deaths. In this case, it is the lack of information that is very telling—especially when we compare white victimhood in the Kent State riot. The absence of detail about rioter death in Detroit supports what Dixon and Maddox discuss as an effect of media priming: stories about black criminals are much more likely to be reported than stories about black victims (1555). But, thinking back to the representative anecdote that news media continued to prime their readers with, why would people want to sympathize with a dangerous enemy?

Despite the fact that police and Guardsmen killed substantially more people than rioters did, media coverage leaves readers without a grasp on that disparity. In too many cases, reporters use language that clouds the reality of a rioter's death. One report states: "the police and National Guardsmen began firing at looters and

within three hours five Negroes died of gunshot wounds" (Roberts, "U.S. Troops"). Even though this reporter actively states that the police and Guardsmen fired at looters, it was still "gunshot wounds" that were responsible for the death of these "Negroes" (not "looters") three hours later. This non-human agency allows National Guardsmen to avoid direct implication in these deaths—perhaps these reporters did not want to blur the line between the enemy and the ally.

The most tragic victim of the Detroit riot was only four years old. On the second day of the riot, when the National Guardsmen entered the city, Tonia Blanding was playing with toys on her living room floor. Blanding's uncle lit a cigarette near the apartment's window; Guardsmen on the street below mistook the flash of light for a sniper shot and immediately sent a volley of gunfire into that window, shooting Tonia through the chest (*Report* 102). She died almost instantly.

News coverage did not allow readers to know who killed Tonia Blanding. When the newspapers reported this story, they removed any trace of agency from the Guardsmen who killed her. Reports included phrases like "the deadly gun battle ... took the [life] of a 4-year-old Negro girl" (Bruckner, "Welfare"); "killed by a bullet that crashed through the window of her home" ("Casualty List"); "An adult struck a match to light a cigarette and a bullet smashed through the living room window, fatally wound[ing] Tonia Blanding, who was 4 years old" (Roberts, "Death Toll"). This last excerpt's detail about the cigarette implies that this reporter knew exactly how and why the National Guard killed this child, but does not make that connection transparent whatsoever. In all of the articles that discuss Blanding's

death, no person is held responsible. Again, non-human agents become responsible for human deaths; black Detroiters are never truly portrayed as victims.

As the riot raged in Detroit, reports of police brutality and uninvestigated killings emerged in newspaper reports. Police and Guardsmen, in front of reporters, kicked and beat handcuffed rioters and looters (Flint, “National Guard”). Two National Guardsmen went on record to say, “If we see anyone move, we shoot and ask questions later” (Roberts, “Troops Battle”). Often, “later” meant “never” as police quickly left the scene after blindly shooting at buildings without further investigation (Roberts, “Death Toll”). The *Los Angeles Times*’ Bruckner observed that, especially compared to the less frequent and more calculated sniper shooting of rioters, “the guardsmen were entirely indiscriminate; they shot up everything in sight” (“Welfare”).

The National Guard responded to reports of police brutality only once in the week following the riot. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that “the head of the National Guard contends the present riot training program—which amounts to less than a day a year—is adequate for coping with such outbreaks as those in Detroit and Newark” (Wilson). Many seemed to agree; the call to stop criminal rioters with as much force as possible fostered wide support for the National Guard. In the words of one *New York Times* writer: “While stores burn and rocks are thrown at firemen, the cries of police brutality sound feeble as excuses for inexcusable criminal conduct” (“Rule of Law”). Rioters’ punishment, then, fits the portrayal of the crime: through a representative anecdote continually primed by news media that establish an irrational,

angry black rioter as the city’s clear enemy, which allows officials to reduce this riot into simple terms of law and order, rioter deaths were underreported and the agents of their deaths were unquestioned. The opposite is true for a white riot.

### **Kent State**

By comparing the Kent State shooting to the Detroit riot, I found major differences in the way news media characterized riot behavior. Comparing Detroit’s massive urban riot to an antiwar protest in an Ohio college town may seem like quite a stretch—after all, it isn’t called the Kent State riot, but the Kent State shooting, and sometimes even the Kent State massacre. Media coverage from the 1970 event has shaped the way we still understand it today; the story revolves around the Ohio National Guard killing four college students. But why was the National Guard on campus? The students had started a riot.

While the National Guard’s shooting marked the beginning of media coverage, it was in reality the end of a four-day saga of campus rioting—which attracted far less media attention than its outcome did. On the night of May 1, 1970, in reaction to President Nixon’s announcement that the United States would extend the Vietnam War into Cambodia, Kent State students rallied in the streets of downtown Kent chanting anti-war slogans (“Chronology, Day 1”). As the crowd reached 400, the rally became a riot (Kifner, “Troops”). When students began throwing beer bottles at patrol cars, police kept their distance, and rioters then lit a bonfire in the street. They took to the buildings, smashing in windows and causing thousands of dollars in damage (Kifner, “Troops”). Kent’s mayor declared a

state of emergency. He and the police confronted rioters, read the Riot Act, and herded students back to campus using tear gas, arresting those who didn't comply (Kifner, "Troops").

The next day, Kent's mayor imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew on the city of Kent; students were not allowed to leave campus (Kifner, "Troops"). The curfew didn't stop the riot from continuing, though. That night, an estimated 500 students gathered around the campus ROTC building, smashed in its windows and set it on fire ("Chronology, Day 2"). Firemen arrived shortly, but students threw stones at them and cut their hoses to keep the building aflame ("Chronology, Day 2"). When the firemen finally controlled the burn, students quickly set the building on fire a second time ("Chronology, Day 2"). Police had to guard the firemen and again use tear gas against students to finally stop the flames.

On Sunday, May 3, the National Guard arrived on campus. This was the first day national news began to cover the events at Kent State. Although campus protests remained comparatively peaceful on this day, the Guard used tear gas, searchlight helicopters, clubs, and bayonets to keep the crowd under control ("Chronology, Day 3"). Monday, May 4, was the day of the shooting. The protesting crowd on campus reached its peak at about 1,500, and again had to be forcefully dispersed by the National Guard. Rioters remained aggressive towards the Guard, throwing rocks and tossing back cans of tear gas. Some of the Guard had herded a smaller group onto Blanket Hill, and at this point, many onlookers and even a National Guard general believed that the confrontation was ending ("Chronology, Day 3"). Then,

suddenly, the Guard opened fire on a group of students from about 100 yards away. They sent a short volley of 67 shots in 13 seconds, injuring nine students and killing four ("Chronology, Day 3").

Newspaper coverage of this riot was minute until the shooting three days later, but the entire nation learned about the college students that the National Guard killed. Though news coverage somewhat acknowledged the riot that necessitated reinforcement from the National Guard, the focus remained on the shooting. The *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* paid little attention to violent student action in Kent, but such violence was the sole focus when these publications covered the Detroit riot. Hence, a general audience would not learn the extent of student violence that preceded the shooting because news media did not fully acknowledge it.

### ***Don't Call it a Riot***

Moreover, these newspapers rarely used the word "riot" when referring to Kent State. Based on the evidence, there can be no doubt that Kent students rioted. They attacked police and firemen, damaged property, set fires in the streets and to buildings. The mayor declared a state of emergency and set a curfew. Police read the Riot Act to the rioters. They used tear gas, bayonets, and knight sticks to control the crowd—and so did the National Guard, when the Governor of Ohio declared that such forces were necessary. *All* of this behavior was reported in the Detroit riot. Yet here, in all 82 articles covering this event, the word "riot" only appears eight times.

The most basic level of analysis—how the issue is defined—falls in line with the tendency for news media to report white victims

more than they report white perpetrators (Dixon and Maddox 1555). Essentially, the defining terms differentiate these two events so drastically that equal actions are to this day not understood as such. If it isn't a riot, then what is it? Often, reporters correctly represented riotous behavior, and then called it anything but. One article says that students were "demonstrating with inexcusable violence," which is essentially the definition of a riot ("Death on the Campus"). One *Los Angeles Times* reporter defines arson and cutting fire hoses as a "demonstration," and later describes a "rampage" where students were "breaking windows, setting fires and damaging cars"—but it's still not a riot ("Ohio Protestors"). The *New York Times*' John Kifner writes that the National Guard was sent in to respond to the "third night of campus unrest" where "the youths set a bonfire in the street and smashed windows" ("Troops"). In another article, Kifner says that "unrest exploded last Friday night, when students began smashing windows. The next night they burned down the ROTC building" ("13 Guard Rifles"). Again, here is riot behavior described, but defined as something that seems less severe.

The words "demonstration" or "unrest" can sometimes be appropriate blanket terms for events in Kent State. After all, nonviolent protests did occur in between the days of rioting at Kent State, and the scale of the rioting was comparatively small. However, media didn't use these words as blanket terms, but rather as the definition of behavior that was considered a riot by the same publications when black Detroiters behaved the same way. The very basic point of my comparison between these two riots might thus seem difficult to grasp because they weren't understood as the same thing—and

that's the point. A word like "unrest" can describe a child after a long car ride. A word like "demonstration" can refer to a math lesson. But the word "riot" has only one connotation, and it's used sparingly when white college students are doing it, but never questioned when black ghetto residents are doing it.

### **Avoid Demonizing a Group**

After all, if there isn't a riot, then there can't be rioters. Reporters do not, at any point in this coverage, describe the student rioters—one of the most striking differences in news media portrayal of the two riots. In fact, coverage consistently separates the rioters from the riot. With Detroit, a representative anecdote characterized all rioters with the same fundamental aspects that news media primed in each article. With Kent, however, there is no "average rioter"—thus no one can consider these students as such. The Kent State student body was largely considered "for the most part ... apathetic" (Kneeland). A *New York Times* reporter wrote that Kent State's "mostly middle class" students had enjoyed "60 years of quiet" until this seemingly out-of-place "demonstration" (Malcolm). Instead of characterizing the rioting group, reporters would only personify the Kent State victims, further distancing other rioters from their violent behavior.

Further, some lawmakers and reporters maintained that students weren't responsible for the ideology behind their protests, dissociating Kent students yet again. Governor Rhodes announced, "it is my prayer tonight that those who have counseled our young people into the violent action that sparked today's incident will give second thought to what they are doing—to

the youth of America and to the nation” (“Investigation Request”). Kent residents similarly assert that “the teachers fill the students full of the wrong ideas ... and they come home rejecting the adults and their values” (Flint, “Kent’s Townspeople”). Though this kind of violence was deemed a psychological imperative for black rioters, the same publications maintain that Kent State students could not possibly be responsible for their riotous behavior. This coverage granted victimhood to white rioters exactly where it villainized black rioters.

With all the terms that helped prime the negative stereotypes encapsulated in the Detroit riot’s representative anecdote about rioting blacks, readers are directed to believe in a specific group-based characterization of black rioters that is different from their own ingroup. The only information we receive about the Kent State student body is vague excuses for their behavior, projected to other responsible figures, as if it is a surprise that these students could be associated with violence at all. While these newspapers describe black violence in Detroit as almost genetically coded, they describe white violence in Kent as a misguided anomaly. This concept would only grow stronger as details of the shooting and victims emerged.

### ***Victims of a Horror***

While reporters generally ignored the rioting student body, they spent plenty of time covering the shooting. As in Detroit, news media used overemotional language to describe the most dramatic part of the story. However, it had a much different effect in Kent. John Kifner of the *New York Times* was an eyewitness to the shooting, and he describes what he saw: “The crackle of the

rifle volley cut the suddenly still air. It appeared to go on, as a solid volley, for perhaps a full minute or longer. Some of the students dived to the ground, crawling on the grass in terror. Others stood shocked or half crouched, apparently believing the troops were firing into the air” (“4 Kent State Students”). Kifner’s detailed, empathetic language allows the reader to stand where he stood. He describes the sound of the gunfire, how long it seemed to last, and how students “in terror” attempted to save themselves. This description doesn’t evoke fear of violent rioters, but rather empathy for the innocent targets of the National Guard. Kifner continues:

When the firing stopped, a slim girl, wearing a cowboy shirt and faded jeans, was lying face down on the road at the edge of the parking lot, blood pouring onto the macadam, about 10 feet from this reporter. The youths stood stunned, many of them clustered in small groups staring at the bodies. A young man cradled one of the bleeding forms in his arms. Several girls began to cry. But many of the students who rushed to the scene seemed almost too shocked to react. (“4 Kent State Students”)

Kifner witnessed a tragedy, and presents it as such. He emphasizes these students’ young age, using words like “slim girl,” “young man,” and “youths” that starkly contrast with imagery from the two Detroit rioter interviews who are physically intimidating. Kifner describes a dead body and the blood that poured out of it, and the tears shed by witnesses. Most of all, his report explains how shocking the event was. It establishes that the students weren’t

expecting the volley, and that even after it happened, students couldn't process the event. Overall, it was a traumatic experience.

Kifner's use of emotional language full of grotesque detail shows that the Guard's shooting was senseless, and that the students are the unquestionable victims. He allows his readers to experience the situation from the perspective of a fellow crowd member, experiencing the same raw emotions as other witnesses—but only in the moment of the shooting. Thus his emotional language does not establish an enemy as news media did in Detroit, but rather creates a victim that readers can empathize with.

Already, this coverage of accidental death at the hands of authorities is quite different from coverage of similar deaths in Detroit. There, the death count often seemed like another statistic, part of a list with the number of arrests and cost of damage that day. Rarely can one empathize with a National Guard shooting victim in Detroit—newspaper reporters cover each of the 43 deaths as impersonally as possible by removing any agency from a police-inflicted death or by withholding details of a person's death. But after reading such a detailed, horrific description of student deaths, it would be hard not to view Kent students as victims.

Many elements of the Kent State coverage created victims out of the students in the same way it created villains out of Detroit rioters. Arendt discusses the use of racialized terms in the context of *association*; the more blackness is associated with criminal language, like "riot," "looting," or "shooting," the more the readers view the two as connected (833). Viewed through this lens, the consistent use of the word "Negro," while accurately calling a riot a riot, reinforces the stereotypical connection between blackness

and criminality. Evidently, the same is not true for this mostly-white riot. Race is rarely explicitly stated in Kent, but language with innocent connotations like "students" or "youths" bolster victimhood along with negations of the victims' association with riotous behavior or beliefs. The news media primed association between innocence and students in every article of outrage at their fate. Reporters illustrated the associations of the Detroit rioters with characterizations of two violent ones. They used the same strategy for the Kent State victims, but with the opposite effect.

The whole nation learned their names: Jeffery Miller, Sandy Lee Scheuer, William Schroeder, Allison Krause. Typically the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* refer to these victims as either "students" or "boys and girls," again priming their youth and innocence. (Remember: Detroit rioters were most often referred to as "Negroes.") One article describes each person's hometowns, hobbies, academic achievements or grades, and even their parents' names and occupations ("Friends of Kent").

What seemed most important with this reporting was setting the record straight: these kids were extremely peaceful, and shouldn't have belonged in the riot in the first place. A friend of Sandy Lee Scheuer told a reporter that she was "incapable of inciting a riot, incapable of throwing a rock, incapable of calling a policeman a 'pig'" ("Friends of Kent"). Like Scheuer, Allison Krause was innocent to her core. Journalists first mention Krause's beauty, as if that was one of the greatest losses. Her death was nothing if not tragic; the *New York Times* reported that Krause died while walking to class with her boyfriend, who was reportedly "the biggest thing" in her life

(“Friends of Kent”). The height of innocence lies in this description of Krause: “By all accounts, Miss Krause had no overriding interest in politics or revolution. She frequently carried around a pet kitten around the Kent State campus. And last Sunday she placed a flower in a guardsman’s rifle barrel and said, ‘Flowers are better than bullets’” (“Friends of Kent”).

There was a bit more coverage on the male victims, who also didn’t seem like the rioting type to their peers. Schroeder, an “all-American type of boy” who never got into trouble, “had hoped for peace but was not the type who would take part in a demonstration” (“Friends of Kent”). Schroeder attended Kent State on an ROTC scholarship, and reportedly told his parents over the phone that “he was staying indoors because he wanted no part of campus demonstrations” (“Slain Girl”). One friend said, “I can’t imagine him participating in any disorderly event” (“Slain Girl”). Jeffery Miller was also described as a “typical all-American boy,” the “friendliest, warmest kid” who was “very polite to adults” (“Friends of Kent”). Even though it was later confirmed that he was a rioter, the *New York Times* reported: “If any of the victims looked like a radical, it was long-haired, 20-year-old Jeffery Glenn Miller.... Many say the looks were deceiving” (“Friends of Kent”). Even when people knew about his rioting, everyone attempted to qualify his true intentions.

Since news media never characterized the student body at Kent State, the peaceful qualities of the victims could be applied to other Kent students as well in another representative anecdote. In Detroit, the representative anecdote perpetuated by the riot coverage portrayed all rioters (and, in some cases, all black Detroiters) as physically

threatening, full of rage and prepared to inflict widespread destruction on the city. With Kent State, media coverage leaves readers wondering why the National Guard was on campus in the first place, since the four victims were *good*: their presence in the riot was purely accidental. What results is more of a *humanization* of these Kent State students, with details of their lives like notes left in their dorm rooms and what books were left on their shelves providing a deeper connection to the victims. These details draw a sharp contrast to the short description of Detroit victims, where details stopped at a simple identification. But, again, the Detroit victims were rarely considered victims.

Newspaper portrayals of each rioting group in Detroit and Kent match the public’s reaction to each riot. While numerous reports of National Guard negligence, brutality, and unnecessary deaths in Detroit yielded virtually no response, the Guard’s seconds-long volley in Kent was met with scathing criticism. One *New York Times* reporter called the shooting an “unconscionable act of military panic” (“...and the Home Front”). A U.S. Senator called the Guard “trigger happy,” asserting that they “lost their heads” (“Senator Young’s”). A Kent State student told one reporter, “Had I witnessed this event in Vietnam, I would have regarded it as murder, and I cannot help but do so now” (“Young”). Many people demanded action against the National Guard. One *New York Times* article said: “Whoever was responsible ... must be brought to justice promptly and steps must be taken to make sure that the forces of ‘law and order’ do not themselves become the instruments of further anarchy” (“...and the Home Front”). One *New York Times* article analyzed a field manual which explains

National Guard rules for riot situations, and detailed how exactly the Guard in Kent broke protocol. Rarely did any article defend the Guard's shooting, though a few did criticize Kent State students for rioting.

This heavy backlash against the National Guard stands in sharp contrast to the general support of the Guard in Detroit. There, no one questioned riot protocol, when the death toll reached several *dozen* (even despite hard evidence of Guard negligence and brutality, specifically in the death of four-year-old Tonia Blanding), but when the Guard killed these four white college students, the nation reacted in uproar. With this victimization of white rioters, news media condemned the National Guard's violence. With a villainization of black rioters, news media supported it.

### ***Narrative Conflict***

Overall it seemed that public officials followed the riot narrative established by news media in Detroit; President Johnson's statement against "lawlessness" established the major argument against Detroit rioters, and became the basis of overwhelming support for the National Guard's use of "whatever force necessary" to suppress rioters. However, news media narrative of the Kent State victims would prevail even when officials challenged it. President Nixon lamented the incident, but reminded Americans that "when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy" (Semple). This statement aligns with the Nixon administration's past stance on student protests: usually Nixon ignored college protests, and once called student participants "bums" (Darnton). Vice President Agnew, who had previously denounced students as hippies who "scorn the traditions of civility" (Semple), called the Kent State shooting "predictable and avoid-

able" (Wicker).

Nixon and Agnew's generally negative attitude against student protestors directly challenged the news media's victimization of the Kent students. And reporters took notice. One wrote that "the deplorably unfeeling statement by the president of the United States ... [does not] show any compassion or even understanding" ("Death on the Campus"). This reporter points out that Nixon's statement "turns the tragedy around" by not blaming the "killers" ("Death on the Campus"). Other journalists agree that Nixon's words were "obtuse and heartless," and Agnew's "indecent," with the combination of both considered not a condolence, but an initiator of further conflict among student populations nationwide (Wicker). Often, reporters and politicians spoke out against the Nixon administration as a whole, claiming that its harsh stance towards student protests affected the way that the National Guard would handle the situation. Bruckner writes, "Any policeman or soldier being sent onto a campus must have a fairly exaggerated notion of what he faces, and it is a wonder there is any restraint at all.... The invitation to disaster of which [Nixon] spoke after the Kent killings is coming from the top" ("Youth's Fright"). The same argument can be applied to Detroit: because of official condemnation of a rioting group, people view those rioters as more of a threat than they are in reality. A severe portrayal of rioters led to their severe treatment. But nobody made that argument for Detroit.

When President Nixon mentioned that students' violence could lead to National Guard violence, the public was outraged that he was not also honoring the victims. Three years before, President Johnson

focused *only* on black rioters' violence in Detroit. Here, blame was unquestionably with those rioters, who received no sympathy. Even when Johnson called the riots "hoodlumism" and Reagan called rioters "mad dogs against the people," no reporter stepped up to criticize these men for using language that officially perpetuates negative opinions toward a group of people in the way they do with Nixon's remarks about Kent State. In fact, news media adopted Johnson's same language that portrays a black riot quite differently from a white riot. But in the aftermath of the Kent State shooting, priming a sympathetic view of the students who were killed and a continuous distancing of Kent State students from any riotous behavior, the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* made it nearly impossible to treat Kent State rioters the same way as it did the Detroit rioters.

### **A History of Disparity in News Coverage**

Simply put, the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* villainizes black rioters and victimizes white rioters. With the Detroit riot, the very first report was an indicator of further newspaper coverage: warlike, hyperbolic language established a narrative of this uncontrollable enemy terrorizing the city. This narrative continues through the representative anecdote that reinforces a reader's idea of Detroit rioters as senseless, irrational, violent, and *black* aggressors—race was a central factor in creating this representative anecdote. Perhaps because of such a harsh characterization, President Johnson and countless others easily argued that this riot is simply "lawlessness," with nothing to do with race, and needed to be violently suppressed. When it was violently suppressed,

nobody voiced complaints for police and National Guard treatment of these rioters—who were, after all, the enemy. Their deaths were not lamented, and not even a four year old girl's negligent death would provoke outrage. From this coverage, it appears that black lives in Detroit truly did not matter.

On the other hand, the first article breaking the Kent State shooting—John Kifner's eyewitness report on the event—immediately connected readers with student rioters and primed them as victims. Kifner's report demanded empathy for these overall innocent young people, an empathy completely missing from the Detroit riot coverage. These newspapers repeatedly distanced Kent State students from rioting, whether by characterizing them as "apathetic" or by sharing the story of Allison Krause's pet kitten. Thus, with no understanding of these students as rioters—because nobody *used* the word "riot"—but a very clear understanding of their innocence, these white college students became the victims. Anyone against these students became the enemy—whether it was the National Guard killers or an unfeeling presidential administration. People *cared* about Kent State victims, demanded justice for their deaths, honored their lives.

My analysis supports media studies research conducted decades after news media portrayed the Detroit riot and the Kent State shooting so disparately. Media priming facilitated the qualities of the representative anecdote, which consistently pushed the stereotype of a group angry black criminals terrorizing the city of Detroit. By and large, these newspapers did not report many details regarding rioter deaths and police brutality, keeping in line with the fact that stories about black

perpetrators are more likely to be reported than black victims. The comparison of the Detroit riot and the Kent State shooting plainly illustrates that fact, as the sole point of difference begins with defining each event in a way that implies fault for black rioters but exempts white rioters.

The way news media characterize a riot affects the way people think of rioters—and in the case of Detroit, it also affects the attitude of black Americans as a whole. A representative anecdote formed the vocabulary around a discussion of human motives, and Detroit's representative anecdote created a dangerous enemy. By contrast, the only image of any rioter in Kent must be deduced from numerous descriptions of four victims

who were deemed incapable of violence. People supported violence towards black rioters and condemned violence towards white rioters. This paper opened with modern complaints about the disparity in riot coverage—that news networks were too quick to brand black rioters as “thugs” and maintained that white rioters were just participating in “demonstrations.” My analysis shows that this phenomenon did not begin with the rise of #BlackLivesMatter protests; if anything, it has been exacerbated with time. A fifty-year racial bias holds that the same behavior earns different definitions—a remarkably unjust use of journalistic power given its important role in forming judgments about an entire race.

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