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Alice Fews

The Assassination of Character: A Reversed Agenda Setting Study of the Twitter Campaign “#IfTheyGunnedMeDown”

The fatal shooting of unarmed teenager Michael Brown sparked U.S. wide protests. Whilst many protested on the streets in Ferguson, online activists took to social media. The viral #IfTheyGunnedMeDown was a response to how Michael Brown was portrayed in the media, with some audiences labelling him a thug who was flashing gang signs. It aimed to address a rhetorical question which resonates with much of the African American community, “what picture would the media use to represent me?” Scholars have highlighted how black individuals are often depicted as violent criminals and much of society has come to subconsciously accept these stereotypes. This study uses a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) of Twitter content to identify common negative stereotypes associated with African Americans and a content analysis of U.S. mainstream news coverage, such as The Washington Post and The New York Times to identify whether the hashtag campaign had reversed agenda setting effects. The results of the study have found that the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown successfully highlighted the problematic issue of the media routinely reinforcing negative stereotypes of African Americans and influenced the media to discuss the issue within wider reports of Ferguson. The study has highlighted that viral hashtag campaigns on Twitter are becoming a powerful force for ordinary citizens to voice their opinions and should not be ignored by journalists.

Keywords: Agenda setting theory, reversed agenda setting, media representation, negative stereotypes, hashtag campaigns, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown.

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INTRODUCTION

The shooting of Michael Brown on the 9th of August 2014 by a white police officer inspired the nationwide Black Lives Matter movement, provoking a fierce debate over how police treat minorities. Protests erupted in Ferguson, Missouri and whilst many took to the streets, an organised form of protest emerged on social media responding to the misrepresentation of Brown in the media. Powerful hashtag

campaigns emerged out of Ferguson, particularly #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, which attempted to bring attention to various forms of racial profiling, misrepresentation and negative stereotyping upheld by the media. The viral #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag saw Twitter users posting a juxtaposition of images of themselves, asking which image the media would use to represent them. The contrasting images represented an act of solidarity, suggesting that racialized groups in society, particularly African Americans could be misrepresented, depending on the staging of the image (Jackson 2015). #IfTheyGunnedMeDown highlighted the systematic profiling and victim blaming suffered by African Americans which is rife today and attempted to develop a counter discourse to racial stereotyping in the media.

McCombs and Shaw (1972) introduced their theory of agenda-setting by quoting Cohen's (1963) epigram:

"The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Neuman et al. 2014 p.193).

However, the development and sharp increase of digital media and online publics has meant that the dynamics of agenda setting has become more complex. Attention towards television news and newspapers has steadily been declining whilst new media, such as social media and blogs, opportunities have been increasing (Barber 1998; Bimber 2003; Lee 2005). The relationship between traditional media and new online spaces has been an area of study which has significantly grown in momentum since Lee's insightful 2005 doctoral dissertation.

Social media has become a powerful tool for empowering citizens across the globe, especially in times of unrest, such as the Arab Springs uprising of 2011. Existing research has suggested that social media can be a useful tool for racialized communities and mobilising for collective action, providing alternative information which may not be available from other media and creating opportunities for opinions to be exchanged and heard (Valenzuela 2013). During the initial week of protests in Ferguson, over 3.6 million posts appeared on Twitter, documenting and reflecting on the death of Brown (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). Social media platforms, particularly Twitter, have become important online spaces for racialized groups to form powerful responses to racial injustices. Hashtag campaigns during the unrest in Ferguson attempted to highlight the problematic ways in which blackness is constantly perceived as a threat (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). The increase of online activism over the years begs the question, how powerful are hashtag campaigns for challenging the mainstream media and can they have reverse agenda setting effects? This study builds on academic work which examines the link between social media and other online spaces such as bulletin boards and forums and reversed agenda setting theory (Lee 2005; Lee et al. 2005, Kushin 2010; Jiang 2014; Cheng & Chan 2015). Using a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) of 150 #IfTheyGunnedMeDown tweets and image content and a content analysis of 51 American newspaper articles, this paper will argue that Twitter campaigns are being used in attempt to reverse the agenda setting function of the mass media. It also focuses on the problematic role of the media which continually reinforces negative stereotypes which are hugely damaging to groups in society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Representations of 'Race' and Racialized Violence

Scholars acknowledge the impact of media images and how they can be extremely powerful in influencing public opinion (Mauer 1999; Welch 2007). The media is a place in which ideas are articulated, transformed and elaborated, making it a highly influential communication medium (Hall 2003 cited by Welch 2007). Media representations of crime and race have been described in two different but related ways. The former assumes that "crime is stereotypically portrayed as a black phenomenon" and the latter assumes that "blacks are disproportionality portrayed as criminals" (Chiricos & Eschholz 2002, p.402), racial typification of crime and the criminal typification of race is discussed in more detail below.

Most individuals in the United States report that the media serves as their primary source of crime information (Russell 1995 cited by Oliver et al. 2002). A prevalent representation of crime in American society is that it is overwhelmingly committed by black men and people have become particularly familiar with the image of a young black male as a "violent and menacing street thug" (Welch 2007, p.279; Hawkins 1987). Negative representations have been fuelled and perpetuated by typifications in the media and have undoubtedly become ingrained in public consciousness. Welch (2007) has suggested that the presumed racial identity of criminals may be so ingrained, that race may not have to be specifically mentioned in reporting for a connection to be made. Walker et al. (1996) determine that perceptions of crime are shaped by highly publicised crimes that feature on the news and as a result, many assume that "the typical offender is African American or Hispanic" (Chiricos & Eschholz 2002, p.402). Mauer (1999, p.276) further supports this view, explaining that whites have long viewed criminal behaviour as an "inherent characteristic of blacks". A growing number of media effects experiments have suggested that distorted portrayals of blacks in the news may "influence social reality judgements regarding race and crime" (Dixon 2008, p.106). However, media effects theory is a highly complex area of literature, and it must not be ignored that there may be other influences such as family and communities which may impact judgements surrounding race and crime (Livingstone 1996).

In terms of the criminal typification of race, Gomes and Williams (1990) found that African Americans are featured in stories about crime "in numbers that are exceptionally disproportional to the percentage of such crimes they commit" (p.61). Research found that one in 15 black men is incarcerated compared to one in 106 white men and blacks are substantially overrepresented in both news coverage and prison populations, relative to their proportion of the population (Pew Center on the States 2008 cited by Miller 2010). News media commonly portray accused black criminals in "scowling mugshots or in video clips being led in handcuffs by White police officers" (Entman 1990 cited by Welch 2007, p.281). Additionally, Dixon and Linz (2000) found that blacks were overrepresented in television news compared to police crime reports, whereas whites were underrepresented as perpetrators, thus "the image of violent criminals as young black males is routinely reinforced" (Young 1985 cited by Welch 2007, p.281; Dixon 2006). In addition, victims of police brutality are often stripped of their victimhood through negative media portrayals (Dowler et al. 2006; Jackson 2016). Given that African Americans are so commonly linked with criminality, it would suggest that the news media activates black

stereotypes amongst regular news consumers, therefore making such racially-charged, negative stereotypes highly problematic.

Social stereotypes are commonly defined as “cognitive structures that contain the perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs and expectations about human groups” and in themselves are not necessarily damaging unless used in ways noted above (Hamilton et al. 1986 cited by Hurwitz & Peffley 1997, p.377). Exposure to mass media imagery may have a long-term effect on viewers’ constructions of social reality (Gerbner 1990 cited by Dixon 2007). Studies have investigated how audiences may process stereotypical information regarding racial groups and black criminality. Results have suggested that people often use shortcuts derived from frequently or recently activated stereotypes to make social judgements (Dixon 2008). Race is an especially salient social category and the portrayal of blacks as criminal suspects will potentially be memorable for news consumers, especially to those individuals who harbour stereotypes of blacks as dangerous criminals (Oliver et al. 2002). The Trayvon Martin case demonstrated that the black body has been widely construed as an object to be feared and “in moments of violent transgression, harshly disciplined” (McCann 2014, p.482). Recurrent images are so widespread that it would not be surprising if much of the American society now subconsciously accepts the portrayal of blacks as criminals (Welch 2007).

The Role of Citizen Journalism and Social Media Empowering Citizens

The Internet revolution has paved the way for a new style of journalism which challenges the mainstream media. New media technologies, such as social media, have enabled the growth of the ‘citizen journalism’ phenomenon (Riaz et al. 2011). There are several definitions of citizen journalism, but it is widely recognised as “journalism engaged in by someone who has not undergone formal training to be a journalist...and is not subject to oversight or censorship” (Korson 2015, p.366). The public can use Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs and social media, to promote its own versions of reality and problematize hegemonic visions presented in the mainstream media (Korson 2015). Citizens can create alternative narratives by criticising these visions and bring attention to issues within the mainstream media that other audiences may not have identified. In terms of this study, these hegemonic visions are negative representations and stereotypes of blacks routinely reinforced by the news media. Scholars have optimistically claimed that technological developments have given ordinary citizens more power for information gathering and dissemination (Carr et al. 2014). Citizen journalists often include citizen voices as official sources with some scholars arguing that this offers more diversity in content than the mainstream news (Carr et al. 2014). The individual, who publishes information online, may intend for it to benefit a community, perhaps highlighting injustices in mainstream coverage (Carpenter 2010). Citizen journalists, who create alternative media coverage, contrast a reality that appears to “oppose the conventions and representations of the mainstream media” (Atton 2009, p.268).

Social media has enabled the expression of alternative viewpoints that are free from influence and not a part of mainstream news media. Events in Syria and the Arab Spring reinforced the importance of citizen journalism, allowing the dissemination of information “unpolluted by hegemonic frames of reference” (Korson 2015, p.364). Despite social media not ultimately being free from bias or influence, it

provides a more streamlined avenue for citizens to promote their own interpretation of the news (Korson 2015). Citizen journalism practices create empowering public spheres, enabling self-education and community discussions (Downing & Rodriguez 2003). There is a broad scholarly consensus that the Internet and particularly social media, has expanded the “collective action repertoire” of organisation actors, such as social movements and grass roots organisations (Breuer et al. 2015, p. 766).

Existing research has suggested that social media can influence collective action, such as providing mobilising information, creating opinion exchange opportunities and coordinating demonstrations (Valenzuela 2013). Mainstream media has limited capacity to transmit mobilising information as this would violate neutrality norms, suggesting that citizens must get their alternative information from citizen journalists via social media (Valenzuela 2013). Shirky (2008) has argued that social media tools have enabled new forms of group formation, making communication faster and invariably better as it promotes rapid communication whilst increasing the speed of group action. Those who experience racial injustices such as police brutality, and are likely to have their protests disparaged as acts of rioting are those that are turning to digital activism (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). The dominant media’s symbolic representation of race frequently undermines minority groups while social media movements allow individuals to express their frustration and solidarity (Jackson 2016). Rodriguez (2011) emphasises the importance of producing alternative media messages, suggesting that social media enabled individuals to produce their own images of themselves and their environment. This is particularly important for groups in society that are routinely oppressed, such as African Americans (Bonilla & Rosa 2015; Freelon et al. 2016). Twitter is a unique platform for identifying and articulating racial injustices from the in-group perspectives of racialized populations (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). It enables groups to share their stories and connect with likeminded people instantly, reimagining group identities and constructing counter-narratives. Twitter campaigns, such as the one considered in this research, namely #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, can be understood as powerful counter-narratives to racial injustices and treatment of African Americans in the United States.

Traditional agenda setting theory and the development of reversed agenda setting
For decades, the notion of agenda setting has been one of the most influential paradigms in media and communication research and was formulated during a time in which traditional media had monopoly power over content creation and formulation (Jennings & Miron 2004 cited by Walgrave & Aelst 2006; Luo 2014). McCombs and Shaw (1972) who developed the theory found that if the media highlighted particular issues, these issues would be perceived as particularly important in the audiences’ minds. Lippmann (1922) noted that the news media is a primary source of the ideas we have about the larger world of public affairs, a world which for most citizens is “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” (McCombs 2002, p.2). Priorities of the media influence the priorities of the public and elements that are prominent in the media are likely to become more prominent in the public mind (McCombs 2002).

To test their hypothesis, McCombs and Shaw chose the 1968 American presidential election campaign to identify what the residents of Chapel Hill, North Carolina

thought the most important current issues were. The findings suggested that the main effect of the media coverage during election campaigns was to draw voters' attention to and increase the salience of issues, rather than influencing voters to vote for a particular party or candidate (Skogerbø et al. 2016). The media are persuasive in focusing public attention on specific events, issues and persons and determining the importance that people should attach to public matters (Shaw 1979). Although agenda setting does not assume a necessarily immediate impact, it does assume a direct impact of the media on the audience's attitudes and cognitions (Shaw 1979). Within the agenda setting process, the relationship between the media agenda and the public agenda was believed to be "unidirectional" and the public, known as the audience, could not communicate its interests back to the media (Luo 2014, p.1291). The emergence of social media has generated attention to reverse agenda setting. Interpersonal conversations about public issues have always been an important part of the public sphere (Habermas 1962 cited by Neuman et al. 2014) and it is now being studied whether these conversations can have an effect on mass media.

Developments in media technology have led to changes in the public's information environment and the increase in media channels has created a problem of scattered attention and attention scarcity (Schudon 1995, Lee 2005). Thus, traditional news media is losing its relevance in the current media environment (Kushin 2010). The proliferation of new media, audience fragmentation and the decentralisation of communication through online activities has resulted in a complication of traditional agenda setting theories (Luo 2014; Roberts et al. 2002 cited by Cheng & Chan 2015). Web 2.0 has enabled the production and circulation of user generated content in real time, creating a new interactive culture (Arguete 2017). In early 2000, blogs became an alternative source of information to traditional media, over time they have been deemed as a legitimate source of information (Arguete 2017; Moon & Hadley 2014). Twitter has supplemented the traditional investigative role of print journalists as well as the role of providers of information about breaking news events (Ahmad 2010). They are seen to be credible sources as individuals are giving first-hand accounts of events and incidents, leading to the development of reverse agenda setting. Reversed agenda setting refers to "one medium's agenda setting impact on other media's agenda" (McCombs et al. 2000 cited by Lee 2005, p. 13). With the versatile nature of the Internet, scholars have conducted studies to scrutinise traditional agenda setting theory and highlight the empowered online public. A study by Lee et al. (2005) found that conversations on Internet bulletin boards significantly influenced newspaper coverage of the 2000 South Korean elections. Additionally, in post-Mao China, the local government authority and the ruling party's political agenda were challenged by online forums (Luo 2014; Zhou & Moy 2007 cited by Cheng & Chan 2015). The studies demonstrated how Chinese Internet users have the ability to reverse the agenda setting function of the mass media (Wang 2008 cited by Cheng & Chan 2015), therefore attempting to democratise the media-public relationship.

Some internet users build their own community and play an active role for the interest of their community. People who use the internet for such a purpose are called 'Netizens' (Lee et al. 2005). Netizens often enjoy an unrestricted freedom of expression, free from government influence, in cyberspace and can actively debate various issues online (Kitchin 1998 cited by Lee et al. 2005). It has been argued by Luo (2014) that online public opinion has emerged as a competitive agenda setting

force which can make certain social and political issues become more salient. The omnipotence of online public opinion, free from restriction, has been hailed by Chinese netizens, claiming “if all netizens yell together, there would be three earthquakes in China” (Ou 2004 cited by Luo 2014, p.1290). Groups can be formed with shared beliefs and viewpoints and by working together they have the potential to be influential (Trepete 2006). Traditional media has failed to provide interactive opportunities and has not enabled engagement in the content creation process (Kolbitsch & Maurer 2006 cited by, Kushin 2010). The two-way interactive capacity and the decentralised nature of the Internet, particularly social media networks, has given more power to people whose agendas may not have normally been reported by the major mass media (Chafee & Metzger 2001). Those with access to online communication technologies can report directly to the Web, “bypassing the hierarchical and elite-controlled traditional news media” (Bowman & Willis 2003 cited by Luo 2014, p. 1291).

The rise of interactive online media has contributed to scholars hypothesizing about what could be a shift in the traditional agenda setting theory as voices online are becoming too difficult to ignore. This is due to the rise of reversed agenda setting studies which have provided evidence that online spaces are becoming more influential than ever (Lee 2005, Lee et al. 2005; Cheng & Chan 2015; Jiang 2014; Kushin 2010). As Chafee and Metzger (2001, p. 375) noted:

“the key problem for agenda setting theory will change from what issues the media tell people to think about to what issues people tell the media they want to think about.”

Based on the literature review, the following aim and objectives have been identified:

Aim:

To explore whether and to what extent hashtag campaigns on Twitter can have reverse agenda setting effects on news media coverage. Empirical evidence will be used to identify whether Twitter can be used as a tool by groups in society to influence mainstream news agendas.

Objectives:

1. To study the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag content to identify common negative representations and stereotypes associated with African Americans.
2. To study U.S. newspaper coverage of the hashtag campaign and identify whether the hashtag had reverse agenda setting effects, by bringing light to the misrepresentation of African Americans.

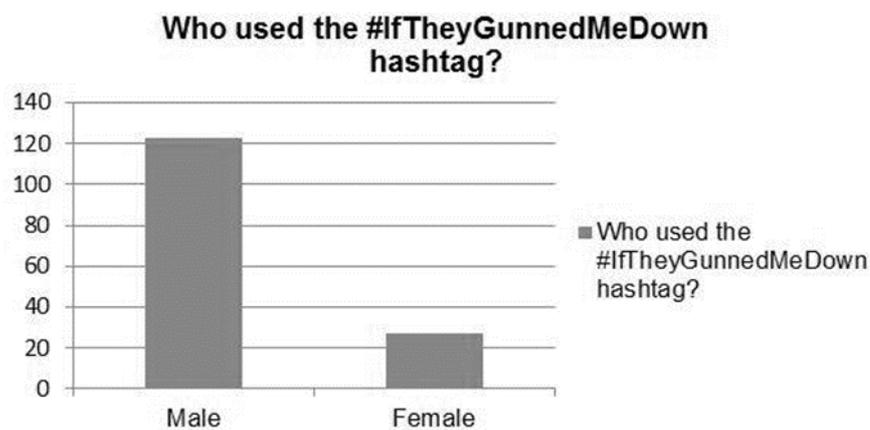
DISCUSSION

This study tested the reverse agenda setting effects between the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag and U.S. news media coverage. The comparison enables the researcher to identify whether the agenda of those who used the hashtag had an impact on the coverage reporting of the Ferguson riots and whether the issue of continual negative stereotyping by the media was addressed.

Twitter Analysis

#IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign demonstrates that there tends to be a narrow range of representations of African Americans in the mainstream media and those representations tend to reinforce existing negative stereotypes. Gorham (1999) suggests that stereotypes can be thought of as a particular subset of social reality beliefs; they are “understandings about particular social groups that we have learned from our social world” (p.232). However, such representations are not universally agreed upon. The contrasting images of individuals represent an act of solidarity, reinforcing the view of African Americans that anyone could be portrayed as a violent criminal by the media. Twitter has become a powerful tool in which groups in society can voice their opinions and issues against the mainstream media.

Figure 1: Proportion of males and females who used the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag.



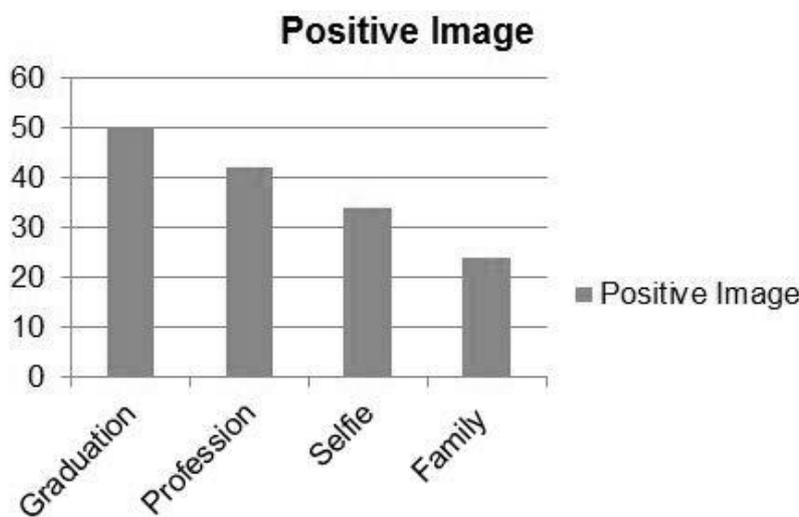
Studying which gender used the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag more frequently gives a greater insight into which gender feels they are misrepresented by the mainstream media more often. 82% of users were males using the hashtag, compared to 18% of females, suggesting that African American males across America recognise that the media continually misrepresents them. Using the hashtag was a way of showing that any African American male could easily be targeted. Brown was reportedly known to his friends “gentle giant” (SLT Today 2014), yet many news outlets used a visual which led to people calling him a ‘thug’ who was flashing ‘gang signs’. Tyler Atkins who used the hashtag said, “This affects me deeply because the stories of Mike Brown...Trayvon Martin...and many more could have been me” (New York Times 2014). Studies have found that although most crime is committed by whites, the common perception is that the majority of crime is committed by blacks (Gilens 1996). The iconography of black criminal threat is so well established in contemporary society that “today’s prevailing criminal predator has become a euphemism for young black male” (Barak 1994, p.137).

Entman (2006) suggests that media images can have huge influence, significantly affecting the life chances of young black men. According to the Opportunity Agenda (2011) study, public perceptions and attitudes towards young black males can create barriers to advancement within society, but also make their minority position in society seem natural or inevitable. Media-driven biases against black males limits

empathy for them in discriminatory encounters. Black victims of violence are represented in ways that “diminish their victimhood and damage their representations” therefore influencing public opinions of events (Jackson 2015, p.315). This view is further supported by the *Color Of Change* (2015) study, which suggests that repeated exposure to unbalanced and distorted portrayals of black males in the media can lead to the development of implicit biases against them. This includes the media inaccurately under-representing white people in crime coverage, which consequently intensifies stereotypes of black people and suggests that they are responsible for their own deaths (Jackson 2015; Wing 2014).

An in-depth analysis of the images and accompanying text found a recurring theme surrounding women. Women posted images which could potentially be hypersexualised by the media, reinforcing the burden of sexual stereotyping that black women often face from the media (Wyatt 1997). Profession, family or achievements are ignored in order to focus on appearance. Wyatt (1997) suggests that black women are depersonalised by their lack of sexual control and sexual irresponsibility within the media, making it difficult for them to express their sexuality without being defined by it. One Twitter user used the caption “Don’t judge a book by its cover”, with the image of the woman in military uniform and an outfit perhaps worn for a night out. This demonstrates that the Twitter user is acknowledging that the media would choose the image which presented the individual in a sexual way, consequently making her seem inferior. Both ‘woman’ and ‘black person’ are considered to be lower status identities in the US (Reid & Comas-Diaz 1990; Dixon 2006). Black women in particular occupy a low status in society where they are in the position of being subjected to both racism and sexism (Crenshaw 1993; King 1998).

Figure 2: Positive images that Twitter users would want the media to use.

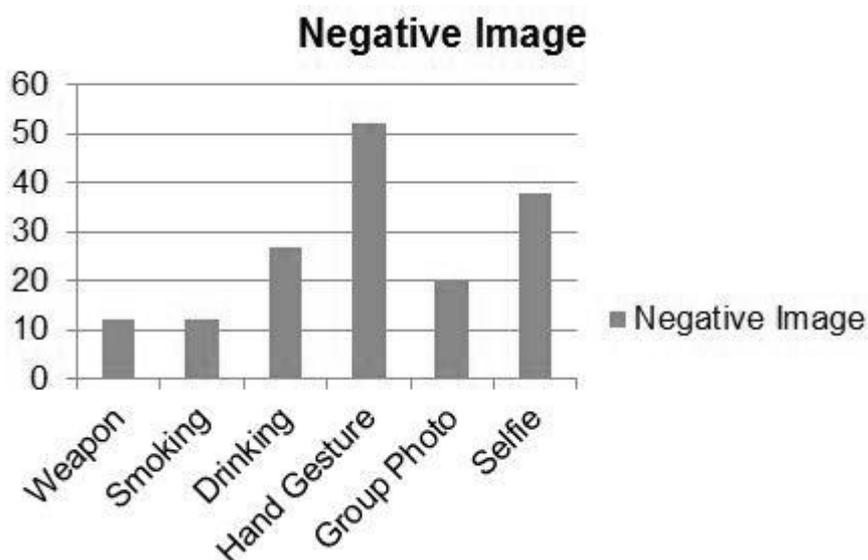


The #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign showed a powerful juxtaposition between two or more images. The positive images that individuals posted were those that they would want used, despite assuming that the media would portray them in a negative way. Twitter has become a unique platform for identifying and contesting racial injustices from the in-group perspectives of racialized populations (Bonilla &

Rosa 2015), offering a way for groups to collectively construct counter-narratives and reimagine group identities. Some 33% of the images were from graduation and 28% of images were professional, such as the military, teaching and motivational speaking. Posting images from college graduations and professions demonstrates that individuals want to be recognised as hard-working and positive contributors to society. It reinforces the idea that news consumers will only see negative stereotyping of the victim, to justify unlawful killing by white police officers. This view is further supported by Dowler et al. (2006) who suggest that images of victims are complex and rife with racial stereotypes which saturate media portrayals of victims. The campaign enabled individuals to produce alternative media messages which both challenge the mainstream media and give individuals the opportunity to produce their own images of themselves and their environment (Jackson 2016). Rodriguez (2011) suggests that through hashtag movements, individuals are able to create new social realities and disrupt the traditional stereotypes which are imposed on groups by outside sources.

Analysis of the accompanying captions was conducted to find recurring positive descriptions which supported the images. However, it must be noted that within the 140-tweet character limit, individuals often devoted the characters to the negative descriptions.

Figure 3: Negative images that Twitter users think the media would use.



The negative images suggested by Twitter users demonstrated how easily the media can manipulate images to make audiences think a certain way. Pictures chosen by news media outlets to represent African American victims of police brutality and other violence will often cast the victim in an unfavourable light (Jackson 2016). How can an individual be assumed to be threatening and/or violent? Oliver (2003) suggests that a host of variables can play contributory roles in priming thoughts of danger or aggression, including age, dress and gender. However, the frequency in which black men have been the target of police aggression demonstrates that race plays an undeniable role in false assumptions of danger and criminality (Oliver 2003).

The results show that in 52% of the images the individual or group is shown using hand gestures. The original image of Michael Brown showed him using hand gestures which many thought was a gang sign; however, these views were based entirely on assumptions by those who may have subconsciously accepted negative stereotypes of black people (Welch 2007). The high proportion of Twitter users posting images with hand gestures demonstrates that the media can easily take these gestures out of context and associate the individual or group with being gang-affiliated. Some of the images included the individual using their middle finger, which could be associated with aggression and being anti-establishment. However, it must be noted that the real context of the images is not known; therefore, the subjects could have been joking around with friends and family. In addition to images showing individuals using hand gestures, 13% of the images posted were group photos, with some using hand gestures. The positive images showed group photos of individuals smiling, laughing and in military uniform compared to group images of non-smiling, casually-clothed individuals, often using hand-gestures. The comparison highlighted the way the media could portray the same group of friends or colleagues. It has been previously discussed that each instance of exposure to a black criminal will activate a stereotype of black criminality (Dixon 2008).

In addition to hand gestures, images featured weapons, leading to audiences automatically assuming that the individual was threatening, violent and dangerous. However, it is unknown whether weapons are real or legal. Violence and youth, especially males have always been closely linked in news media (Welch 2007). In a National Race Survey in 1991, a clear majority showed that whites and blacks agreed with the statement "blacks are aggressive and violent", other research indicated that the public associate blacks with violent street crime (Welch 2007). Individuals may have chosen to post images with weapons to demonstrate how a fake weapon can be taken out of context to portray them as aggressive and violent. An interesting juxtaposition used by some individuals showed an image of them holding a gun whilst in the military, compared with holding a gun at home. As previously discussed, individuals may have been attempting to construct counter-narratives and reimagine group identities (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). This comparison suggests that the military image would be positive; showing the individual dedicating their life to defending the country, yet the individual would be depicted as violent if using a gun at home. The media may want to engender fear and give sense that young people are less likely to have necessary restraint in handling dangerous weapons (Blumstein 1995).

Further analysis was conducted to discover recurring negative descriptions of themselves that individuals felt that the media would use. Words and phrases such as "thug" and "gang affiliated" accompanied the images. Individuals who used these descriptions are assuming that audiences will automatically, and subconsciously, develop negative associations without knowing the victims background. Stereotypes such as the "menacing street thug", criminals and the disadvantaged are demoralising, reducing self-esteem and expectations amongst African Americans (Welch 2007, p.276. Hurwitz & Peffley 1997; The Opportunity Agenda 2011). In media coverage of police brutality, suffering black males can easily be presumed to be solely responsible for their own fates. Without contextual explanations, the average person is left to assume that these black males are inclined towards criminality. Often, these kinds of negative representations of victims of colour often

strip them of their status as victims, influencing some to believe the individual “had it coming” (Jackson 2016, p.316).

Rhetorical Questions

As previously discussed, social media is a tool which enables the expression of alternative viewpoints, promoting alternative interpretations of the news (Atton 2009; Korson 2015). An interesting result from the Twitter discourse analysis was that Twitter users frequently used rhetorical questions to accompany the images they had posted. In the case of the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign, Twitter users were arguing that they already knew what image the media would use. Rhetorical questions included “How would I be painted?”, and “Which deserves to get shot?”. Rhetorical questions directed at the media creates an ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ mentality, as African Americans have recognised that they will always be targeted by the American media. This group behaviour is linked to social identity theory proposed by Tajfel (1978, 1979) which assumes that acts of solidarity, aim to achieve positive self-esteem and self-enhancement (Trepte 2006; Abrams & Hogg 1988). By directing rhetorical questions at the media, it suggests that African Americans as a group are more often than not discriminated against. Perhaps the most impactful rhetorical question from the sample was “Which one would the media use to justify my murder?” because it reinforced the reason for the hashtag campaign becoming so popular amongst African Americans. One of the main arguments of the campaign is that media distortion and inaccurate portrayals can ‘justify’ unlawful killing by police.

Newspaper Analysis

A content analysis of American newspapers, such as The Washington Post, The New York Times and St. Louis Business Journal was conducted to determine whether the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign had reversed agenda setting effects. Due to the limitations of the study it was necessary to sacrifice qualitative data to gather rich and insightful quantitative data about the newspaper coverage. Results are focused primarily on whether the news media reported the Twitter campaign and whether the misrepresentation of African Americans in the media had become a topical issue. The results of the content analysis allow a direct link to be found and determine whether reversed agenda setting had occurred.

The results found that nearly half (47%) featured a selection of popular tweets from the campaign and 43% featured screenshots of images from Twitter posted by users. 19% of articles featured interviews with individuals who used the hashtag, however the articles that did include interviews used individuals whose tweets had gone viral or the inventor of the hashtag (C.J Lawrence). While the potential impact of Twitter on news media has been discussed in the academic arena, few scholars have discussed the implications of Twitter in a journalistic context, such as the process of information gathering for reports, yet literature is growing in this area (Paulussen & Harder 2014; Moon & Hadley 2014). It has been suggested that the news media should provide “fair and balanced information that represents voices of diverse groups” to be democratic (Moon & Hadley 2014). This has meant that changing technology, especially the growth of social media has had a great impact on journalism across traditional news media. Reporters rely on the internet for news

gathering, fact checking, contacting sources and obtaining story ideas (Arkteki Group 2011; Pavlik 2000). Over 90% of journalists said that their reliance on social media has increased and serves as a reliable tool for sourcing stories (Middlesberg/SNCR 2011). The use of Twitter content from the campaign shows that news media is now taking online activism, sometimes labelled by cyber pessimists as 'slacktivism' seriously, as journalists are using content from online campaigns as a reliable source for their stories (Gerbaudo 2012; Morozov 2011). Even though interviews with individuals were not conducted as much as expected, the voice of the African American community was being heard as images and tweets were included in the reports.

Reports featured subsections about the rise and use of social media activism to voice opinions during times of crisis, particularly #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. Social media has enabled individuals to express alternative viewpoints from the mainstream media and interact with others who may share similar frustrations (Jackson 2016). As the hashtag gained popularity and more African Americans joined the movement to highlight the issue of racial stereotyping, it meant that the media could not ignore widespread dissatisfaction. By prominently featuring sections about social media activism within wider reports on Ferguson, it suggests that the media is not ignoring the wave of online activism and dissatisfaction. Despite the digital divide within the United States, it must be noted that the percentage of African Americans who use Twitter (22%) is much higher than that of white Americans (16%) (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). African Americans are working collectively online to highlight racial injustices and when campaigns enter mainstream media reports; this reflects that they are doing so successfully. As previously noted, African Americans are turning to digital activism as their protests are often labelled as rioting and looting (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). Coverage of the hashtag campaign was positive and highlighted how Twitter has become a new platform for bringing important issues to light.

Reversed Agenda Setting

After studying the results of the newspaper content analysis, it can be argued that reversed agenda setting did occur. The volume of coverage over the week period demonstrates that Twitter has become a powerful tool in bringing issues to light and subsequently forcing the media to cover the issue of racial inequality and media stereotyping. Social media has enabled individuals from all over the globe to voice their opinions, proving to be an invaluable source for oppressed groups in society. The Arab Springs in 2011 became known as a Twitter revolution, helping organise collective action (Gerbaudo 2012). It is evident that trending topics and viral hashtags such as #IfTheyGunnedMeDown have the potential to influence media coverage. This finding is consistent with Kushin's (2010) study which suggests that social media may not be clearly setting the news media agenda, but it does have the potential to influence coverage. Thus, Twitter campaigns may not have direct influence over what the news media report yet they do have the potential to influence how certain incidents are reported and highlight issues that need to be discussed. It must be noted that some scholars argue that Twitter is still being used "mainly as a place to follow celebrity gossip and popular culture" and its ability to set the agenda is not as strong as traditional news media (Thorndyke 2012, p.13). However, this study has demonstrated that Twitter is gaining significant power to affect the mainstream media agenda and become a public space for contentious

issues to be discussed amongst groups whose agenda would not normally be reported by the mainstream media.

Many used the hashtag as a protest and to argue that their image would be distorted and filtered through negative stereotypes. The results found that 91% of the articles featured and discussed the issue of the media negatively stereotyping young black males. This is an interesting finding, because although fewer than 50% of articles featured tweet content from the hashtag campaign, the main agenda was to highlight the issue of negative stereotyping. That being said, it can be argued that the campaign was successful in influencing the media to highlight the issue of negative stereotyping, within the wider issue of police brutality and the Ferguson riots. Although not all articles discussed the issue at length, its inclusion indicates that the agenda of African Americans did have a slight impact on the coverage of Ferguson. The notion of reversed agenda setting suggests that journalists may respond to actual or perceived public interests and thus the public agenda can be seen as influencing the media agenda (Neuman et al. 2014). Garcia (2014) argues that Twitter is a "reflection of the public agenda" (p.249) and so must not be ignored by the mainstream media. The high percentage of articles covering the issue of negative stereotyping reflects journalists taking note and discussing the agenda of African Americans.

The use of Twitter content from the campaign being used as a source also demonstrates that reversed agenda setting did occur. Social media has become an alternative news source to traditional media outlets (Arguete 2017). It could be suggested that social media has become a 21st century newspaper, offering alternative views and updating people around the world on current issues. Twitter allows users to access stories from a first-person perspective, undistorted and truthful, whereas traditional news media reports it in a second-hand context. It offers real-time discussion, making it an alternative breaking news platform. It has empowered citizens, especially those whose agendas are not reported by the mainstream media, to voice their opinions on particular issues. This has also meant that the news media are now using these social media voices as credible sources to support reports on contentious issues, such as police brutality and negative stereotyping. By using content from the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign, it demonstrates that journalists are now relying on social media to source and inform their stories. This finding supports the scrutiny of traditional agenda setting theory by Lee et al. (2005), highlighting that the public have become more empowered and the traditional media are becoming increasingly reliant on user generated content.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided an insight into the relationship between hashtag campaigns on Twitter and the influence they have over traditional news media. The findings of the study support research that social media has become a place for online activism, especially for those who are often targeted by the news media in a negative way (Bonilla & Rosa 2015; Rodriguez 2011; Atton 2009). Individuals who used the #IfTheyGunnedMeDown hashtag have realised the potential of social media platforms such as Twitter as a way to express dissatisfaction and voice opinions that, without them, would not be reported by the mainstream media.

Reversed agenda setting. McCombs (2005) highlighted the importance of research investigating reversed agenda setting in the current digital media environment. Previous studies have given scholars a greater understanding of online media, particularly blogs and online discussions on bulletin boards (Lee, et al. 2005; Lee 2005; Jiang 2014; Cheng & Chan 2015); however, this study has focused primarily on content from Twitter, contributing to studies such as Kushin's (2010) dissertation.

These findings reveal that Twitter has become a powerful force for reversed agenda setting. The #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign highlighted the issue of negative stereotyping within news reports about incidents of police brutality, suggesting that images chosen can strip individuals of their victimhood. Although the study did not focus on whether representations of Michael Brown or other victims changed, it studied whether the hashtag campaign could influence the mainstream media to discuss the issue of negative media stereotyping. The findings show that reversed agenda setting did occur, as the news media featured subsections in their reports about online activism and the issue of media representations. These findings corroborate with Kushin's (2010) study which found that "Twitter appears to be one tool, but not the major tool, that helps the news media determine what to cover" (p.140). The results contribute to a body of reversed agenda setting research, by exploring the capabilities of Twitter to influence mainstream media agendas.

Relevance of negative stereotyping. Hashtag campaigns, such as #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, have highlighted the long history of inaccurate portrayal and victim blaming suffered by African Americans within the mainstream media (Bonilla & Rosa 2015). Michael Brown's controversial representation is not an isolated occurrence and the hashtag campaign demonstrated this. Many other victims of colour have been depicted in negative ways including Trayvon Martin, another unarmed teenager who was portrayed as a criminal who deserved to be shot and victims of Hurricane Katrina (Benash 2014; Jackson 2016). Through hypothetical scenarios, the campaign drew attention to implicit and explicit forms of racism that appear through representations of African Americans and other black people. By including an analysis of how individuals used Twitter to highlight the negative stereotypes they face, it adds a deeper understanding of the way social media is being utilized to bring these issues to light.

This study has enhanced an understanding of who sets the media agenda in an ever-changing media landscape. It has demonstrated that the public now has a role in setting the news media agenda, especially if they are voicing their opinions on social media sites such as Twitter. However, it can be debated how influential the public are over media agendas, studies have shown that online public opinion can have little effect (Kushin 2010; Jiang 2014). Whilst the results of the study did not focus primarily on the change in representations of African Americans, it did demonstrate how important social media is in shaping which issues are discussed in the news media. Many important insights can be taken from this study, including the powerful counter-narratives created by African Americans to highlight their mistreatment by the traditional media, as well as social media evolution as becoming a powerful tool to influence mainstream media agendas.

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