

Teaching You to Love Fear: Television News and Racial Stereotypes in a Punishing Democracy

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Because I am one of the few African American professors my students have ever met, I am often asked to speak to various student groups about my life and work; one of the questions I address regularly is “why do you study racial stereotypes in the media?” I usually respond that my scholarly work is inspired by my personal experiences, for I grew up in South Central Los Angeles, that Hollywood symbol of projected racial stereotypes and fears, and later attended a college where I encountered white students who had been taught by the media to see me as a problem requiring careful scrutiny, perhaps even punishment. I had grown up fearing the police and the violence of angry white men, but *my classmates were afraid of me*.

While growing up, even though I was a hardly imposing “geek,” I was often harassed by police officers who assumed that I was up to no good simply because of my race and my neighborhood. On one occasion I was attending a church barbecue. When it was time to head home, I borrowed my grandfather’s truck (with his permission, of course). I was soon pulled over and confronted by two white police officers with their guns drawn; although I was a good kid returning home from a church function, they thought I was a violent predator. It turns out that I was dropping off a friend who lived near a store that had been burglarized earlier that day, and so the Los Angeles police were on a manhunt, looking for a black man, any black man. One inappropriate move, including any verbal protest against my mistreatment, and I might have been beaten, arrested, or even shot. And so my childhood unfolded in South Central, where, on more than a dozen occasions, I faced profiling behavior, was handcuffed, or was pulled over for no reason other than the color of my skin. I thus learned to be careful around the police, to know when to shut up, and both to recognize and fear the inarticulate fury

of those who had been trained to see the world through the lens of mass-mediated racial stereotypes.

Later in life, I came to realize that the same fear and misunderstanding that drove some white police officers to target me also encouraged many of my teachers and then professors to expect little from me in the classroom. When I was a freshman in college, I recall a mathematics professor who talked down to me when I attended his office hours and who seemed to be systematically rude to all the women and people of color in his class. While pacing in front of the class during the final exam, a black student turned in his exam somewhat early, prompting the professor to exclaim: “Now I know this test is too easy!” Perhaps he thought he was being funny, but many of us heard the comment as yet another racial slur. While walking across campus, I remember the familiar question posed by my classmates: “Are you an athlete?” This was a question I would have never been asked while attending my predominantly black high school, where I was known as a geek, not a jock—I was not an athlete; it was self-evident that I was the nerd, not the sports star. Nonetheless, mediated stereotypes led my classmates to believe that black people are either criminals or athletes, not scholars.

I eventually overcame this institutionalized racism to obtain a Ph.D. and become a professor. As I pursued my degree, I was dogged by a persistent question: “Why do people use stereotypes to guide their decisions?” As I read others’ research and undertook my own investigations, I became convinced that support for policies that hurt the life chances of young black men is tied to either a tacit or explicit endorsement of racial stereotypes. Furthermore, because we live largely in a segregated society, many of these stereotypical conceptions are perpetuated not by individuals reflecting upon their interpersonal contacts with others, but by the mass media. Unfortunately, these mass-mediated racial stereotypes may be teaching us to love fear by prodding us to support a punishing and racist democracy rather than an empowering one. Neil Postman famously worried that we Americans have fallen so in love with our televisions that we are “amusing ourselves to death”; in that same vein of thought, I fear that we may have become so inundated by mass-mediated racial stereotypes that we are losing the ability to see past our racialized fears. What if the mass media are, in effect, teaching us to see the world in ways that will, ultimately, lead to disaster?¹

To begin answering that question, this chapter outlines what we know about the content and effects of mediated racial stereotypes on black male criminality. I focus on television news shows because people tend to view them as

accurately reflecting reality and therefore use them as a basis for constructing both their personal worldviews and their positions on public policy. Given this premise, I offer two claims about the news media and racial stereotypes: First, the news media misrepresent black men as criminal suspects; second, exposure to this misrepresentation perpetuates the stereotypical belief that African Americans comprise the bulk of threatening criminal suspects and therefore need to be incarcerated in order to protect white society. I argue, therefore, that watching television news leads to implicit racism, and that unconscious racism underpins support for a punishing democracy that treats black men as criminals rather than as citizens. In short, television news is teaching us to love fear.²

The Stereotypical Content of News Programming

The majority of research suggests that news programming perpetuates stereotypical crime imagery focused on the monstrous deeds of black men. These findings hold true for both local and national news coverage. To help readers understand the crushing implications of these claims, I offer overviews of the racializing content expressed in local and national television news shows. Studying these sources enables me to map two of the main paths of indoctrination into a world driven by racial stereotypes and hence prone to accepting the mass incarceration of young black men.

The Black Criminal Stereotype on Local Television News

Communication scholars, political scientists, and psychologists have studied the effects of the entertainment media in perpetuating stereotypes for decades, but substantial attention to the role of the news media in depicting stereotypes and reinforcing stereotypical thinking did not occur largely until the 1990s. One of the first and most important investigations was undertaken by Bob Entman and his colleagues, who analyzed 55 days of local television news in Chicago; the study indicated that black men accused of a crime were much more likely than similarly accused white suspects to be shown in the grip of a restraining police officer. At some deep visceral level, then, the news media tended to portray black men as needing restraint, as requiring state intervention, as predators to be feared. Entman also found that black men accused of committing a crime were less likely than white suspects to be identified by name in news stories. Entman interpreted such differences as evidence that when African American and white suspects are

accused of similarly serious offenses, black suspects appear to be treated in a more dehumanized manner. Thus, whereas white suspects have individualizing names, black suspects are anonymous, more nameless evidence in the long-standing narrative claiming that black men are criminals. Moreover, Entman maintained that those black suspects who were most dehumanized were portrayed as being the perpetrators of violence against white victims. These images appear to suggest that while crime is always a terrible event, it is even worse when committed by a black man against a white victim. Although limited to fifty-five days of coverage in Chicago, Entman's findings suggest strongly that the television news perpetuated a series of stereotypical depictions in which black suspects were violent, nameless, and perpetually attacking white victims.³

Although Entman limited his investigation to local Chicago stations, such stereotypical depictions are not confined to Chicago news. For example, Daniel Romer and his colleagues analyzed the 11:00 p.m. news broadcast for three stations in Philadelphia over fourteen weeks. In each of the stories, Romer and his associates coded the ethnicity of primary actors (i.e., "person of color" or white) and they recorded their roles (i.e., victim or perpetrator). Echoing Entman's conclusions for Chicago, Romer's study found that black Philadelphians were more likely to be shown as perpetrators than as victims in the news. In addition, Romer and his team found evidence that white Philadelphians were overrepresented as victims, and that these portrayals of white victims were matched by an overrepresentation of black perpetrators. Indeed, although crime reports indicate that only 10 percent of white victims are murdered by black offenders, the Philadelphia television news shows studied by Romer and his colleagues depicted a world in which 42 percent of white victims were murdered by black thugs—*this amounts to an overrepresentation of black-on-white murder by more than 400 percent*. In short, the television news studied by Romer distorts reality by creating a nightmare world driven by fear-based racial stereotypes.⁴

Whereas Entman, Romer, and their colleagues have made a substantial contribution to our understanding of race and the news in Chicago and Philadelphia, other research on racially biased depictions in local news programming has addressed Los Angeles. Much of this work has been undertaken either by me and my colleagues or by Franklin Gilliam and his colleagues. These studies reveal several consistent findings. First, in relation to actual crime reports, African Americans are overrepresented as criminal suspects in Los Angeles news programs. On average, crime reports indicate that African Americans

make up about 21 percent of actual perpetrators in the Los Angeles area, yet they appear as perpetrators about 37 percent of the time on Los Angeles area news. I should note as well that this overrepresentation of black criminal suspects on local television news is likely even more egregious than these numbers suggest, for the crime reports I am using for my baseline figures likely include disproportionate numbers of black men who are arrested because of racist police practices. This means, then, that the discrepancy between television news depictions of black criminals (37 percent of suspects) and crime reports (21 percent of actual suspects) is most likely even larger than what I am reporting here. As in Chicago and Philadelphia, then, the television news in Los Angeles is systematically filling our heads with racist images that do not report the facts faithfully but that perpetuate the stereotype of the young black man as a violent threat to society.⁵

Second, my and my colleagues' research has shown that African Americans are generally associated in television news shows with negative roles. For example, we found that African Americans are more than twice as likely to appear as criminal suspects than as officers on news programs—put simply, the television news depicts black men as criminals, not as law-protecting police officers. As in the Romer study, we also found that black men are more likely to appear as perpetrators than as victims in the news in Los Angeles area news programs. In fact, in proportion to crime reports, African Americans are underrepresented as homicide victims on local television news: whereas black Angelinos represent about 23 percent of the victims portrayed in television news, they account for almost 30 percent of the actual victims in the Los Angeles area. Because being a victim of crime puts one in a position of sympathy in most viewers' eyes, this underrepresentation of black victims amounts to yet another subtle way that African American experiences are downplayed, as if our pain is less newsworthy than that experienced by white victims. Finally, African Americans are twice as likely as white suspects to have negative pretrial publicity aired about them in the news. For example, if you are a black suspect on television news, then the news story is more likely (than if you are a white suspect) to air the fact that you have committed crimes in the past. This reporting of past deeds is important because the American Bar Association has identified negative pretrial publicity as a hindrance to the constitutional principle of a fair trial. The bedrock commitment of our justice system, the belief that one is innocent until proven guilty, is thus jeopardized by the mass circulation of racial stereotypes.⁶

As a corollary to these findings about media bias in its depictions of black

men, we have also found a consistent pattern in the portrayal of white suspects and victims. For example, we found that white Angelinos are underrepresented as both violent and felony perpetrators. One of the things we have been taught to forget is that a significant number of crimes (in Los Angeles, almost 28 percent) are committed by white criminals; however, our research indicates that white men make up only about 20 percent of the perpetrators shown on Los Angeles television news. By overemphasizing the crimes committed by African Americans and underportraying the crimes committed by white Californians, the Los Angeles news media racializes crime, showing it not as a communal dilemma to be addressed by all of us, but as a specifically racial problem in which predatory black men victimize innocent white citizens. This systematic pattern of racializing news stories about crime depends in part on showing white Angelinos as the upholders of law and order. For example, white suspects are underrepresented as the perpetrators of crime, and white Angelinos are simultaneously overrepresented as police officers: They account for 69 percent of police officers on television but only 59 percent in fact. This stereotypical local news depiction suggests that law and order is the province of white police officers, whose job is to defend white victims from black villains. When inundated with such images, day in and day out, year after year, there can be little wonder that so many Americans support the prison-industrial complex, for the mass media are indeed teaching us to be racists, to clamor for more arrests of young black men, to surrender our hopes for justice and racial equality to the hysteria of a punishing democracy.

The Black Criminal Stereotype on National Television News

Network news is important to study because national news programs often air information about the laws and policies on crime and violence. Whereas local news shows tend to sensationalize local events, national news shows tend to run stories that position African Americans within the larger context of law and policy. I should note, however, that network news spends less time discussing crime than local news; instead, several studies have noted that network television news tends to address stories that link African Americans with other social issues, including welfare and education, which tend to associate black Americans with stereotypes such as being complainers, loafers, and underachievers. For example, Jimmie Reeves and Richard Campbell have provided an insightful analysis of network news coverage during President Ronald Reagan's so-called "war on drugs." They found that the media was

complicit in supporting a type of new racism that falsely overassociated black youth with the then-booming cocaine drug culture; according to Reeves and Campbell, the news media produced a cocaine narrative that “took shape around social conflicts and cultural distinction related to the contemporary politics of race, class, gender, sexuality, region, religion, age and taste. At various moments during the narrative the meaning of cocaine would be inflected by gender issues, it would take on racial overtones, and it would animate myths about the sanctity of small-town life in middle-America.” As these narratives trumpeted the threat of black male aggression against white middle class values, so this overarching racial theme became a ubiquitous refrain of network news coverage. Thus, whereas the local news stories analyzed above tended toward sensational (and factually inaccurate) portrayals of black men as violent criminals preying on local white victims, the national news stories addressed here tended to link African Americans with larger social issues, such as welfare or education or drugs, thus subtly depicting us as the cause of social decline. In short, black men were shown on national news not only as criminals but as the cause of a host of other social crises. The national news would thus have us think this way: if America is falling apart, then it is *my fault*; as a black man, *I am the problem*.⁷

Moreover, when national news shows did address victims of crime and upholders of law, they tended to do so in ways that repeated the stereotype-reinforcing patterns deployed in local news. For example, while African Americans make up 48 percent of crime victims nationally, we account for only about 30 percent of the victims shown on network television; similarly, whereas black officers total 17 percent of the police forces nationally, only 3 percent of the officers portrayed on network news are African Americans. As in local news shows, this network news pattern communicates the false impression that blacks are perpetrators of crime but are not its victims and definitely not the police officers trying to stem the tide of crime.⁸

To summarize my argument thus far, the best available data on both local and national news coverage suggest that when television news shows address crime and other crime-related issues, black men are overrepresented as criminals but underrepresented as police officers and agents of the law; we are overrepresented as attacking white victims but underrepresented as the victims of crime; we are often depicted in ways that are likely to prevent receiving a fair trial; and, in keeping with cultural narratives originally derived from slavery, we are portrayed as the root cause of a host of other social problems that require heavy-handed responses.

From Media Content to Daily Life:

How Biased News Depictions Reinforce Stereotypes

The content analyses offered above include strong evidence of how the media produce and perpetuate racial stereotypes; however, they cannot tell us much, if anything, about the effects of consuming such mass-produced racist content. In order to understand whether news viewing contributes to an individual employing racist stereotypes in his or her daily life, I would like now to consider a field of research known as systematic effects investigations. There are two kinds of tools used by social scientists to tease out these effects. The first involves laboratory experiments in which viewers are asked to watch certain programs in a controlled environment and then to record their impressions, hence enabling scholars to study the flow of ideas from a given show to a particular viewer. As critics have noted, such contrived experiments are not very naturalistic—they do not reflect typical viewer patterns or practices—and so some experts question whether such experiments are generalizable across diverse populations and situations. The second study technique is the survey wherein viewers watch television at home and then report their responses to scholars. Such surveys are more naturalistic, but even when well conducted they cannot tell us definitively about causation, just about relationships (for as in exit-voting reports, most Americans are loath to admit that race influences their thinking, even when answering in anonymous surveys). Because both research methods have limits and strengths, I report on both kinds of studies, thus hoping to provide the best understanding of whether distorted race and crime imagery influences support for the mass incarceration of black men. I should note as well that many scholars agree that even the most egregiously racist news programs could appeal to and hence influence only viewers who are already predisposed to consuming such images; this means, in short, that stereotypes must somehow be fulfilling, they must somehow provide a sense of understanding and meaning. And so, before diving into an analysis of the experimental and survey research on media effects, I need first to discuss the psychological reasons that enable stereotypes to be appealing.⁹

The Psychology of Mediated Stereotyping of Black Men as Criminals

From a psychological standpoint, stereotypes are cognitive structures that help us understand the world around us: in the face of confusion, stereotypes provide a sense of stability and order, they anchor meaning to certain assumed truths. Moreover, psychologists tend to agree that because stereo-

types fulfill these sense-making roles, the more they have been used in the past, the more likely they are to be used in the future—in short, stereotypes tend to be both self-fulfilling and self-perpetuating precisely because they help us explain the world. The technical concepts describing this process are *chronic activation* and *chronic accessibility*. Chronic activation denotes the ways consistent exposure to stereotypical images triggers chains of associations in the brain; chronic accessibility denotes how, after years and years of chronic activation, we learn to draw upon stereotypes to explain the world, thus accessing meaning by activating stereotypes. The two processes interlock to form a cycle of stereotype-producing thought: If a stereotype has been repeatedly activated in prior and multiple contexts to make sense of situations, then the stereotype becomes a source of meaning likely to be more and more readily accessible. Chronic activation leads to chronic accessibility and then back again, creating a loop of stereotype-driven sense-making that is difficult to break—and so thinking in a stereotyped way becomes almost addictive. The crucial questions, then, are how do stereotypically racist television news shows contribute to this cycle, and how can we measure the effects of this process in daily life?¹⁰

Experimental Research on Stereotype Reinforcement Via the News

A growing body of research suggests that exposure to biased media portrayals activates stereotypes that associate black men with criminality. This stereotypical association then leads to biased judgments that may be made even without the perceiver's conscious awareness. For example, in one of her experiments, Mary Beth Oliver tried to study how viewers respond to news stories, and how their choices may reflect stereotypical racial biases. She exposed participants to a series of similar news stories, with different versions of the story featuring suspects of different races; she then asked the participants to identify the race of the suspect portrayed. She found that people tended to pick the black suspect, even after having watched a news story identifying someone else as the suspect. Confronted with a hard choice, participants, almost by default, relied upon stereotypical thinking and assumed the suspect was black. Oliver then brought participants back into the laboratory several months later and found that many of those who had been shown an image of a white suspect now identified a black suspect as the assailant they had seen several months earlier—their memory was overridden by racist stereotypes. Oliver later repeated the study using newspapers and varied whether it

was violent or nonviolent stories that people read. Here again she uncovered a similar process of participants relying upon racializing stereotypes to try to make sense of the stories they had read. In short, participants' mistakes in reporting what they had seen or read were driven by relying upon racial stereotypes. Chronic activation theory thus suggests that repeatedly seeing black suspects in the news will encourage people to unconsciously use a black criminal stereotype to make sense of news clips, even when they have just witnessed images of white suspects.¹¹

Pursuing this same line of research, Franklin Gilliam and Shanto Iyengar conducted a series of experiments in which they exposed thousands of participants to either a black, white, or racially uncoded criminal suspect (in some cases even showing participants stories that were not about crime). Afterward, they asked participants about their endorsement of subtle racism and their support for punitive crime legislation. Their studies produced two notable conclusions. First, as in Oliver's studies, they found that participants tended to falsely recall the race of unidentified suspects as black. Second, they found that white participants, but not participants of color, were more likely to express subtle racism by supporting punitive crime policies after exposure to either an unidentified or black criminal suspect, but not after being shown a story about a white suspect. Specifically, white participants exposed to an identical crime story in which a black rather than a white suspect was shown were six times as likely to express support for three-strikes legislation and other punitive measures for crime. Witnessing a white criminal produced one response and witnessing a black criminal produced a harsher response explicitly linked to punitive crime policies; and so we can conclude that racially biased stereotypes do indeed have a direct impact on our attitudes on crime-related social policy.¹²

Critics of this argument will raise the question of cause and effect: Are racist stereotypes more accessible because we live in a racist culture or because people repeatedly watch racist news programming? Which factor causes which result? To address this concern, my colleagues and I conducted a series of experiments designed to understand the potential impact of repeated viewing of stereotypical news coverage on stereotype activation and use. We suspected that frequent viewing of newscasts that overportray black criminality would lead to the development and reinforcement of a cognitive association between black men and lawbreaking. In other words, we tried to develop a method for measuring whether and how watching biased news coverage of black criminality contributed to the chronic activation of the black criminal stereotype, and whether and how such viewing increased the accessibility of the stereo-

type when relevant policy judgments needed to be made. And so we exposed participants to a news program featuring either a majority of black suspects, a majority of white suspects, a number of unidentified suspects, or noncrime stories. We also asked participants about how much news they watched daily. We found that heavy news viewers were more likely than light news viewers to believe, when exposed to images of black suspects, that the world is a dangerous place and, as a result, to experience emotional discomfort when witnessing such images. In addition, heavy news viewers were more likely than light viewers to assume, when exposed to either black or unidentified criminals, that a subsequent race-unidentified perpetrator was culpable for his offense. This study suggests that heavy news viewing perpetuates fear of black offenders and a willingness to assume that black suspects are guilty. Moreover, it suggests that by chronically activating racializing stereotypes, some of our participants in turn found such images more accessible as a means of explaining the stories we showed to them—each racializing moment fed the next.¹³

I want to emphasize that some of our experiments involved the assessment of exposure to news images of unidentified suspects. We thought that assessing or reacting to unidentified suspects might be a particularly powerful way of demonstrating whether and how news programming reinforced stereotypical cognitive links between black men and criminality. For if reactions to black suspects and unidentified criminals were similar or connected, then we thought it would illustrate the strength of the stereotypical link between African Americans and lawbreaking. In short, we thought it might be convincing if we could demonstrate how viewers, even when shown a suspect of nondescript status, tended to assume that the offender was a black man. In many cases, we found that participants misremembered unidentified persons as black suspects, that they became equally punitive when exposed to black and unidentified suspects, and that their support for the black community declined as a result of exposure to unidentified suspects. Apparently, the association between African Americans and criminality is so strong that simply thinking about crime, even when shown a suspect of nondescript characteristics, causes many perceivers to conjure visual images of black criminals.¹⁴

While viewers' responses to crime news reveal assumptions about race and its impact on the guilt or innocence of suspects, I have also wondered about viewers' responses to questions about the deeper social causes of success or failure in contemporary America. For example, in one study we found that heavy news viewers were less likely than light news viewers to believe that African Americans face structural limitations to their success in life. This

study echoes a growing body of research providing evidence that watching television news makes you more likely to believe that black Americans are an irresponsible group of loafers rather than a people who have been oppressed for hundreds of years by institutionalized racism. While television news thus overrepresents black Americans as violent criminals, and underrepresents us as the victims of crime, this more recent line of research has perhaps even more far-reaching implications, for it suggests that television news is pushing a storyline in which the legacies of slavery have been transcended, the playing field is even, and talk of racism is just bad nostalgia.¹⁵

The "New Racism" and Stereotype Reinforcement in the News

Scholars are in fact beginning to understand that racism in the twenty-first century has taken on a dangerous pattern wherein most white Americans no longer speak openly about race—they even deplore racism when asked about it directly—yet they refuse to support the social programs that might redress the damage caused by hundreds of years of racism, and they offer rabid support for penal policies that reinforce those same patterns of disenfranchisement. Paul Street has thus argued that the combination of media stereotypes and the prison-industrial complex has launched "the new racism"; Eduardo Bonilla Silva has called this a condition of "racism without racists." To support the findings of these cultural critics with social-science-based research methods, scholars are trying to craft surveys to measure how television news influences how we think about race and crime and their causes and consequences in the twenty-first century. In one such study, Gilliam and Iyengar tested whether exposure to local news programming in Los Angeles would be associated with old-fashioned racism (e.g., the belief that black Americans are inherently inferior beings) or the new racism (e.g., lack of support for policies designed to assist African Americans); moreover, they tried to assess support for punitive crime policies such as three-strikes legislation and the death penalty. They found that overall exposure to local news programming was associated with higher "new racism" scores and also with greater support for punitive crime measures.¹⁶

But we are still left with the question of cause and effect. One possibility unexamined by Gilliam and Iyengar is that those who already endorse stereotypes about black criminality are more likely to watch the news, perhaps because the news reflects their racist thinking. I therefore became interested in repeating and extending their survey work. My goal was to assess whether television news created racial stereotypes in viewers' minds or rather rein-

forced already-lodged biases. As in the previous studies discussed above, I found that even after controlling for prior racial attitudes, attention and exposure to crime news was positively correlated with a general concern about crime. In short, the more news you watch, the more afraid of crime you become. In addition, crime news exposure was also positively correlated with hypothetical culpability ratings for black and unidentified criminals, but not with white criminals. So the more news you watch, the more likely you are to assume that black suspects are guilty. Finally, and most telling, respondents with heavier exposure to local news content that overrepresented black men as criminals—even those respondents who denounced racism when asked directly—had a stronger perception that all African Americans are violent. This means that independent of one's prior racial attitudes, the more you witness black men portrayed as criminals in the news, the more likely you are to hold negative racial perceptions of all African Americans. In other words, even people who tend to be consciously sympathetic to African Americans can unconsciously stereotype black men if they watch extensive amounts of television news portraying black criminality.¹⁷

Conclusion: Television News, Crime, and the Production of Racial Fear

Taken together, the experimental and survey work discussed in this chapter provides a consistently disturbing picture of the effects of exposure to racially biased crime news. Specifically, this research points to three incontrovertible patterns. First, crime news exposure increases the accessibility of a black criminal stereotype that associates African Americans with criminal behavior. This has the consequence of encouraging news viewers to associate crime stories, even those devoid of direct racial references, with African Americans. In short, exposure to racist television news leads to *chronic activation* of racist stereotypes. Second, crime news exposure leads viewers to harbor an elevated fear or concern about African Americans and leads to a greater perceived danger and concern about becoming a victim of crime. This includes creating a perception in viewers that black men are violent or intimidating. Over time, this pattern means that viewers come to *chronically access* stereotypical narratives about and images of black men, hence creating a foundation of racist thinking. Third, heavy news exposure encourages viewers to endorse punitive measures to address the so-called problems with African American crime. This support for punitive crime measures comes in the form of culpability judgments of suspects,

support for tough prison terms, and flagging support for affirmative action and the other social programs meant to heal the wounds of hundreds of years of institutionalized racism. In short, the television news teaches you to be a fear-filled racist who supports the most brutal policies of the prison-industrial complex—the media are indeed teaching us to love fear.

I will leave the macro-analysis of the political economy of the corporate media to others who can better articulate the impact of market consolidation on media content. As I have noted elsewhere, however, we need to be clear that the profit motive encourages the corporate media to emphasize coverage of the kinds of crimes poor black men are more likely to commit while ignoring those crimes more likely to be committed by wealthy white offenders. In other words, because of poverty and structural racism, black men have a higher likelihood of committing blue-collar crime (e.g., robbery) rather than white-collar crime (e.g., embezzlement). And because the former are easier to cover and depict in graphic ways, the media target them, hence appealing to viewers and hence keeping advertising profits as high as possible. Indeed, whereas street crime can be covered by an intrepid reporter in a van with a camera, reporting on corporate malfeasance requires several things, including: (1) a whistleblower, (2) the will to offend a powerful company or advertiser, (3) the funds to cover a story long-term, and (4) the ability to make an intricate story of corporate intrigue interesting to the average person. These are not insurmountable hurdles (for example, consider the success of the documentary *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, a blistering exposé of the Enron debacle), yet they make it almost impossible to cover such stories in the nightly television news. Rather than covering rampant corporate crimes committed by white executives, then, the profit motive leaves television news viewers inundated with gruesome depictions of gangland slayings—and so rich white criminals go unreported while poor black criminals are splashed across the television screen each and every night.¹⁸

To help reverse these patterns, we can pursue a few political and personal strategies. First, we can demand that the Federal Communications Commission and Congress require broadcasters to report fair and balanced news coverage using a standard similar to the now-defunct fairness doctrine. The news wing of a station should no longer be seen as a profit center or propaganda machine for the network; instead, news should serve the greater good of providing information to the public. Second, as citizens, we should discourage the loosening of restrictions on conglomerate ownership of media outlets. In other words, as long as profits are the primary goal of networks, then they

will rely on stereotypes to tell their stories. Third, at an individual level, television viewers could be encouraged to become more conscientious about the media choices they make, thus enabling them to distinguish between news and racializing hysteria. One way to achieve this goal is for news consumers to expose themselves to diverse media sources and to actively pursue media outlets run by, working with, or at least addressing the concerns of people of color—for scholars have shown that one of the best ways to break down stereotypes is to present viewers with multiple exemplars of the stereotyped group, thus illustrating that the group or character type formerly thought to be monolithic is in fact diverse, complicated, and full of individuals. There are many nonprofit organizations working to facilitate this process, especially on the subject of stereotypical representations of crime and race, including BeyondMedia Education (www.beyondmedia.org), Paper Tiger TV (www.papertiger.org), the Prison Radio Project (www.prisonradio.org), the Thousand Kites Project (www.thousandkites.org), and others. Visiting these groups and other local alternative media outlets can indeed help viewers to move beyond the numbing pattern of chronic activation and chronic access of stereotypical images of black men and crime. I only hope that we can spread this message and hence begin breaking the cycle of racism before it is too late.¹⁹

Notes

1. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1986); for more on media-produced racism and the prison-industrial complex, see Marc Mauer, *Race to Incarcerate* (New York: New Press, 1999), 118–41 and 171–77; Erica Meiners, *Right to Be Hostile: Schools, Prisons, and the Making of Public Enemies* (London: Routledge, 2007), 81–112; and Carol Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race, and Crime News in U.S. Culture* (London: Routledge, 2006), 128–89.
2. Shanto Iyengar, "Television News and Citizens' Explanations of National Affairs," *American Political Science Review* 81 (1987): 815–31, and Shanto Iyengar and Don Kinder, *News That Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
3. Robert Entman, "Blacks in the News: Television, Modern Racism, and Cultural Change," *Journalism Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (1992): 341–61; see pages 350–51 for a discussion of how black suspects may be dehumanized and undifferentiated from one another in news coverage.
4. Daniel Romer, Kathleen Hall Jamieson, and Nicole J. de Coteau, "The Treatment of Persons of Color in Local Television News: Ethnic Blame Discourse or Realistic Group Conflict?" *Communication Research* 25, no. 3 (1998): 268–305.
5. My work in this area includes Travis L. Dixon and Cristina Azocar, "The Representation of Juvenile Offenders by Race on Los Angeles Area Television News," *Howard Journal of Communications* 17 (2006): 143–61; Travis L. Dixon and Daniel G.

Linz, "Overrepresentation and Underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos as Lawbreakers on Television News," *Journal of Communication* 50, no. 2 (2000): 131–54; and Travis L. Dixon and Daniel G. Linz, "Race and the Misrepresentation of Victimization on Local Television News," *Communication Research* 27, no. 5 (2000): 547–73; Gilliam and his colleagues' work in this area includes Franklin D. Gilliam, Shanto Iyengar, Adam Simon, and Oliver Wright, "Crime in Black and White: The Violent, Scary World of Local News," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 1, no. 3 (1996): 6–23; Franklin D. Gilliam and Shanto Iyengar, "The Superpredator Script," *Nieman Reports* 52, no. 4 (1998): 45–46; and Franklin D. Gilliam and Shanto Iyengar, "Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public," *American Journal of Political Science* 44 (2000): 560–73.

6. For information on prejudicial pretrial information, see the American Bar Association, "Model Rules of Professional Conduct" (first adopted in 1983, accessible at http://www.abanet.org/cpr/mrpc/rule_3_6.html); monopolizing the subject position of aggrieved victim has become crucial for proponents of the death penalty and other "get tough on crime" measures. In this regard, see three essays by Jennifer K. Wood: "In Whose Name? Crime Victim Policy and the Punishing Power of Protection," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 17 (2005): 1–17; "Justice as Therapy: The Victim Rights Clarification Act," *Communication Quarterly* 51 (2003): 296–311; and "Refined Raw: The Symbolic Violence of Victims Rights Reforms," in *Un-Disciplining Literature: Literature, Law, and Culture*, ed. Kostas and Linda Myrsiades (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 72–93; on the question of pretrial publicity and race, see Travis L. Dixon and Daniel G. Linz, "Television News, Prejudicial Pretrial Publicity, and the Depiction of Race," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 46 (2002): 112–136.

7. Jimmie L. Reeves and Richard Campbell, *Cracked Coverage: Television News, the Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 15; for more information on racialized drug coverage, see Clarence Lusane, *Pipe Dream Blues: Racism and the War on Drugs* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1991), and Daniel Larson's essay in this volume (chapter 3).

8. For my study on network news, see Travis L. Dixon, Cristina Azocar, and Michael Casas, "The Portrayal of Race and Crime on Television Network News," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 47, no. 4 (2003): 495–520; for other important studies of biased network news programming, see Robert Entman, "Representation and Reality in the Portrayal of Blacks on Network Television News," *Journalism Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (1994): 509–20; on racialized portrayals of welfare, see Martin Gilens, "Race and Poverty in America: Public Misperceptions and the American News Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (1996): 515–41, and Martin Gilens, *Why Americans Hate Welfare: Race, Media, and the Politics of Antipoverty Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

9. For more information on the methodological claims for the power of surveys and experiments, see Earl Babbie, *Survey Research Methods*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1990), and Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1992).

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11. See Mary Beth Oliver, "Caucasian Viewers' Memory of Black and White Criminal Suspects in the News," *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 3 (1999): 46–60.

12. See Franklin D. Gilliam and Shanto Iyengar, "Superpredator Script," *Nieman Reports* 52, no. 4 (1998): 45–46, and Gilliam and Iyengar, "Prime Suspects."

13. See Dixon, "Psychological Reactions to Crime News Portrayals of Black Criminals"; Dixon and Azocar, "Priming Crime and Activating Blackness"; and Travis L. Dixon and Keith B. Maddox, "Skin Tone, Crime News, and Social Reality Judgments: Priming the Stereotype of the Dark and Dangerous Black Criminal," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 38, no. 8 (2005): 1555–70.

14. See Dixon, "Psychological Reactions to Crime News Portrayals of Black Criminals"; Dixon and Azocar, "Priming Crime and Activating Blackness"; and Travis L. Dixon and Keith B. Maddox, "Skin Tone, Crime News, and Social Reality Judgments"; these conclusions are echoed in Oliver, "Caucasian Viewers' Memory of Black and White Criminal Suspects in the News."

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16. Paul Street, "Color Bind: Prisons and the New American Racism," in *Prison Nation: The Warehousing of America's Poor*, ed. Tara Herivel and Paul Wright (New York: Routledge, 2003), 30–40; Eduardo Bonilla Silva, *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2001), and *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Boulder, CO: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); on "racism without racists" in the prison-industrial complex, see PCARE, "Fighting the Prison-Industrial Complex: A Call to Communication and Cultural Studies Scholars to Change the World," *Communication and Critical Cultural Studies* 4, no. 4 (2007): 402–20, and Gilliam and Iyengar, "Prime Suspects."

17. Travis L. Dixon, "Crime News and Racialized Beliefs: Understanding the Relationship between Local News Viewing and Perceptions of African Americans and Crime," *Journal of Communication* 58, no. 1 (2008): 106–25.

18. See *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, dir. Alex Gibney (Los Angeles: Magnolia

Pictures, 2005); for an introduction to white-collar crime, see the resources posted by the FBI at www.fbi.gov/whitecollarcrime.htm; for macro-analyses of the media, see Robert W. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), and Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); for my analysis of these misrepresentations, see Dixon and Linz, "Overrepresentation and Underrepresentation of African Americans and Latinos."

19. For background on FCC policy and lobbying, see Pat Aufderheide, *Communications Policy and the Public Interest* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999); on news culture and producing change, see Don Heider, *White News: Why Local News Programs Don't Cover People of Color* (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2000); for research on how counter-stereotypical depictions can thwart stereotypes, see Juanita Covert and Travis L. Dixon, "A Changing View: Representation and Effects of Women of Color in Mainstream Women's Magazines," *Communication Research* 35, no. 2 (2008): 232–56; for further suggestions on media activism, see Robert McChesney, Russell Newman, and Ben Scott, eds., *The Future of the Media: Resistance and Reform in the 21st Century* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005); on media activism and prisons, see PCARE, "Fighting the Prison-Industrial Complex."