

npr.org

Four Lessons From The Media's Conflicted Coverage of Race

Dec. 6, 2014 • 5 min read • [original](#)

i

Now more than ever, America needs productive conversations about race, stereotyping, police, crime and social justice. And too often, our national media continues to fall short.

After many years of dissecting how race works in media, I was both disappointed and but, sadly, not surprised by much of the coverage so far. It repeats many of the same mistakes we've seen for years in how we talk about race-fueled controversies in America.

We don't have the right conversations.

There are two central threads in the Brown and Garner cases: concerns about the particular facts surrounding their killings, and the broader questions about how unarmed black people are treated by police.

Many of those who agree that Brown put himself in a life-threatening position — by stealing from a convenience store, and then arguing with a police officer — are still dismayed by how authorities handled the investigation and the grand jury proceeding. I'm in that camp, and those questions deserve to be taken seriously. But guest spots by former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani offer a good example of how those questions get ignored and this debate gets twisted.



i

On *Meet the Press*, Giuliani told African-American pundit Michael Eric Dyson **that white police officers wouldn't be in black neighborhoods** "if you weren't killing each other 70 to 75 percent of the time." Later on *Fox News Sunday*, Giuliani **admitted** there may be more "unfair" interactions with white police in black neighborhoods. Then, he said there was "just as much, if not more, responsibility in the black community" to reduce the tension, and that white officers police in black neighborhoods because "blacks commit murder eight times more per capita than any other group in our society."

Giuliani presented the issue as one of self-control: If black people would take responsibility somehow, murder rates would go down. But white people are **far more likely** to be arrested for DUI or arson. Do they have more responsibility than the police for stopping those crimes? Because poverty leads to more crime and black people are disproportionately poor, it also means they are more likely to live in dangerous environments. Could that affect the murder rate?

No one asked those kinds of questions; there wasn't time. It's too much for a five-minute TV segment, to be sure. But it also shows that tackling a difficult story about race in a panel debate format doesn't serve the issue and distracts from the serious questions at hand. It only serves television news networks' need for conflict among well-known opinionators.

Trying to talk about systemic racial issues during a crisis is always much harder.

Real progress on racial issues happens when people thoughtfully consider perspectives different from their own — and that's much tougher in a crisis.

It's the Catch-22 of covering racial issues. The public tends to pay the most attention after a calamity: someone is dead, has been hurt or has been victimized. But in that moment, the public debate becomes polarized.

People are more focused on winning arguments than understanding other perspectives and cherry-pick data to serve their own side.

The Washington Post [recently pointed](#) to a 2012 study in Florida comparing two telephone polls on perceptions of crime with actual crime statistics. The study found that the white respondents regularly overestimated the percentage of black people who commit crimes, saying 50 percent of criminals involved in violent crime were black when the actual percentage was closer to 20 percent.

But the statistics also showed black people committed about 40 percent of gunpoint robberies and represented 35 percent of those selling illegal drugs, in a state where about 16 percent of the population is black. So those who believe in systemic racism could note that white people consistently overestimate the criminality of black people, while those who resist that notion could argue black people still were committing crimes beyond their population levels.

In truth, this study is the starting point of a conversation that should include the effects of poverty, urban gangs, aggressive drug enforcement and more. But when people are trying to make a point, such detailed discussion is often left behind.

Cable news has sped up the path from news reporting to punditry with disastrous results.

Baltimore Sun TV critic David Zurawik got pushback from CNN analyst Van Jones after criticizing the news channel's [decision to send Jones](#) to Missouri on NPR's *On The Media*. That prompted Jones to send a series of tweets [criticizing Zurawik, and touting his own qualifications](#).

I sympathize with one element of Zurawik's critique. Piling on-site analysis from pundits on top of news coverage focused on an emergency — rioting in Ferguson — confuses the issue. What viewers really needed in the hours

after the grand jury's decision was solid, factual reporting on issues such as the evidence considered, the extent of rioting, the police response to violence, and details about the grand jury process. Watching Jones and CNN anchor Don Lemon [squabble over](#) how many protesters were acting violently felt like watching an oddly personal dispute fueled by too many hours on camera and too little sleep — the kind of buzz-inducing conflict that drives cable news ratings and kills enlightening conversation.

Each cable news channel fine-tunes its coverage for its target audience, including how that target audience sees racial issues.

A [2011 study](#) from the Brookings Institution noted that 46 percent of Americans believe discrimination against white people is just as big of a problem as discrimination against people of color. But among respondents who said they trusted the Fox News Channel, that proportion rose to 70 percent.

So it makes a certain kind of sense that big Fox News stars such as Sean Hannity and Bill O'Reilly would reflect the views of their target audience in their coverage of racial issues, challenging the notion of white privilege and insisting there is little racial bias among institutions such as police departments and law enforcement. (O'Reilly [has also said](#) he thinks police overreacted in the Garner case). *The Daily Show's* [recent criticism](#) of Ferguson coverage, largely focused on Fox News, made the channel's focus clear.

CNN is also looking to make headway in the ratings with a cable news audience that's mostly white. So it isn't surprising that Lemon, its most prominent black anchor, has gained recent fame by challenging the views held by many black people on hot-button issues. November ratings among key viewers for *CNN Tonight*, hosted by Lemon, [were the best](#) the channel has seen in 18 months, according to The Wrap website.

It's hard to imagine a white cable news anchor getting away with Lemon's statement, [during a live broadcast](#) from Ferguson, that "obviously, there is the smell of marijuana in the air," in a way which seemed to imply it was a given that protesters on the scene would be using the drug. In a later broadcast, Lemon decried "political correctness," which he said led to "trying to appease protesters" in Ferguson. (That sparked an argument with Jones.)

At MSNBC, Rev. Al Sharpton has been a strong advocate for families at the heart of these cases, speaking for the parents of slain Florida teen Trayvon Martin in 2012 and [leading a rally](#) on Garner's case this week. That tracks with MSNBC's status last year as [most-watched](#) among black cable news viewers.

These are all ways in which news outlets' drive from conflict and their target audiences are sidetracking the conversation during a crucial moment.

It may be time for an educated public to demand better coverage from an industry that is sometimes too wrapped up in its own priorities to get it right.

Original URL:

<http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/12/06/368713550/four-lessons-from-the-medias-conflicted-coverage-of-race>