Media Coverage of Ferguson, Missouri: A Normative Approach

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Abstract—This study seeks to examine media coverage of the Ferguson, Missouri racial tensions and police action following the grand jury decision, with a focus on stories which include religious leaders, religious comments, or those that take place in community churches or religious centers. Through a mixed-methods approach of critical discourse analysis and a normative analysis of the coverage, the research attempts to bring understanding of the role religion plays within the media, and provide suggestions as to how the media can cover religion more effectively not only during times of unrest, but on a more regular basis.

Keywords—religion, media, normative, Ferguson, news, television, radio

I. INTRODUCTION

As protests, both peaceful and sometimes violent, broke out in Ferguson, Missouri following the shooting death of Michael Brown by a police officer, initial coverage by the media primarily focused on the effects and damage of the protest, the response from police and government officials, and continued speculation on whether the protests were justified. Various actors strode forward into the public light attempting to serve as spokespersons for the family of Michael Brown or to speak for the community, the police, and race relations within St. Louis and the United States. These actors included national and local religious leaders, community organizers, educators, public intellectuals, media pundits, and the public itself. While much of the media coverage has followed the action of the protests, much in the spirit of searchlight journalism criticized by Walter Lippmann and seen as a tragic failure of journalism, there have been efforts by some media outlets to attempt to bring an understanding and meaning to the response by the public to Brown's shooting death. As religion is such an integral part of African American communities in structuring their political lives, as enumerated by numerous scholars (see [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]), how the media covers religion during major times of unrest, such as the one in Ferguson, is worthy of study.

This study seeks to examine the media coverage of the recent Ferguson, Missouri racial tensions and police action following the grand jury decision, with a focus on stories which include religious leaders, religious comments, or those that take place in community churches or religious centers. Through a mixed-methods approach of critical discourse analysis and a normative analysis of the coverage, the research attempts to bring understanding of the role religion plays within the media, and provide suggestions as to how the media can cover religion more effectively not only during times of unrest, but on a more regular basis. From a normative approach, the ultimate goal of this paper is to think about the reality that is, and work towards the ideals of what should be.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars such as Emile Durkheim have spoken about how religion organizes people into cohesive social groups, and helps maintain order to preserve social functioning [8]. As Jacqueline Mattis speaks about in her article Religion and African American Political Life, as the first institution created and fully owned by African Americans, the church has been assigned the responsibility of using its resources to alter the material conditions of the poor and disenfranchised [7]. In a modern American culture, the church has been responsible for training and supporting local and national leaders, educating member of the African American community about political issues that directly affect them, and agitating for social justice [7]. This has been seen during the civil rights movements of the 1950's, 60's, 70's, as well as during more recent instances such as Ferguson. Without just a basic understanding of the history of church and religion within the African American community, mainstream media outlets continue to under represent or misrepresent the role of the church and religion within the African American community as it comes to at situations such as Ferguson. The church is a symbol of autonomy to many African Americans, a place where a sense of unity, leadership, and understanding can be found among themselves, without the influence of the dominant white culture.

So how is the media doing when it comes to covering religion and stories with religious ties or overtones? Frankly, not very well, according to some critical scholars. The authors of Blind Spot: When Journalists Don’t Get Religion explain that enough important news organizations miss, misrepresent, dismiss, misunderstand, or otherwise get religion wrong on enough occasions to cause a problem for the news business. Its purpose being to demonstrate how religion has become "increasingly vibrant, assertive, and politicized the world over" [9]. What has emerged, they say, is a "prophetic politics" in which "voices claiming transcendent authority are filling public spaces and winning key political contests." The voices are diverse, including Islamic radicalism and evangelical Protestantism" [9]. These developments provide a powerful reason for news organizations to take religion seriously, and
report on it just as they would any other part of a story. And instead of treating religion as a completely separate or disparate issue, an incorporation of religion within stories (of which it applies) needs to be done. Gil Beckerman also speaks to how journalists do not cover religion well by saying that despite the renewed awareness of faith’s role in the world, religion writers remain a tiny minority in the newsroom. Editors and owners simply do not make religion a priority, and journalists are not encouraged to make it a part of their stories. “By excluding faith, we miss the core of so many stories — what motivates people to act? What are the beliefs that give meaning to our lives? What ideas are we willing to live and die for? If journalism means to relay the day-to-day saga of our society, it can’t continue to ignore these questions” [10].

The media holds a very influential place in negotiating the processes that result in cultural meaning. That applies to religion, according to Stewart Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark, the authors of Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion, and Culture. Culture and cultural practices are dynamic and in a constant state of transformation that simultaneously reflects and influences individuals, groups, and institutions [11]. We need to focus on the practices of lived experiences and meaning making that people use to give their lives meaning and values. Robert Woods and Paul Patton take these ideas and move forward in Prophetically Incorrect: A Christian Introduction to Media Criticism. Words, spoken in a prophetic tradition, can build bridges and help in understanding our role in societies dominated by consumerism. Media and culture are synergistically dependent to one another, and prophetic critique seeks to upset that synergy by asking people what they really want and why [12]. Quentin Schultze says that we, as a society, propagate ourselves, and that the media join in, telling us what we already believe or what we want to believe. This comes into play when thinking about the voice of religious leaders within stories.

So what is prophetic critique, and how can it help us find meaning in the coverage of religion by the media. From a social theory paradigm, prophets are truth-tellers with a penchant for social critique who seek to expose the hypocrisy and hubris of those in power. As a social critique, it questions our faith in media technologies and the institutions that promote them. Prophetic media critique highlights the role of the mass media in promoting an over-valuation of wealth, power and material goods, and seeks to transform the media environment into a space that cultivates deeper values by allowing prophetic voices to speak and be heard. Media and journalism today (at least in the U.S) are not driven by a commitment to social responsibility, but by competition and making money. So in turn, social issues are not covered as in-depth as they could be. Two problems emerge in modern society, the increasing tension between religious and secular communities, and the failure of the mass media to facilitate sustainable, ethically-minded public discourse. Prophetic critique can be broad and inclusive, that does not restrict to a particular religion, or no religion at all. It comes from the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim faiths, such as jihad, a principle of independent thinking and the pursuit of truth that encourages Muslims to foster critical engagement with their own tradition and surrounding culture. By emphasizing the role the media can play in this discourse, we as scholars can critique both the current divisive conversations regarding religion and secularism, as well as examining how media itself can be a positive force in bringing people together.

The search for truth and justice, and looking for ways media can assist with this quest, is linked with Clifford Christians' description of media's "prophetic witness," wherein the media can serve as both a challenge to the capitalist norm and provide a socially conscious voice to the people, as well as become a way to serve as a critical consciousness present during technical development. Prophetic media critique can be broken down into six basic characteristics: seeing media technologies as value-laden not morally neutral, prioritizing the human over the technological, that prophetic critique is embodied, that is it concerned with authenticity, that it embraces universals, and that prophetic critique can involve personal risk. That risk can be violent, ethical, or philosophical. This media reform activism dovetails into Robert McChesney's work on political economy. McChesney writes that modern prophetic critique must deal squarely with capitalism. The so-called love of capitalism is almost like a religion—which democracy should put government in a cage, and let the free market flourish and survive through competition. As McChesney says, capitalism is actually based on the endless and ceaseless pursuit of profit. It produces massive inequality, monopolies, and hyper commercialism. By recognizing this critique on capitalism and the media, finding the prophetic within the media can become more meaningful. What I see as the greatest quality of prophetic critique is its desire and focus on the idea that every person has a responsibility to be a prophet of sustainable, civil discourse about the social issues facing populations today, and that these discourses must provide valuable help and solutions. Hope is what gives this type of methodology its academic and social credence. Without hope, and the ability to help people seek the truth within society or our media, prophesy rings empty, without a purpose.

A prophetic critique coincides with a normative theory of public communication as the reasoned explanation of how public discourse should be carried out in order for a community or nation to work out solutions to its problems [13]. For this study, an analysis will be made on coverage of the Ferguson incident based upon the normative roles of news media detailed below, alongside the prophetic critique.

III. METHOD

Data Gathering

A two-week time period was chosen, starting on November 24th and ending on December 1st 2014, to examine broadcast stories from FOX News, CNN, and St. Louis Public Radio. The dates coincide with the day the grand jury decision was made public regarding the Michael Brown case, and the aftermath. Only news stories were examined, all other opinion pieces, personal anchor or reporter comments, or pundit voices were not considered. Only stories published in an online format
were considered. Concerning FOX News, research offers a portrait of a channel centered on offering specific narratives, which conform to ideological and political agendas. Research has shown that FOX News viewers have distinct political beliefs and perceptions of political reality which differ greatly from the rest of the television news viewer audience [14]. Varying polls and surveys regarding FOX News audience members have offered information regarding the viewpoints commonly held by the audience. In a NBC/WSJ poll, researchers found that the majority of FOX News watchers were misinformed regarding President Obama’s health care plan [15]. Another poll from the Program on International Policy Attitudes found that FOX News viewers were more likely to hold misinformed views on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and numerous foreign policy issues [16]. In a survey performed by Stanford Woods and the National Science Foundation, they found that more exposure to Fox News was associated with more rejection of scientists’ claims about global warming, with less trust in scientists, and with more belief that ameliorating global warming would hurt the U.S. economy [17]. Finally, a survey of FOX News viewers by Fairleigh Dickinson University found that watching FOX News regularly was actually worse regarding informing viewers that watching no news at all. What is also interesting is that FOX does not suffer due to its perceived bias. Rather, it is the most watched and used primary news source for political and societal information. FOX News continually outpaces all other cable news networks. This information leads to FOX News and its ideologically opposite partner, MSNBC, being regarded as partisan source, while CNN often remains and is viewed as relatively neutral regarding content distribution, faring better than both FOX and MSNBC concerning informing audiences and educating their worldview.

Considering this, the comparisons for this study will focus on comparing news stories by both FOX and CNN. As a counter comparison, stories that aired on St. Louis Public Radio (National Public Radio) were also analyzed during the same time period. The same search phrases and words were used for all three networks. These search phrases included Ferguson and religion, Ferguson and church, Ferguson and God, Ferguson and Christian, Ferguson and minister, Ferguson and religious leader, Ferguson and faith leader, Ferguson and faith, and Ferguson and preacher. These phrases were chosen to reflect the strong African American community within the Ferguson and St. Louis area that is an integral part of this current research, and leaves out phrases that denote other religious denominations. Further research will expand this study to include other faith communities and the dialectics of religion within the media concerning the Michael Brown case.

Analysis

This study will use critical discourse analysis and textual analysis as a way of examining the text and its meanings. Although critical discourse analysis is sometimes mistaken to represent a 'method' of discourse analysis, it is generally agreed upon that any explicit method in discourse studies, the humanities and social sciences may be used in critical discourse analysis research, as long as it is able to adequately and relevantly produce insights into the way discourse reproduces (or resists) social and political inequality, power abuse or domination. That is, critical discourse analysis does not limit its analysis to specific structures of text or talk, but systematically relates these to structures of the sociopolitical context. Hegemonic representations will also be investigated within the text of the stories found. These representations may vary in the extent in which they are asserted or assumed. The use of intertextuality can open up the difference. It is useful to understand which texts and voices are included, which are excluded, and what significant absences are there. Fairclough’s methodology of using textual analysis in reference to hegemony, the universal and the particular will inform this work greatly [18].

A normative analysis of the stories found will include looking at them from the monitorial, facilitative, radical, and collaborative roles. The dominant meaning of the monitorial role of journalism is based on the ideas of neutral and balanced reporting. "In this view, the observer-reporter is no more than an extension of the senses of the members of the public on whose behalf the press acts. Those who hold this view do not want their press to do more than tell them what is happening in social reality, without value judgments, emotion, or interventions" [13]. The facilitative role of media is to promote dialogue among their readers or viewers through communication that engages them and in which they actively participate. In other words, the media is there to support and strengthen participation in civil society to encourage meaning. The radical role of media is by definition partisan, as it seeks to help minorities articulate an alternative set of goals and to expose the conflict of interest between those who dominate the political-economic conditions and cultural values of a society and those who have little influence over these conditions [13]. The main goals of radical journalism are accountability and serving as a voice for the marginalized in order to find truths not exposed in the more hegemonic, monitorial-style of mainstream journalism today. Both the radical and facilitative roles can be seen in line with the prophetic media critique outlined earlier, where the media can serve as both a challenge to the capitalist norm and provide a socially conscious voice to the people, as well as become a way to serve as a critical consciousness. Finally, the collaborative role of the media implies a relationship with the state or other centers of power built on mutual trust and a shared commitment to mutually agreeable means and ends [13]. It can come in many forms including using state and government sources exclusively, not releasing information because a governmental organization says not to, or not releasing stories or information based on concerns of public safety (usually articulated by state and governmental agencies). All of these roles apply in particular ways and at particular times. On any given day, and with different stories, most media play multiple roles as will be examined.

IV. FINDINGS/DISCUSSION
Using the parameters discussed, the search elicited seven stories on FOX News, seven stories on CNN, and six stories on St. Louis Public Radio. Three general themes emerged from these findings: the church as a player in the story, the church as a place of communication and respite, and the religious or faith leader as a voice in the ongoing dialogue. One outlier demonstrates an interesting twist— that of religion being used as an indicator of lawlessness and even terror.

Starting the discussion with the outlier in the findings, FOX News aired a story on November 27th, 2014, a few days after the grand jury decision was released concerning the Michael Brown case. The story was organized under the “Terror” sub-heading online.

**TERROR**  
**Global jihadists tweet in bid to recruit Ferguson protesters**  
By Steven Edwards  
Published November 27, 2014  
*FoxNews.com*

Islamic jihadists worldwide have launched a barrage of recruitment messages amid the latest unrest in Ferguson, Mo., using Twitter accounts to call on African-Americans and others in the United States to join their cause. Some messages urge direct revolt against the U.S. government, while others evoke the names of former black leaders—among them Malcolm X—in a bid to convince people of color that living under an Islamic caliphate is in their best interests.

“March against tyranny and arm yourselves against the true terrorists of our time: the US government,” says a tweet from a prominent Dutch jihadist in Syria going by the name of Israfil Yilmaz, and carrying “Ferguson Rising” and “Ferguson Decision” hashtags. Another tweet from a user going by the name of Abu Hamza As Somaal says: “My fellow black community knows that #Jihad is the only thing that will bring justice, respect and honor in (the) Ferguson decision.” ~This message is followed by the hashtag “Islamic State.”

“The U.S.-based monitoring firm SITE Intelligence Group, which has been collecting the messages, said they began emerging in large numbers in the wake of the grand jury decision not to indict Darren Wilson, the white police officer involved in the shooting death of 18-year-old Michael Brown, an African-American.”

“Users characterized the decision as the result of America’s racism while claiming jihad and revolution to be fitting responses,” the group says in a statement accompanying the tweets. “Some jihadist supporters even appeared to openly acknowledge the use of Ferguson as a means of recruitment.” A message from a user identified as Abu Dhar Al Amirki appeared to directly address African Americans by encouraging people to travel to the IS-declared Caliphate in Syria and Iraq [19].

The only sources used in this story is an unnamed spokesperson from the U.S. monitoring firm SITE Intelligence Group, as well as tweets provided to FOX News from SITE. No interviews were conducted with protestors or members of the public in Ferguson. By placing the story under the sub-heading of “Terror,” editors are categorizing the information presented as dangerous, linking Islam with revolution and terrorism, and ultimately to the protestors in Ferguson. Using phrases such as “launched a barrage” and “urge direct revolt,” the story gives the impression of imminent danger, but yet does not supply any specifics on how many messages were sent and to whom specifically (beyond the general Ferguson protestors). In analyzing this story in regards to normative roles, it has elements of both monitorial and collaborative. It is monitorial in that it does not overtly express an opinion or stance, and presents the information in a more or less straightforward way. Collaborative in that FOX News only is using information given to them from a powerful monitoring firm. SITE is a major corporation with strong governmental connections, and when the viewer only hears a story from that point of view, without any counter voices, it implies a relationship with the state or other centers of power built on mutual trust.

Considering how religion itself is treated by the media, according to scholars such as Beckerman and Marshall, this story provides an example of how the media generally does not take into account the importance of religion and religious practices within the Ferguson community. Why is violent revolution immediately tied to Islam and terror? Why are no voices heard from community religious leaders and protestors themselves? From the information presented in the story, how do we really know that protestors actually received these messages urging them to join ISIS? Is this not reinforcing established stereotypes of violence, terror, and Islam, and tying them to the black community? By hiding behind “objectivity,” the media outlet is unable to provide a fuller, richer story that provides a more cultural understanding of the community.

In considering the first theme, the church as a player in the story, two media outlets (CNN and St. Louis Public Radio) carried stories concerning the fire that destroyed Michael Brown’s father’s church (during the time-frame of this study). The first story analyzed is from St. Louis Public Radio, the second CNN.

**ATF Searching For Answers in North County Church Arson**  
By Emanuelle Berry  
November 27, 2014

A fire that destroyed a church during Monday night’s chaos in Ferguson is being investigation by the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. Burning a church is a federal offense. Investigators said that the fire at the Flood Christian Church was intentionally set. The Flood Christian Church is just a mile outside of Ferguson. The Rev. Carlton Lee was in shock when he got the call Monday night telling him his church was on fire. His reaction: “This can’t be real; this can’t be true. There’s a mistake... why... why you know, why set a church on fire.” So far investigators have determined that there was forced entry into the Flood Christian Church and
that the fire was set on purpose. Michael Brown Sr. is a member of the church. ATF public information officer John Ham says structures around the building were untouched; and the church is not near other buildings that burned on Monday. “That’s a concern to us. So one of the things we need to determine and will determine as part of our investigation is whether this church was a target in some way because of its affiliation to the Brown family.” Ham notes that at this point they haven’t ruled anything out. It could be targeted vandalism or a crime of opportunity, but he says the investigation will take time. ATF is working on the investigation alongside the St. Louis metro arson task force. Lee says he doesn’t think insurance will cover the damage. Regardless he says he’s going to continue his work. “What we do now is we regroup, we refocus and we rebuild. We are not stopping because we are stronger than this,” he said. “We believe that God has called us to this region and so we are going to do exactly what God called us to do” [20].

Ferguson community leaders show strength after destruction
CNN-November 25, 2014

Pastor Carlton Lee repeatedly called for the arrest of Officer Darren Wilson. Michael Brown’s father worships there. Last night, his church was one of a dozen or so buildings that were set on fire. Pastor Lee said that he is experiencing feelings that are similar to losing a child. Varun Madaksira owns The Original Reds Barbecue in Ferguson. When his business burned during protests last August, he moved his grills outside and fed protesters. Sadly, Reds Barbecue suffered far more extensive damage last night. Now, Madaksira says he is not sure that he will be able to reopen. He says that despite all of this, he is still “a firm believer in the fabric of a strong neighborhood” (21).

In terms of how the stories are treated differently, the CNN one is obviously a shorter and came out quickly after the fire that destroyed the church. It concentrates on not only the damage to the church, but to other businesses in Ferguson after the shooting death of Michael Brown. The public radio piece is much more in-depth, and includes quotes and information from a spokesperson for the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms commission, as well as the pastor of the church. The information attributed to Pastor Lee in the CNN piece is much more inflammatory, saying that he “repeatedly called for the arrest of Officer Darren Wilson.” In the public radio piece that aired two days after the fire, a quote from Pastor Lee used is more reflective and hopeful compared to the one used in the CNN piece. “What we do now is we regroup, we refocus and we rebuild. We are not stopping because we are stronger than this,” he said. “We believe that God has called us to this region and so we are going to do exactly what God called us to do.”

Both stories reflect the monitory role of media. The public radio story attempts to present a fuller presentation with quotes from both official and affected sources, without a call to action or opinion. While the use of a more inflammatory lead in the CNN story is an interesting choice, the rest of it stays with the monitory format. The content of the quotes from the pastor in both stories reflects the importance of the church within the Ferguson community. He refers to the church as “his child” and expresses disbelief and anguish over the destructive fire. As evidenced in the quotes, there is a strong belief that the church is a viable and invaluable resource in the community, and has an important role to play. But what if the church destroyed had not been Michael Brown’s father’s church? Would there be as much media coverage? Would it have been seen as important?

The next theme that emerged from the findings was the church as a place of communication and respite. The two stories analyzed come from CNN and St. Louis Public Radio, and deal with the reaction to the release of the grand jury decision in the Michael Brown case.

Ferguson church turns to faith as uncertainty looms
By Moni Basu, CNN updated 9:00 AM EST, Mon November 24, 2014

At Greater St. Mark Family Church, parishioners wonder what's next, "I don't know what the verdict will be," one worried woman says. Another speculates the grand jury could postpone its decision. The church's pastor encourages voting and community involvement. Carol Byrd feels anxious at night when she leaves her home, just a few blocks away from West Florissant Avenue. She fears for her life. She lives near the epicenter of protests that erupted after the killing of Michael Brown in this St. Louis suburb last August. Byrd sought solace Sunday at her church. "I feel calmer, but I'm still deeply disturbed," said Byrd, 49, after service was over at Greater St. Mark Family Church, which has served as a sanctuary for protesters and will be a haven again if things get rough. Byrd said someone in her apartment complex was shot a few weeks ago during protests. She fears that demonstrations could turn violent again. "I don't know what the verdict will be," she said about the grand jury investigating Brown's death. "I don't know when it will come." That's a question that hangs heavily over Ferguson, a city that remains on edge as word spreads that a grand jury looking into whether to indict police Officer Darren Wilson has yet to make a decision. Jurors are set to reconvene Monday. Amina Stevenson, 26, said everyone is doing their best to deal with this period of extreme anxiety. "I know God is protecting me and my family," she said [22].

After Ferguson Decision, One Church’s Grief and a Call to Action
St. Louis Public Radio Nov. 24 by DURRIE BOUSCAREN
Audible groans murmured through the West Side Missionary Baptist Church in north St. Louis County when county prosecutor Robert McCulloch announced, via livestream, that no charges would be
filed against Officer Darren Wilson. A mother and her son react to the grand jury decision, they watched over livestream, at West Side Missionary Baptist Church in north St. Louis County. Church leaders switched off the projector and the Rev. Starsky Wilson stood to give a sermon, calling for dissent. “The question is whether our faith will produce anything as an alternative witness to the system that has both broken, busted and disgusted,” Wilson said. Wilson called on the congregation to mobilize against racial disparities in the justice system, pointing to the problems with the region's municipal courts, traffic stops and policing practices in predominantly African-American neighborhoods. “I cannot conform and I’m not going to adjust myself to fit into the box of a system that is killing,” said Wilson, who is also co-chair of the Ferguson Commission. The Rev. Starsky Wilson gives a sermon at the West Side Missionary Baptist Church in North St. Louis County following the announcement that no charges would be filed against Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson. Nadia Brown, a visiting political science professor, said the grand jury decision confirmed what she had expected. “I’m frustrated, I’m disappointed. I think we have to think about where our next steps are and how do we achieve justice,” Brown said. “I think there are real questions we have to ask about what does the future hold for us” [23].

Both of these stories reflect the role of the church within the Ferguson community for protestors and the general public. The church is a place for safety as evidenced by the quote in the CNN story by the woman seeking solace in her church, “I feel calmer, but I’m still deeply disturbed. She also evokes God saying "I know God is protecting me and my family." This story demonstrates a fear of what will happen, and how the church itself can help. The next story from St. Louis Public Radio is an immediate reaction to the grand jury decision. Parishioners were at church listening to the decision, and immediately following, were discussing and listening to fellow members and their church leader. This story contains quotes from the pastor and a visiting political science professor calling for action and dissent. In both of these stories we do not hear from governmental/official sources, we hear from the people directly involved in the church community. This better fits into suggestions made by Beckerman and Marshall on how the media should cover religion and religious issues—they should be incorporated within the story naturally and be held as just as important as other issues. These stories also reflect how scholars such as Mattis view the church within the African American community. It is not just a place for worship, but for political empowerment and communication.

While the reporters for both stories do not implicitly call for action, the pieces are moving more into the facilitative role of media. By giving voice to those at ground-level, and choosing not to use the voices of those in power, these stories move towards a shared understanding for those affected. There is a call to action communicated by the actors in the stories, and while there are no definite goals established, these stories share many of the attributes of the facilitative role of media. The story from St. Louis Public Radio can also be analyzed using prophetic media critique. By allowing the ground-level actors within the story to express their viewpoints and speak out in commentary of what is happening in Ferguson, it seeks to transform the media environment into a space that cultivates deeper values by allowing prophetic voices to speak and be heard.

The last theme is that of religious or faith leaders as a voice in the ongoing dialogue. The first story is from FOX News, and deals with Reverend Al Sharpton's remarks following the grand jury decision. The second story is from St. Louis Public Media (aired on the national NPR show, Morning Edition) and focuses on how local religious leaders are helping their parishioners and the communities deal with the grand jury decision.

CRIME
Sharpton, families of Michael Brown and 2 other black men killed by police, pray for justice
Published November 26, 2014

NEW YORK – The parents of Michael Brown and relatives of two other unarmed black men killed by police officers joined hands with the Rev. Al Sharpton on Wednesday and prayed for justice amid days of protests over a Missouri grand jury's decision not to indict the officer who killed Brown.

The mourning families stood silently at the Harlem headquarters of Sharpton's civil rights organization, the National Action Network, and allowed Sharpton to describe the common grief that suddenly thrust them together.

"On this Thanksgiving eve, this is a very painful time for these families," Sharpton said. "As you see, they share each other's pain and understand what we don't understand." He said he hopes that, as the national spotlight is trained on these families that people on both sides of the legal outcomes would remember that "these are real human beings and the value of the lives of their sons and husbands should not be minimized by anybody." The attorney for the Brown family, Benjamin Crump, said that they had watched Tuesday's television interview with Darren Wilson, the officer who shot Brown and said his conscience is clean over the shooting. "They thought he had no regard for their child and that was hurtful to them," the attorney said. The Missouri family was joined by the wife and mother of Eric Garner, a Staten Island man who died in a police chokehold in July after being confronted by officers for selling loose cigarettes. That case has been sent to a grand jury. Kimberly Michelle Ballinger, the mother of Akai Gurley's child, also attended. Gurley was shot to death by a rookie police officer in a dark Brooklyn high-rise hallway last week. Sharpton said Ballinger had just returned from the
morgue where she identified Gurley's body. Police Commissioner William Bratton said Gurley had been "a total innocent" when he was shot. That shooting is under investigation. The civil rights leader had traveled to Missouri, where he voiced his disappointment in the lack of charges against Wilson. But in his prayer he said he hoped that the men will "not have died in vain, but that we all make sure that their deaths become beacons of a new way that we deal with law enforcement and community responsibility in this country." Ten people were arrested in New York on Tuesday during protests over the Missouri case that closed several bridges and snarled traffic on a busy travel day just two days before Thanksgiving. Those protests, unlike some in Ferguson, have remained peaceful. Sharpton made clear that he does not condone violence but said it's important to separate those looting and causing trouble from those demonstrating [24].

Church Leaders Look to Educate, Encourage and Calm St. Louis Parishioners
Originally published on Mon December 1, 2014 2:00 pm

Transcript

STEVE INSKEEP, HOST: This morning’s news takes us around the world in protest. We'll hear in the next few minutes about acts of protest and the response in Hong Kong, online and near Ferguson, Missouri.

CROWD: (Chanting) No justice, no football. No justice, no football.

INSKEEP: No justice, no football, they were chanting. Protesters outside yesterday's home game for the NFL's St. Louis Rams. It was one of many demonstrations over the weekend calling for justice for Michael Brown, who was shot and killed by Police Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson. Last week, the grand jury decision not to indict Wilson caused riots. Yesterday, Ferguson Mayor James Knowles confirmed Wilson has now resigned.

MAYOR JAMES KNOWLES: There is no severance agreement with Officer Wilson and the city of Ferguson. Now is the time for the city of Ferguson to begin its healing process.

INSKEEP: The mayor announced a new program to recruit more minority police officers. St. Louis Public Radio's Emanuele Berry reports the effort at healing was also taking place in churches across the region.

TASHA DAVIS: We thank you, God, for peace on today, God.

EMANUELE BERRY, BYLINE: Tasha Davis is leading more than 50 people in a prayer under a large, white tent in a parking lot just outside Ferguson. Just feet away, the cinderblock building that once housed the Flood Christian Church is destroyed, still marked with black ash from a fire set during chaos last Monday evening; the night a grand jury announced its decision not to indict Darren Wilson. Davis says this last week has taken a toll on the congregation.

DAVIS: Emotions are really all over the place. I'm grateful. I'm thankful. I'm sad because I understand that it could've been worse.

BERRY: Davis says authorities are currently investigating the fire, trying to determine if it was a targeted attack against the church which Michael Brown Sr. attends. Despite the damage, Davis says she's hopeful about the future of the church and the region.

DAVIS: You know, when our children get older and grandbabies will look at this, you know, being on the history books, and we'll be able to see how St. Louis was able to come back together again.

BERRY: Twenty minutes from Ferguson in downtown St. Louis, the Rev. Michael Kinman of Christ Church Cathedral is practicing his Sunday sermon. He's having some technical difficulties.

REVEREND MICHAEL KINMAN: I have it already queued up, and it's just not playing. And I'm not sure why.

BERRY: Fiddling with his iPhone for a moment, he finally gets the song to play.

KINMAN: There we go.

BERRY: Just over half of Kinman's congregation is white. And he hopes this song will inspire his church to have difficult conversations about race.

KINMAN: I think one of the tasks for us as white people - and it's radio, you can't tell I'm a white guy - is to say, OK, yeah, this may be hard for us now, but as Jon Stewart said this perfectly, he said, you know, you're tired of hearing about race? Try being black.

BERRY: Kinman notes not everyone is willing to talk about race.

KINMAN: We've had people leave the congregation because we keep talking about this. We've had people join the congregation because we keep talking about this.

BERRY: Race is something the Rev. Traci Blackmon is singing about at a rally in the St. Louis suburb of Clayton.

REVEREND TRACI BLACKMON: (Singing) Until the life of a black man, black mother, son.

BERRY: It was one of many protests organized in the St. Louis region this past weekend. A question many in the area are asking is when the demonstrations will stop. Blackmon says not anytime soon.

BLACKMON: We are here making people uncomfortable because whether you know it or not, your liberty is connected to mine. What is being uncomfortable compared to being dead?

BERRY: Blackmon called on marchers to take that discomfort to leaders in the state capital, Jefferson City.
BLACKMON: We are coming to you. If you don’t come to Ferguson, Ferguson is coming to you.
(APPLAUSE)

BERRY: Blackmon says when they come, they will come in peace, but also in power. For NPR News, I'm Emanuele Berry in St. Louis [25].

Once again, FOX News classifies its' story under a sub-heading, this time it is "Crime." Even though this story is focusing on Rev. Al Sharpton, and his communication with the families of Michael Brown and other families affected by police shootings, the sub-heading "Crime" categorizes it wrongly. This story is not about crime, it is about families talking and praying about what had happened. Sharpton discusses the deaths of these men, and hoped the men "not have died in vain, but that we all make sure that their deaths become beacons of a new way that we deal with law enforcement and community responsibility in this country." The quote is immediately followed by information on how the protests in Missouri and New York snarled travel in the days leading up to Thanksgiving. Sharpton can be seen as a very polarizing liberal figure, particularly for FOX News. This story does not focus on the importance of religion and prayer for those involved, only on the more "objective" facts of the story. It is very careful not to insert a particular opinion by the journalist, but does include the information concerning the protests and riots at the end of the story, which seems somewhat out of place.

The next story aired nationally by National Public Radio, but collected by St. Louis Public Radio, is more focused on how local church leaders are leading their congregations into communicative understanding of the aftermath of the Ferguson shooting and grand jury decision. There are comments from leaders of multiple denominations and from leaders in both black and white churches. Many of them are trying to work towards understanding within their congregations, and some are calling for action from their parishioners. This reflects a more facilitative role of the media, as opposed to the FOX story which is more monitorial.

V. CONCLUSION

The goal of this research was to examine news coverage surrounding the release of the grand jury decision in Ferguson, Missouri, and contemplate how religion is covered. The analysis showed elements of monitorial, facilitative, and collaborative roles within the stories, with a clearer connection to the monitorial and collaborative roles. There was some movement towards a facilitative role within some of the quotes in the stories (primarily from the stories by St. Louis Public Radio), but a most definite lack of a radical voice. As expressed earlier, the radical role seeks to help minorities articulate an alternative set of goals and to expose the conflict of interest between those who dominate the political-economic conditions and cultural values of a society and those who have little influence over these conditions. Within the mainstream media analyzed, these features were noticeably absent, and future research will hopefully uncover these elements in later coverage or in the radical press.

In terms of recommendations for the mainstream press based on this research, journalists need to first consider how the religious or faith community operates within the larger scope of the coverage. This requires a more thoughtful analysis on the history and cultural values of the community. As Beckerman proposed in his article on why and how journalists do not cover religion well, those who cover stories need to consider what motivates people to act. What are the beliefs that give meaning to their lives? What ideas are they willing to live and die for? If journalism means to relay the day-to-day saga of our society, it can’t continue to ignore these questions.

Secondly, journalists need to integrate the religious voices within the story and not place less value on them or relegate them as external to the story, or only as "soft" news in comparison to governmental or official sources. Gatekeepers also need to consider where they place these stories and how they classify them. With more and more religious voices taking their place in cultural and political stories, they must be integrated into stories and not classified as only "religious" or incorrectly placed under categories such as "crime" or "terror." By placing more importance on these voices, these stories may give a better cultural and richer meaning to viewers and listeners.

Lastly, depending on the story itself, journalists may need to consider whether to allow prophetic or radical voices to emerge within the coverage. Rather than only rely on covering events or actions in a monitorial and objective way, journalists need to consider how to give voice to those who can possibly help a community work towards change, or to allow minority voices to challenge those in power. This can only happen with concentrated change, and has proven extremely difficult in the current corporate-controlled media system. Despite the challenges, by continuously allowing ground-level voices that challenge the hegemonic consensus to be a priority in coverage, a more culturally-conscience understanding will hopefully emerge.

REFERENCES


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My work encompasses tracing the evolution of religious messages embedded in communication and media within institutions, and how text and visuals are received by those members. I am also interested in how these groups show either acceptance or resistance to these textual and visual messages. My research interests also include both historical and freedom of expression frameworks. Teaching experience includes journalistic writing, interviewing, broadcast, media law, public relations, and advertising.