

The Police & Color Discrepancy in America  
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## The Police Color Discrepancy in America

Throughout the history of our nation, we have prided ourselves on the fact that we are a country comprised of immigrants. We as a union revel in the fact that we are separate but equal, and that we are a melting pot of uniqueness. From our first days in school we are taught that everyone is equal, and in the eyes of the law we are innocent until proven guilty. That ideology may very well be true, but not if your skin tone is darker than your caucasian counterparts.

Nowhere is this concept more evident than with the case of Stephon Clark. According to a play by play off the incident on abcnews.com, on March 18th, 2018 Clark was in the backyard of his grandmother's home in Sacramento, California. In an instant his life would be over when two Sacramento Police officers who were responding to a 911 call about someone breaking car windows in the 7500 block of 29th street was seen in his vicinity. (Bates, 2018) A Sacramento 911 helicopter was also dispatched to the call to help apprehend the suspect. The helicopter relayed information to the officer below stating that the had a visual on a suspect with a "tool bar" in a nearby backyard, and began directing the officer to that yard. (Bates, 2018) When the officers entered the backyard they came upon Mr. Clark standing in the backyard. One of the officers "saw" a cell phone in Stephon Clark's hand and mistook it for a firearm. Both officers then opened fire and shot over twenty rounds in the direction of Stephon Clark, striking and killing him on the spot.

On the surface this shooting could seem to be justified. It was dark, the officer's senses were on edge and one tiny mistake could have meant life or death for them. This type of incident happens all the time, it requires careful training on the part of the officers. However, when you look deeper into the case and the hundreds happening on a daily basis you notice a disturbing

trend. Police officers are cherry picking whom they distribute mercy to. When officers happen upon a black suspect, they tend to shoot first, and ask questions later.

There are plenty of instances where discrepancy is evident, but for the purposes of this paper I will point out the most recent. In February, there was a mass shooting at a school in Parkland, Florida. When Officer Leonard (The arresting officer) was confronted with the shooter on the street, the arrest takes a different tone entirely as reported by the Miami Herald. “He looked like a typical high school student,” Leonard said. He was wearing clothes that matched the description on Leonard’s police radio. “Could this be the person? Is this who I need to stop?” Leonard said he thought to himself. So he pulled his patrol vehicle over and confronted the man outside the Pelican Pointe community. “He complied with my commands and was taken into custody without any weapons,” the officer said. “This is what we train for. We hope it never happens.”

This is in stark contrast to how Stephon Clark was treated. The Parkland shooter was identified, and known to be a serious threat to officers and citizens. Clark was innocently minding his own business, in his family's backyard, and had committed no crime. “The autopsy — commissioned by the family of Mr. Clark, 22, and conducted by Dr. Bennet Omalu, a private medical examiner — showed that he was shot three times in his lower back, twice near his right shoulder, once in his neck and once under an armpit. He was also shot in the leg. The neck wound was from the side, the doctor found, and he said that while the shot to the leg hit Mr. Clark in the front, it appeared to have been fired after he was already falling. (Robles, Del Real, 2018) Stephon Brown didn’t stand a chance. There was no calm questioning and presumption of

innocence in this case. Clark was presumed guilty on sight, simply because his melanin was a darker pigment.

This is just one example of the gross miscarriage of justice in recent news. I chose the topic of color discrepancy because I have witnessed countless incidents like these first hand. Having an African American father, and a Puerto Rican Mother, I was exposed to man behind the curtain of U.S. Justice System from an early age. I've seen our inner cities being turned into police states, and war zones, but only in those areas where there is a high presence of minorities.

Another reason for choosing this subject is because I believe that we can use both Invitational Rhetoric and Feminist ideologies to create a space for true dialog to happen. If we understand why this is happening, and how we can express our outrage in a productive manner we can begin close the chasm of destruction that is plaguing our country. This needs to happen, and it needs to happen soon. The United States is beginning to spiral back in time to when our civil rights were non-existent. Both the minority, and women need to understand the power they wield, and how to use it to make the changes this country is so desperately crying out for.

Starting by voting, non-violently protesting, or even by just creating more awareness about the current issues that they face. All it takes is one voice to light the spark, and if history has proven anything to us, it's that all it takes is one voice to create a movement of change.

When you look at the racial events that plague our poorer communities, you tend to regard them as isolated incidents, with no seemingly obvious connection between them. Utilizing Agenda-Setting Theory, we can unwrap the way the media outlets utilize it to keep society mentally bound and unable to discern the facts from their carefully constructed plot.

Agenda-Setting Theory is based on the hypothesis that “The mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of issues on their new agenda to the public agenda. (Sowards 2013). In other words, we judge what's important based on what the media tells us is important.

Agenda-Setting Theory can be broken down into levels. The first is used by researchers to see how the media uses societal issues to influence what people should think about and act upon. The second level focuses on the issue and how people should think about them. To better describe this you can use the example bitcoin. Just a few short years ago, bitcoin was essentially worth less than a cup of coffee at McDonalds. Because the media chose to focus it's stories on the rise of crypto-currencies, the market has since exploded into a multi-billion dollar industry, complete with ATM's and just about every corner bodega and deli, vying for a way to accept it as payment.

In doing this the media outlets will use tactics such as Priming and Framing. Priming simply means that the media will take a subject and give it value, thus that subject will get more air time over other issues of equal importance. For the terms of my paper, I will discuss how the media chooses which to issues to give more air time to, i.e. the war that's about to start in Syria over the two young black men arrested in a Philadelphia Starbucks for simply waiting for their friend to arrive before ordering.

Framing is “a process of selective control.” (Communication Theory 2011) This happens quite frequently and is intrinsically tied into Priming. The media will use framing to choose what issues are important, then by using priming they give those issues more screen time. Never have these two issues been more important than with the Black Lives Matter Movement and the institution of racism in our country.

Agenda setting theory is extremely vital in understanding how the media is shaping the country's views on politics, gender, education, and most importantly race. I chose this theory as the framework of my paper, because all the information that we as Americans consume is based on what the media tells us. We form our ideologies, and make critical decisions based on the information that is provided. If that information biased and corrupt, no matter how slight, then it has the power to steer the public in any direction it wants.

When the media chooses to focus on the Officers in the cases in the Black Lives Matter movement, then it's taking power and justice away from the victims and their families. When the media chooses to take subjects like President Trump's fifteenth trip to Mar A Lago, and focus its airtime, research and manpower solely on that, then it forces the serious issues like racism and gender equality to take a below the fold spot.

Finally the reason I chose Agenda-Setting Theory to frame my paper around, was because I wanted to expose this schema that media uses and start the groundwork for allowing people to think critically about this issue. This way, they can start to pick apart the agenda on the table and learn to figure out the the real issues from the "Fake News" as Trump supporters are so fond of stating.

When Dr. Martin Luther King J.R. delivered his now famous "I have a dream" speech on August 28, 1963, he dreamed of a day when Black men and White men could join hands and be considered equals in our society. He could not however, foreshadow how society would slowly sink back into segregation and racism with the help a divided country, and media outlets helping to propagate it.

On March 18th, 2018 Stephon Clark was sitting in his backyard spending time with family, when he was rushed upon by two Sacramento Police officers. Clark was then shot over 20 times, and subsequently died from his wounds. On April 12th, 2018 Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson walked into a Philadelphia Starbucks to wait for their friend to arrive. They had been there less than two minutes, before an employee arrested them for not ordering anything.

When glancing at these two cases on the headlines of your local paper, or when scrolling past them in your facebook news feed you wouldn't notice the bias that some media outlets use to engender their version of events. Using Agenda-Setting Theory and the concepts of priming and framing, we can break down the incidents and begin to see just how discriminative America still is in 2018.

Whenever an incident involving race happens in the United States, the mass media have to measure the index of curiosity. This index will tell them how the general public feels about an event, and acts as a model on how to proceed with the information gathered about said incident. They do this by priming the issue. When the news outlets want to prime an event, issue, or story, they will bring up prior news stories that they believe can be related to the new incident, and try to look for links with which they can tie the old story to the new one. When Stephon Clark was shot and killed, the media chose to correlate them with previous incidents involving Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Both were young black males who died at the hands of police officers, and both helped to spark the "Black Lives Matter" movement. Priming the news story not only tells the media whether the public thinks the incident was good or bad, it helps them lay the groundwork for shaping the story they feel the public needs to hear.

Once the media has a sense of how the public will respond emotionally about events, they move onto the framing stage of Agenda-Setting Theory. During the framing stage they begin to shape the story and influence the public by deciding what about the incident they want the public to focus on. They do this by utilizing attention getting headlines, combined with intense imagery to capture the attention of their audience. The media will select what they think is relevant and focus on that. With Clark, the focus was on the fact that the officers assumed he had a weapon.



Some of the headlines included “They Executed Him!” (Levin 2018) and “Stephon Clark shooting: How police opened fire on an unarmed black man holding a cellphone” (Winton, Parvini, Morin 2018) It wasn’t until weeks later that we learned that the officer turned off their body cams in an attempt to mask their mistake. In this case the shooting was tragic, but only tiny fraction of a much larger issue between law enforcement, and the black community.

Throughout the framing process media outlets choose what points of the issue are important, and how much airtime and or coverage they will get. You wouldn’t know about their cameras being turned off because that’s not the position they want you to focus on. In doing this they made sure to reduce if not eliminate the culpability of the officers. This is evident by the officers involved being allowed to return to work without incident or trial. (CBSNEWS 2018)

During framing, you are told everything you need to know about the matter, and without realizing it you have already created baseline attitude and opinions about it. Your opinion is not formed of your own volition, but instead is provided to you from the media free of charge.

With the case involving Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson and Starbucks, the media again recalled earlier incidents of racial bias. Then the media starting their framing engine to once again decide what was important for the people to know. The media outlets would have you believe that this is a tragic incident and sadly it should never happen again. They did a wonderful job of reporting this, but just as with Clark’s case they decided to leave out the underlying motivation of both cases. What they should have discussed is the overt principle of racism in America.

With all this misdirection and bias being so blatantly expounded upon, one may ask, why? Why would agencies who seemingly pride themselves on objectivity choose to be so selective in their actions and reporting? There are two answers to this question. The first being that sensationalism sells. Violence, sex, scandal, all things that have sold papers and information for as long both have existed. When telling the story of Clark the stories honed in on the amount of shots fired, and the fact that most of them were in Clarks back. The second is simply that they can. In an age where information is power, making people believe your story over others gives you power over them. This is evident by our newest Presidential Administration's admonishment of any news they don't like. They do this by calling on their constituents to rebuke the "fake news" and only listen to politically authorized news outlets that they deem worthy. While this may seem like a chapter from some unknown Orwellian dystopian novel, sadly it is the state of our media coverage today.

One only has to compare how the victims in the black lives movement are portrayed by news networks on both sides of the political spectrum to see just how divided we are. On channels like The Huffington Post, MSNBC, and CNN, "Stephon Clark is remembered as outgoing, a father of two young sons who was trying to turn his life around." (Sanchez 2018) These media conglomerates chose to frame their articles around the character of Clark and what he was trying to achieve in life.

This is in stark contrast to how the right wing media wanted people to view Clark. The most discordant of these FOX News, determined that their viewers needed to see what they deemed "A darker side." and resolved to try and decimate his character. They stated, "Clark had a troubled past, according to KCRA, the local NBC affiliate. He had run-ins with police going

back to at least 2014. He pleaded no contest to a robbery charge and violated a five-year probation status. Shortly after he was arrested for “procuring someone for the purpose of prostitution,” and pleaded no contest to a lesser charge. In 2016, he was arrested on domestic battery charges and pleaded no contest. He completed a battery treatment program.” (Llorente 2108)

Despite the vast difference in areas of focus, all of these media outlets have the same thing in common. Treating their viewers as informational commodity and getting them to believe their side of the story. No matter if it’s FOX News or CNN, the objective is to limit what the public is exposed to, and subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) push that agenda onto that same public.

Agenda-Setting Theory exists so that we can take stories like those of Clarke, and learn to understand what image the media is trying to force upon us. By doing this we can look to all areas of the issue objectively and form an unbiased opinion for ourselves. We then take the power away from the news outlets to influence our opinion and create our ideologies.

In Dr. King’s iconic speech he also declared that “We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a Larger one.” (King 1963) The media is used by the political elite to keep all of black society in its place. However, by not only understanding the premise of Agenda-Setting Theory, but also by utilizing it fully, will we be able to move forward and help the black community to rise out of the ghetto and into an equal and unsegregated society.

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