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Bridging Cultures N° 2, 2017

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Cómo citar el documento:

Olah, Stephanie. "Racism in the American press and policies" [en línea]. Bridging Cultures, 2 (2017).

Disponible en: <http://bibliotecadigital.uca.edu.ar/repositorio/revistas/racism-american-press-policies.pdf> [Fecha de consulta:.....]

Racism in the American Press and Policies

Stephanie Olah²⁶

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify whether the depiction of the stop-and-frisk policy in the American press is racist. The first phase of the paper consists of a brief summary of the implementation and practice of the stop-and-frisk policy in New York City. The second phase studies racism in the American press as a whole. The final phase involves a critical analysis of an article appearing in *The American Signal* following T.A. van Dijk's theory on critical discourse analysis. By applying these guidelines, different levels of scrutiny have been assessed since there is not only one form of racism. This research will provide information regarding the way in which racism is conveyed through the press and policies in America.

Keywords: racism, press, stop-and-frisk, Afro-American minorities.

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio es identificar si la descripción de la política "detener y registrar" en la prensa estadounidense es racista. La primera fase del documento consiste en un breve resumen de la implementación y la práctica de la política "detener y registrar" en la ciudad de Nueva York. La segunda fase estudia el racismo en la prensa estadounidense en general. La fase final incluye un análisis crítico de un artículo de *The American Signal*, siguiendo la teoría de T.A. van Dijk sobre el análisis crítico del discurso. Al aplicar estas pautas, se han evaluado diferentes niveles de escrutinio ya que no solo hay una forma de racismo. Esta investigación proporciona información sobre la manera en que se transmite el racismo a través de la prensa y las políticas en Estados Unidos.

Palabras claves: racismo, prensa, «detener y registrar», minorías negras.

"To see what is in front of one's nose needs a constant struggle."

G. Orwell (1968)

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Introduction

Racism has been sitting at the core of American society since its birth. However, in today's postmodern world, many people –including scholars, politicians, and journalists– believe that it has been eradicated simply because there is a legal framework protecting minorities from overt abuse and malicious discrimination. Nevertheless, regardless of the current rules and norms which govern harassment and degradation of Black and Latino groups, inter alia, there still exists a pervading attitude of disdain towards these ethnic groups. This is the concern of our paper.

In order to examine whether both American policing policy and at least a segment of the American press promote racism, a recent article appearing in *The American Signal* which refers to the stop-and-frisk program in New York City has been analyzed. This critical analysis has been performed following T. A. van Dijk's theory on critical discourse analysis from his book "Racism and the press". Therefore, this investigation provides grounded conclusions, a summary of the main issue and an overview of racism in the American press.

Overview of the Main Issue

More often than not, somewhat heated arguments concerning New York City's controversial program "stop and frisk" arise within the members of their fractured society. This policy allows police officers to stop and question certain individuals if they hold enough reasonable suspicion that they may have committed a crime or that they may be about to commit a crime. Moreover, a police officer may even frisk individuals if they are believed to be carrying a weapon. The grand debate involves the questions of the effectiveness, constitutionality, and partiality of the practice. Nevertheless, there are substantial reasons to affirm that the "stop and frisk" program is ineffective, racist, and unconstitutional.

The first detriment of "stop and frisk" is that it has proven to be highly ineffective. According to the New York City Bar Association's report, "Only approximately 6% of

the stops have resulted in arrests and approximately 2% in the recovery of weapons.”(2013, p. 1). Not only does this show how futile this program is, but it also demonstrates that it enables unjustified psychological coercion towards innocent and unarmed citizens. People often claim –and politicians largely profit from this assertion– that this practice lowered the number of crimes committed in New York City. While figures illustrate that crime rate in NYC has lowered considerably (New York City Bar Association’s report, 2013, p. 11), the Brennan Center for Justice sustains that “statistically, no relationship between stop-and-frisk and crime seems apparent” (Cullen, J., & Grawert, 2016, p. 2) since the trend continued in the same direction regardless of the decrease in number of stops between 2012 and 2014. Similarly, the effectiveness of this tactic has proven to be almost nonexistent when it comes to gun possession. Only less than 0.02 percent of stops resulted in the recovery of a gun in New York City –known for its highly restrictive firearm policy (New York Civil Liberties Union, 2014). Therefore, there exists no factual basis to a claim that “stop and frisk” is beneficial to society.

A further problem with this program is that it has become broadly biased. The proportion of people belonging to a minority group who are stopped based solely on the poor standard of reasonable suspicion of the police officer is outrageous. As per the New York Civil Liberties Union data reveals, 53% of New Yorkers who were stopped during 2011 were black and 34% were Latino (New York Civil Liberties Union, 2014). Racial imbalance opens up a serious issue because it is not present in just a few cases, but in the vast majority of them. These groups are obviously being targeted due to their ethnic characteristics, rather than due to potentially dangerous behavior. Moreover, the public perception of these groups is badly damaged as a result of this situation. Therefore, the system of “stop and frisk” has resulted in major cases of racial profiling, leading to an even deeper concern regarding discrimination.

Last but certainly not least, the practice of “stop and frisk” has been upheld to be unconstitutional. The system in itself has proven to be constitutional, as it carves out an exception to the Fourth Amendment requirement that a police officer must conduct searches and seizures only with “probable cause”. Officers need only to prove there exists “reasonable suspicion” that the person has committed or is about to commit a crime for them to conduct a brief interrogation on the street. However, subject to the

Fourteenth Amendment, the practice of “stop and frisk” should not be performed differently when dealing with minority groups, such as African American or Latino. As Judge Shira A. Scheindlin of Federal District Court in Manhattan ruled in *Floyd v. City of New York*, “stops (should) be conducted in a racially neutral manner” (Scheindlin, 2013, p. 2) in order to be constitutional. In practice, treatment of minorities diverges greatly from that of non-minorities; but, in theory, “race may not be the sole factor that causes an officer to conclude that there is likely criminal activity” (Office of the Attorney General, 1999, p. 44). Thus, as the *modus operandi* fails to observe the supreme law of the land, it represents a threat to the liberties of all of its inhabitants.

All issues considered, the “stop and frisk” program is highly ineffective, racially biased and unconstitutional. Statistics have proven the low, almost non-existent, effects its implementation has had in crime rates and unlawful gun possession. Furthermore, it fuels discrimination and prejudice against minority groups, as they are being continually targeted by police officers. Besides, it does not comply with the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution, making it illegitimate and menacing for each individual and for society as a whole.

Overview of Racist Discourse in the American Press

Racism, understood as “the structural subordination of a group based on an idea of racial inferiority” (Matsuda, 1989, p. 2358), is ubiquitous in today’s society. There is little to no doubt regarding its existence: hate speeches are being pronounced with escalating frequency and long forgotten extremist institutions have begun to reappear with an alarming popular endorsement. However, “most Americans vociferously denounce overt acts of racism, people of color remain economically and socially disadvantaged compared with whites” (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011, p. 202). Accordingly, the press unknowingly purports this same behavior to the presentation of news in the media. The press, thus, conveys a unilateral perspective of news because “the media are sometimes (...) instruments in the hands of those in power” (Löwstedt and Mboti, 2017, p. 114). Racist communication is achieved through processes of detachment, de-legitimization, and de-humanization.

One of the many ways in which journalists transmit an utterly biased view of society is through the process of Othering (Fozdar et al., 2009). This kind of discourse alienates members of the other-group from the center of society and places them at the margins of society. Löwstedt and Mboti (2017, p. 117) retrieve a situation whereby the NY-based Associated Press (AP) and the Agence France-Presse (AFP) addressed the same issue with entirely different approaches. Both news agencies “reported the same action by hurricane victims as ‘looting a store’ when done by a black man (AP), and ‘finding food’ when done by whites (AFP)”. This paradox exemplifies how conclusive racism is at the time of delivering information. This method of fragmenting groups of people into ‘us’ and ‘them’ inaccurately represents racism as normal, even inevitable, and the news media are largely to blame.

A further course of action followed in the American press that conveys racism is the delegitimization of the other-group. Members of the dominant-group feel fortunate to be as distant as they can be from members of the victim-group (Matsuda, 1989, p. 2339). This erroneous conception that places subjects in remote positions deepens racism in the media because it grants a sense of intellectual superiority to the dominant-group. Therefore, the main issue arises when allocation of rationality depends solely on facts related to cultural preferences, sexual orientation or nationality, rather than depending on reasonable and logical standards. Moreover, not only is their intelligence underestimated but also their honor and adherence to universal values. Presumptions of lack of intelligence or morality delegitimize the opinions, testimonies, and suggestions made by members of the other-group, leading to plain racism.

Lastly, racism is also purported by the dehumanization of discriminated subjects. Matsuda (1989, p. 2358) determined that “racist speech proclaims racial inferiority and denies the personhood of target group members.” This means that words are such a powerful and persuasive tool that they may deprive a group of people of the common virtues of humanity. The effect caused by this kind of speech is such that it permeates both, members of the dominant-group causing them to disregard the others as alike and inferior, and members of the other-group, whose inner perception and understanding of themselves within their communities gradually deteriorates. Furthermore, Charles (2015) explains that the use of de-humanization is not new, since this method of violating the other as an animal-object is the epitome of racism, present at the times of

slavery and –even– in the Nazi regime. The American press consummates its racist speech by rating the appearance and origins of people superficially over their substance or character; or, in the words of Löwstedt and Mboti (2017, p. 125), “racism in the media is the (re)presentation of others as disposable lives”.

The American press is almost essentially racist since it emerges within a culturally stratified society. Not only does it segregate certain groups of the population from the rest, but it also disprizes their voice and undermines their humanity. This paper, however, does not claim to place any culpability on journalists, but to demonstrate how installed this trait is in the American idiosyncrasy. In postmodern times, when racism is not as overt, it “emerges not so much out of (concrete) individual reporters or editors or individual media organizations as out of the entire (abstract) mass media system” (Löwstedt and Mboti, 2017, p. 117). The press, therefore, exteriorizes a categorical feature of the people of the United States –racism–; and this process is executed by journalists who are simply following “cultural patterns of which they are only imperfectly aware” (Charles, 2015, para. 6).

Critical Analysis

This section will analyze the article “How White Liberals Enable Crime in Black Communities”, published on February 15, 2017, on *The Daily Signal* (see Appendix) in accordance with Teun A. Van Dijk’s (1991) theoretical basis. In summary, the article intends to demonstrate that blacks’ aversion to the stop-and-frisk policy is not only exaggerated, but also groundless. It tries to establish that the program is favorable to black people, in contrast with the liberal assertion that it victimizes minorities. The article portrays how attached racism is to both the stop-and-frisk practice and the press. A critical analysis shows that this depiction is achieved through a separation between white and black subjects, the latter being in a passive role, and a particular topicalization of the article itself.

To begin with, the topicalization of the article, “the headlined definition of the situation” (Van Dijk, 1991, p. 67), is both confusing and erroneous. The main idea is reduced to the word “SOCIETY”. This, at first, appears to be a positive representation

of black people as being a part of the whole; however, simply labeling the article as such will not suffice when they remain in the outskirts of society. Van Dijk posits that “topics influence the representation readers construct in their mind” (1991, p. 74). In this case, it means that the perspective of readers of the situations mentioned in the development of the article is shaped by its ambiguous topicalization. Many understatements in the article indicate that black people are naturally inferior to white people, such as the remark that blacks “cannot afford to go along with the liberal agenda” and that they would not be alive today if it had not been “for proactive policing”. Moreover, doubt in the reader’s convictions is fostered by means of a very straightforward rhetorical question: “If you’re trying to prevent shootings and robberies, whom are you going to focus most attention on, blacks or whites?” This is to show the reader that an honest inquiry regarding the subject matter would only lead to the same conclusion the writer has arrived to, presupposing that there is an ideologically framed opinion on the matter. This makes the reader believe that he is in agreement with the article and the racist representation of minorities, making him or her into one of the members of the “us” group.

Another way in which the article depicts racism is a positive self-representation and a negative other-representation. This is accomplished by presenting information that endorses the writer’s view as indisputable facts while discrediting the opinions of members of the other-group. When introducing numbers and information to support the claim that stop-and-frisk is necessary and beneficial, the information is assumed as facts not subject to questioning. On the other hand, opinions in favor of the other-group are introduced vaguely without quoting any specific source. “Academic liberals and civil rights spokespeople” are the voice of black people, while “Manhattan Institute scholar Heather Mac Donald”, “the U.S. Justice Department”, and “John R. Lott Jr. and Carlisle E. Moody of the Crime Prevention Research Center” represent the white majority. The binary schema of “us” and “them” manifestly exposes the disqualification of the black community as an ideological opponent.

Racism is also conveyed in the article by undermining the role of the other-group. Black people are portrayed as passive actors accepting white liberals’ influence upon them. Agency is not granted to the minority group since they are not portrayed as the masters of their own destinies. Even their very existence is reduced to the implementation of the

Terry stop when the article establishes that “more than 10,000 blacks are alive today who would not be had it not been for proactive policing”. Blacks are literally depicted as beneficiaries of the same policy to which they are victims. The article even identifies black people as “pawns for white liberals”, personifying them as submissive characters. The only exceptions to this pattern emerge when members of the other-group are placed close to negative predicates, such as “violent crime”, “likelier (...) to shoot and use force against black suspects”, and “responsible for 75 percent of shootings and 70 percent of robberies”. Moreover, minorities are seldom portrayed as “speakers and definers of their own reality” (Van Dijk, 1991, p. 154). In conclusion, the assumption that black people are not active builders of their own lives further encourages racism.

By means of a thorough analysis of the article “How White Liberals Enable Crime in Black Communities” from *The Daily Signal*, the effect racism has on the press and the practice of the stop-and-frisk program is revealed. A clearly defined division line has been drawn between white and black people segregating the latter group. Besides, blacks are represented as passive actors who do not conduct themselves in ways that may alter their current situations. Furthermore, the article is topicalized in such a way that racism is blatantly obvious. All issues considered, racism as a social construct seems to affect the entire construction of thought of individuals and the structural systematization of society.

Conclusion

The overall purpose of this paper has been to examine whether both American policies and press are racist. In order to satisfy such purpose, a summary of the dilemma of stop-and-frisk in New York City has been included. Next, the inference of racism as a social construct in the American press has been examined. Finally, we have analyzed to what extent racism permeated an article from *The Daily Signal*. It is reasonable to conclude that, even when the author believes he is writing in favor of the black community, there exists an implicit racist trend behind knitting words. The difficulty in identifying racism in the press and policies is that racism is so entwined within American society that people simply do not identify it as such.

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Appendix



How White Liberals Enable Crime in Black Communities

Walter E. Williams / February 15, 2017

Ordinary black people cannot afford to go along with the liberal agenda that calls for undermining police authority. That agenda makes for more black crime victims.

Let's look at what works and what doesn't work.

In 1990, New York City adopted the practice in which its police officers might stop and question a pedestrian. If there was suspicion, they would frisk the person for weapons and other contraband. This practice, well within the law, is known as a "Terry stop."

After two decades of this proactive police program, New York City's homicides fell from over 2,200 per year to about 300. Blacks were the major beneficiaries of proactive policing.

According to Manhattan Institute scholar Heather Mac Donald—author of "The War on Cops"—seeing as black males are the majority of New York City's homicide victims, more than 10,000 blacks are alive today who would not be had it not been for proactive policing.

The American Civil Liberties Union and other leftist groups brought suit against proactive policing. A U.S. district court judge ruled that New York City's "stop and frisk" policy violated the 14th Amendment's promise of equal protection because black and Hispanic people were subject to stops and searches at a higher rate than whites.

But the higher rate was justified. Mac Donald points out that while blacks are 23 percent of New York City's population, they are responsible for 75 percent of shootings and 70 percent of robberies. Whites are 34 percent of the population of New York City. They are responsible for less than 2 percent of shootings and 4 percent of robberies.

If you're trying to prevent shootings and robberies, whom are you going to focus most attention on, blacks or whites?

In 2015, 986 people were shot and killed by police. Of that number, 495 were white (50 percent), and 258 were black (26 percent).

Liberals portray shootings by police as racist attacks on blacks. To solve this problem, they want police departments to hire more black police officers. It turns out that the U.S. Justice Department has found that black police officers in San Francisco and Philadelphia are likelier than whites to shoot and use force against black suspects. That finding is consistent with a study of 2,699 fatal police killings between 2013 and 2015, conducted by John R. Lott Jr. and Carlisle E. Moody of the Crime Prevention Research Center, showing that the odds of a black suspect's being killed by a black police officer were consistently greater than the odds of a black suspect's being killed by a white officer. And little is said about cops killed. Mac Donald reports that in 2013, 42 percent of cop killers were black.

Academic liberals and civil rights spokespeople make the claim that the disproportionate number of blacks in prison is a result of racism. They ignore the fact that black criminal activity is many multiples of that of other racial groups. They argue that differential imprisonment of blacks is a result of the racist war on drugs.

Mac Donald says that state prisons contain 88 percent of the nation's prison population. Just 4 percent of state prisoners are incarcerated for drug possession. She argues that if drug offenders were removed from the nation's prisons, the black incarceration rate would go down from about 37.6 percent to 37.4 percent.

The vast majority of blacks in prison are there because of violent crime—and mostly against black people. That brings us to the most tragic aspect of black crime. The primary victims are law-abiding black people who must conduct their lives in fear. Some parents serve their children meals on the floor and sometimes put them to sleep in bathtubs so as to avoid stray bullets. The average American does not live this way and would not tolerate it. And that includes the white liberals who support and make excuses for criminals.

Plain decency mandates that we come to the aid of millions of law-abiding people under siege. For their part, black people should stop being pawns for white liberals and support the police who are trying to protect them.

SOURCE: <http://dailysignal.com/2017/02/15/how-white-liberals-enable-crime-in-black-communities>