

A CRITICAL LOOK AT MEDIA COVERAGE IN THE KILLING OF TRAYVON MARTIN

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Ten years ago, I was an undergraduate student of journalism. One of the research projects I produced during that time was an extensive analysis of how partisan media influenced and drove news reporting, most significantly in the case of the Iraq War. In seeing how media partisanship has greatly increased since the early stages of the Iraq War, I chose to revisit the subject, but with a blank research slate. This essay discusses a specific event –the February 2012 shooting death of Trayvon Martin – as a way of analyzing the influence of partisan media in the American news market.

The Death of Trayvon Martin

On the night of February 26th, Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old black male, was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a Hispanic community watch coordinator. The case became a media feeding frenzy, with civil rights activists, political pundits, politicians and even President Obama commenting on the killing. Theories and characterizations of both Martin and Zimmerman abounded. Those in the pro-Trayvon camp sought to portray Zimmerman as a virulent racist who had it in for black people, a loose cannon and a radical anti-crime activist. Those on Zimmerman's side attempted to portray Martin as a thug, a petty criminal, and a punk who sought trouble and got what was coming to him. The debate over the Martin-Zimmerman case became part of a national conversation over gun rights and controversial Stand Your Ground laws; depending on which side you embraced, Zimmerman was either exercising his rights as an armed citizen or acting recklessly, and Stand Your Ground laws were either necessary for self defense or needlessly reactionary. The truth about Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman falls somewhere in the middle of the two extremes and I will provide contextual background information to analyze the case.

On February 26th, Trayvon Martin was staying with family at the Twin Lakes housing community where Zimmerman also lived. Sometime during the evening, Martin left his family's townhouse to walk to a local convenience store to make a purchase. Martin made this purchase, and was in the process of walking back to his family's residence when Zimmerman, who was driving through the neighborhood, spotted him. Zimmerman called the police, and reported Martin as a suspicious person walking through the neighborhood. Zimmerman was recorded by the police dispatcher as saying, "This guy looks like he's up to no good or is on drugs or something," and, "these assholes, they always get away."¹ Zimmerman was asked if he was following Martin, and he said that he was. The police dispatcher responded, "OK, you don't need you to do that."²

At some point, Zimmerman exited his vehicle, and he and Martin got into a physical confrontation. Both men ended up struggling on the ground, and during this struggle Martin was shot in the chest with Zimmerman's handgun, killing him. The initial police report indicates that Martin may have been getting the better of Zimmerman physically; Zimmerman was bleeding from the nose and the back of the head, and his back was wet and had grass clippings on it, as if he had been laying on his back in wet grass. However, this evidence does not determine who instigated the confrontation.³

Zimmerman was arrested that night and his firearm was confiscated. However, citing a lack of evidence, police did not charge Zimmerman with a crime. The state prosecutor's office initiated its own investigation, and filed second-degree murder charges against Zimmerman on April 11th, 2012. Zimmerman was ultimately tried and found not guilty in 2013. By this time, dueling media narratives had obscured the actual facts of the case: Trayvon-the-thug vs. Trayvon-the-ordinary-kid, and Zimmerman the right-wing-reactionary vs. Zimmerman the honest-citizen. Examining how this case became a racial flashpoint is almost useless; an examination of the cases of Bernhard Goetz, Sean Bell, and Michael Dunn, § among many others, shows that practically any incident where a suspicious killing of a person who is a racial minority ends up stirring racial animosity in

§ Some background for clarification: Goetz was the man dubbed the "Subway Vigilante" by the New York press after he shot four black men who he claimed tried to rob him. Bell was an unarmed black man who was shot and killed by New York City police the night before his wedding, and Dunn was convicted of killing a black teenager who he claimed was playing his music too loud. Like Zimmerman, Dunn also claimed self-defense.

some form. Instead, I will focus on the positive and negative media narratives that attempted to characterize Martin and Zimmerman.

From Local to National News

The death of Trayvon Martin was a local news story from February 26th through the first week of March. In a summary of the Martin-Zimmerman case, Reuters reported that Martin's death was covered sparsely by The Orlando Sentinel, The Sanford Herald, and local TV affiliates in Orlando, but the national press had not picked up the story.⁴ According to Daniel Trotta of Reuters, Martin's family was frustrated that Zimmerman had not been charged in their son's death, and hired a publicist as part of their legal team, with the intent of using the national media to bring pressure on public officials to charge Zimmerman. Martin's family also kept in contact with civil rights activist Al Sharpton.⁵

The first national report was done by CBS on March 8th; reporter Mark Strassman interviewed Martin's father Tracy, who expressed his frustrations that Zimmerman remained free. "Why would he attack this guy?" Martin said, "He don't know this guy. What he going to attack him with, a pack of Skittles? ... My kid went to the morgue and this guy went home and went to sleep in his bed. There's no justice in that."⁶ The next national report was issued by the Associated Press the next day, and once again relied mostly on Martin's family as sources. It also included an erroneous sentence that stated Zimmerman was white.⁷ By March 12th, the story had blown up nationally, reaching news broadcasts in all corners of the country.

Much of the early reporting on Martin's death relied heavily on statements from the Martin family and their legal counsel. It is understandable why those on Zimmerman's side might have looked at the early reporting and concluded that the press was biased against Zimmerman. However, it is worth noting that Zimmerman refused all interview requests early on, issued very few statements, and did not give an interview of any significance until mid-July 2012. Until then, Zimmerman's side of the story was represented through secondhand accounts offered by friends, acquaintances, police reports and statements by legal counsel. †

 The partisan press picked up on the story around the same time.

† It should be noted that Zimmerman did this on the advice of his lawyer, since any public statement Zimmerman may have made after the shooting could have been admitted into a court of law. However, this had the effect of his side not being heavily represented in the press.

Sharpton's show "Politics Nation" was the first partisan outlet to report on Martin's death, and from the first report, Sharpton framed the shooting as an act of vigilantism:

So, this young man is dead. The police confirm all he had was Skittles and an iced tea. The other man, who was not a policeman, not in uniform, we don't even know if Trayvon knew who he was, approaches him, kills him, and he says, self-defense? Even if they got in an altercation, how is that self-defense and how do you -- how are you allowed to kill somebody? ... I think that that's critical there, so the neighborhood watch supposed to watch, call the police, he didn't do that went and took it in his own hands with a 9 millimeter?⁸

Sharpton's comments are troubling on several levels. First, they assume Zimmerman acted as a vigilante when this had not been determined yet by police investigators. Second, Sharpton paints Zimmerman as a man out for blood. Even now there is nothing that suggests Zimmerman intended on killing anybody on the night he encountered Martin. Third, the comments amount to race baiting. As an activist, Sharpton is unquestionably aware that there is a significant amount of distrust of the justice system and especially of white authority figures within the black community. Some of this distrust is entirely justified; black motorist Rodney King was beaten, and the police officers that beat him were found not guilty, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. NYPD officers were acquitted in the shooting death of African immigrant Amadou Diallo, who despite being unarmed, was shot 41 times in an excessive display of aggression. Martin's community of Sanford has its own history of racial tensions. According to Reuters, "black mistrust of the (Sanford) police runs deep. In 2011, a previous Sanford police chief was forced out of the job after a white police officer's son was captured on video sucker-punching a black homeless man outside a bar. Sanford police did not arrest the assailant until video of the attack surfaced on local TV and provoked an outcry from Sanford civil rights leaders."⁹

These incidents and many others have polarized Americans along racial lines; Sharpton knows this, and more cynically, he knows how to

exploit it. Where he is disingenuous in his comments is in assuming the justice system will not work long before the case is settled. At this point, Zimmerman's destiny as a free man was hardly set in stone.

MSNBC heavily covered the story in the ensuing weeks, with "Politics Nation," Lawrence O'Donnell's "Last Word" and Ed Schultz's "Ed Show" all airing segments on Martin's death. Sharpton appeared on the "Ed Show" on March 19th, again indicting the police and Zimmerman. "So, how is he killed and police decide that they're the judge and jury and let Zimmerman go," Sharpton said. "Zimmerman was told not to follow him. He followed him any way, he ends up killing him. That is probable cause to make an arrest. It's up later to grand jury and a prosecutor presenting the case in front of a judge and jury whether he's convicted. To not arrest him, to let the young man lay there three days dead shows real, real concern about how the police handled this matter and it's something that warrants national attention."¹⁰

Sharpton flat-out gets several facts wrong. Zimmerman was arrested after shooting Martin. He was not charged. Furthermore, Martin's body did not lie unclaimed for three days due to misconduct by the local authorities; Martin's father identified his son's body the morning after his death.¹¹ The facts Sharpton got incorrect were easily verifiable by public police reports. Sharpton's mangling of the truth indicates that he had chosen not to do his research (in which case he should not have been on television), or had already made his mind up about the case and didn't care about the facts. Either way represents irresponsibility on the part of Sharpton and MSNBC.

Fox News treated the shooting much differently. The Martin/Zimmerman story was not heavily covered on the network until late March; one of the first substantive segments Fox ran was on the March 20th edition of "The O'Reilly Factor." In the segment, host Bill O'Reilly discusses the case with contributors Kimberly Gulifoye and Lis Wiehl. The segment is much more sympathetic toward Martin than Sharpton was toward Zimmerman. The exchange below suggests a healthy amount of pro-Trayvon skepticism:

WIEHL: Right, right. And to be clear, in the state of Florida, along with 17 other states, there is a "Stand Your Ground" law, but that doesn't -- means you don't have to retreat. It doesn't mean you can go after somebody.

O'REILLY: OK, but let's stay on the facts of the case. Was Trayvon Martin carrying a gun?

WIEHL: No. He was carrying a bunch of Skittles.

O'REILLY: Easy, easy, easy.

WIEHL: Sorry.

O'REILLY: Was he carrying any weapon?

WIEHL: No.

O'REILLY: He had no weapons at all?

WIEHL: No.

O'REILLY: He had candy?

WIEHL: Candy and an ice tea.

O'REILLY: Did he have a record? Had he done anything wrong?

WIEHL: No. Not that we know of.¹²

Two nights later, Sean Hannity made these comments on the case: "Could this just be a terrible tragedy? Could this just be, you know, a case where Trayvon was running because he thought he was in jeopardy? He was in the neighborhood and that we had a series of crimes, they have a community watch. Is it possible that it was just a horrible accident? ... I want a full complete investigation. We need to get to the bottom of it. And our thoughts and prayers go out to the family. This is a tragedy, this young man. We don't know if it was an accident or if this was somehow intentional."¹³

Fox's weekly media analysis program also covered the story, and the show's panel also seemed a least partially skeptical of Zimmerman's side of the story. Conservative commentator Cal Thomas commented, "I live in Washington, D.C., and watch the local news every night. It's true in many other big cities, too. Most of the crime stories that local stations focus on involve African-American perpetrators. Dead black children,

perpetrating adults with guns, this sort of thing. You almost never see stories on local news about successful, family-oriented, honest, law-abiding African-American people. And I'm suggesting to you, Jon, that this helps feed the racism in some minds and gives the gated communities and the alarms more credence."¹⁴ The show's entire panel agreed that racial suspicions likely factored into the shooting.

During the month of March, the coverage of the Martin/Zimmerman case was much more fair and balanced, to cop a phrase, on Fox News than it was on MSNBC. Fox News can be accused of jumping to conclusions in many instances. However, this is not one of them.

Newspapers were also more sympathetic toward Martin. The usually conservative New York Post headlined a Martin/Zimmerman story with, "Cop wannabe on paranoid patrol."¹⁵ An op-ed by Charles Blow in the New York Times read in part, "As the father of two black teenage boys, this case hits close to home. This is the fear that seizes me whenever my boys are out in the world: that a man with a gun and an itchy finger will find them suspicious."¹⁶ And the Washington Post's Jonathan Capeheart wrote that Martin's death served as a reminder that for black men, "the burden of suspicion is still ours to bear."¹⁷ Editorials sympathetic to Martin were published in the Philadelphia Inquirer, Atlanta Journal-Constitution, USA Today, and numerous other newspapers. They establish one thing for certain – that any insinuation that the national media was totally anti-Trayvon is completely false.

As the investigation into Trayvon Martin's death continued, and media coverage became more intense, the press began reporting more on the personal character of Martin and George Zimmerman. Both men would be placed under a media microscope; the intensity of the public attention ultimately led Zimmerman to go into hiding.

Martin was suspended from school at the time of his death. On March 25th, CNN reported that the reason for this suspension was marijuana possession – a baggie with trace amounts of pot had been found in Martin's backpack.¹⁸ It was also around this time that Martin's online presence was made public; photos of Martin wearing a removable gold grill, a hoodie, and giving the middle finger were circulated through the media. Martin's Facebook and Twitter posts were also widely read, and revealed a teenager who joked (sometimes profanely) about street culture, expressed a distaste for school, and quoted the lyrics of hip-hop artists such as DMX

and Mystikal. None of this content is terribly surprising; there are millions of teenagers like Martin who tweet profane jokes, hate school, and listen to hip-hop. Unlike most teenagers, Martin had his digital footprint observed by millions.

Media coverage of Martin and Zimmerman began to change at this time. Conservative and liberal partisan media began sniping at each other, each accusing the other of exploiting Martin's death for political points. Neither side is completely innocent of these accusations, but conservative media did have a leg to stand on, and it was provided by NBC.

NBC Wrecks Their Credibility; Media Take Sides

Several times in between March 19th and March 27th, NBC News and its affiliates played a deceptively edited audio selection of Zimmerman's call to 911 on the night he encountered Martin. The original transcript records this following exchange between Zimmerman and the 911 dispatcher:

Zimmerman: Hey we've had some break-ins in my neighborhood, and there's a real suspicious guy, uh, [near] Retreat View Circle, um, the best address I can give you is 111 Retreat View Circle. This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something. It's raining and he's just walking around, looking about.

Dispatcher: OK, and this guy is he white, black, or Hispanic?

Zimmerman: He looks black.¹⁹

NBC producers edited the tape to make it sound as if Zimmerman had said, "This guy looks like he's up to no good, or he's on drugs or something. He looks black."²⁰ The differences, though minor, changed the context of the conversation and had the effect of painting Zimmerman in a much more sinister light. In the original transcript, Zimmerman volunteers the information on Martin's race when asked. In the edit, Zimmerman was made to sound as if he was making a racial judgment and profiling Martin on the basis of his skin color, an accusation Zimmerman faced repeatedly in the weeks and months after the shooting.

The clips were produced by NBC affiliates in Florida and aired

multiple times on the “Today Show,” “NBC Nightly News,” and MSNBC. The edits were first noticed by conservative media blog *Newsbusters*,²¹ and condemnation was quick to follow. The *New York Post* called the edits “damning evidence of willful misconduct by NBC News.”²² The *Washington Post* said that “to portray that exchange in a way that wrongs Zimmerman is high editorial malpractice.”²³ Bill O’Reilly accused the media of trying and convicting Zimmerman on television.²⁴

NBC later apologized for the misleading edits. Several local reporters and producers were fired or disciplined. Lilia Luciano, whose segments were used in national broadcasts, was also fired.²⁵ The broadcasts and transcripts containing the misleading edits were taken offline. In December 2012, George Zimmerman filed a libel lawsuit against NBC. Despite NBC’s apologies, this episode poisoned the national discourse. In the eyes of millions, Zimmerman was a racist and those defending him were suspect. Conservatives, meanwhile, had a bona fide example of the media bias they had long claimed. Zimmerman’s lawsuit was ultimately thrown out of court in June 2014.

Partisan media continued attacking each other over perceived slights to either Zimmerman or Martin, and the effect of this sophomoric back-and-forth had an oddly similar effect as in the case of the Benghazi situation, in that the actual facts stopped being important and the case began more about scoring points for one side or the other. As the Pew study quoted above shows, Fox viewers don’t watch MSNBC and vice versa. By the time Zimmerman was acquitted of second-degree murder on July 13th, 2013, most viewers had likely already made up their minds whether he was guilty or innocent.

The character of Trayvon Martin was left relatively untouched. Fringe right-wing blogs regularly attacked Martin with racist caricatures and epithets, but this form of overt racism was not a major element of any media narrative. For all of MSNBC’s griping about Fox News and right-wing media, Fox treated Martin’s death as a tragic event; their grievances were primarily directed at media coverage of the case, which they accused of wallowing in needless sensationalism. It is a slight difference but an important one.

George Zimmerman fared differently. From the very start, Zimmerman faced accusations of racism and speculation as to whether he had profiled Martin. These were not inappropriate questions. Black men and

women are well aware of numerous instances of racial profiling, some of which have turned violent. Zimmerman's father Robert defended his son in a letter to the Orlando Sentinel, stating that, "the media portrayal of George as a racist could not be further from the truth."²⁶ During a July 18th interview with Sean Hannity, Zimmerman said that he was sorry for shooting Martin.²⁷

It may not be possible to truly know what Zimmerman thought when he first observed Martin, but one slightly reported event in Zimmerman's life prior to the shooting may provide some idea as to his real attitudes on race. In a 2011 Sanford town hall meeting, Zimmerman protested the beating of a homeless black man at the hands of a police officer's son. Zimmerman expressed his belief that the suspect was given preferential treatment due to his association with the police.²⁸ This action does not suggest someone with a deep-rooted hatred of black people.

Conclusions

Perhaps the second tragedy of Trayvon Martin's death is the exploitation of the story by ideologues driven by ratings. The events of February 26th, 2012 and beyond effectively illustrated that though we share one country, Americans of different races and political beliefs are often separated by vast social and ideological chasms. Martin's death proved how easily these differences can be exploited.

The facts behind the altercation between Martin and Zimmerman are difficult to discern. We know that Zimmerman exited his vehicle against the advice of the police dispatcher. We know that he and Martin fought before Zimmerman shot Martin. We do not know who threw the first punch. We do not truly know Zimmerman's frame of mind on that night. Instead of responsibly reporting these elements of the story as unknown, the media engaged in needless speculation, and in some cases irresponsible distortion.

Zimmerman was needlessly dragged through the mud by MSNBC. With Al Sharpton leading the charge, the network used the Martin/Zimmerman story as red meat for its more liberal and racially diverse viewership. It also had the effect of proving Bill O'Reilly's statement correct – Zimmerman was tried in the media before he was tried in a court of law. Though Zimmerman has remained silent since his trial, one could reasonably conclude that the ordeal was stressful, and that it will be difficult for

him to return to a normal life.

For his part, Sharpton does not belong on television. He has continued to engage in partisan activism while hosting his MSNBC show. Sharpton's continued involvement with civil rights organization the National Action Network is a direct violation of every form of journalistic ethics imaginable. Sharpton's leadership of the organization coupled with his role on MSNBC amounts to a significant conflict of interest for both Sharpton and MSNBC. Journalistic ethics dictate that someone employed by a news organization cannot maintain said employment while engaging in activism. For MSNBC to allow Sharpton to maintain this dual role seriously damages their credibility. On the flip side, Fox News may have handled the story more responsibly, but the end result still amounted to the case of the proverbial "thinnest kid at fat camp," when one considers that Fox has no problem using needless sensationalism when it has served their interests. However, they should be commended for having the decency to silence the racist elements of the Tea Party's lunatic fringe this time around.

The straight news coverage of Martin and Zimmerman by broadcast networks and newspapers was much more responsible, and newspaper columnists tended to refrain from the excessive hyperbole of television. Black columnists and commentators, such as Jonathan Capeheart and Fox's Juan Williams, made statements that were not so much anti-Zimmerman as they were sympathetic to the realities of life for black Americans. USA Today asked perhaps the best question of all: If Zimmerman were black and had shot a white, unarmed 17-year-old, would he have been let go by the police?²⁹ Furthermore, would the case have become the national spectacle it did? I personally think the answer to both questions is no.

The death of Trayvon Martin was tragic. The exploitation of that death was equally tragic. Events such as these, unpleasant as they are, can also be opportunities for Americans to gain a greater understanding of their countrymen. This conversation can best happen with a responsible media as a moderator. In this case, the media was anything but responsible.

Afterword

The events surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin were important news stories, but it also represents missed opportunities. The

importance of this story lies in its ability to generate greater discussion about important subjects; the killing of Trayvon Martin could have led to a much-needed discussion about the still sore issue of race relations in the United States.

However, this conversation did not happen, and it is partly due to the continually problematic news media that it did not. This brings me to the issues of corporate media ownership raised by Chomsky and Hermann, and Michael Schudson, “If the corporate structure of the media does not in itself determine news content, it still tends to marginalize some news and some ways of telling the news,” Schudson writes.³⁰ This is a more academic way of saying that while it is easy to use a racial conflict frame for the death of Trayvon Martin, it is much harder to do a journalistic examination of the American domestic policy decisions that make such frames possible. Doing so would likely require examining those voices on the political fringes that so often get overlooked by the corporate media.

It is easy to be cynical about the state of the news media. It has numerous problems that the corporate structure of the press compounds, and frequently chooses sensationalism over tough, fact-based reporting. However, it is also easy to forget that the world as a whole has more information at its fingertips than ever, and that despite its shortcomings, our media is better organized than ever. This in turn makes critical thinking easier than ever. Furthermore, our increasing interconnectedness allows us as news consumers to be informed and to care about a teenager shot dead in Florida. Fifty years ago, the death of Trayvon Martin would likely have been a footnote in a local newspaper. That it is not today reflects a world that is more informed and perhaps more tolerant. I believe this is a net positive.

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*Note: This piece is Part 2 of a longer work, which includes the media coverage of the assault on the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi. For the full story please contact Wes Benash through the MALS Office.