

Racial Issues in the News Media Coverage of the George Zimmerman Trial

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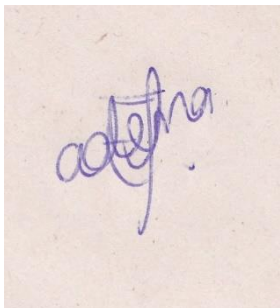
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Summary

Trayvon Martin's death and the arrest and trial of the shooter, George Zimmerman, sparked a national debate about race, given that Martin was an unarmed African American teenager. Media outlets, which have become increasingly politicized over the past decade, eagerly participated in the discussion surrounding the racial implications of the case. Images of African American men as violent perpetrators in the news media combined with the politicization of news media have contributed to the ways in which this discussion unfolded across the ideological spectrum. Where CNN and MSNBC tended to take Martin's side, believing that Zimmerman racially profiled Martin, FNC defended Zimmerman by arguing that racism no longer exists in modern society, thereby making racial profiling obsolete. *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* took a different approach by providing meta-commentary on the coverage of the case, while also facilitating an open discussion on race. By examining the case study of Martin's death and Zimmerman's trial it becomes clear that discussions on race are rarely fruitful: due to the ideological stances the respective networks have taken, there is hardly room for a variety of opinions within the networks.

Key words: News media, race, representation of African Americans, Trayvon Martin, George Zimmerman

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Introduction

In 2009, Sherman Alexie published his short story “Breaking and Entering” in the collection *War Dances*. In this story, a young African American man breaks into the house of the narrator, who then hits the burglar with a baseball bat, killing him instantly. The media picks up on this story and frames it as white violence against young African American men, thereby adding an explicit racial component to the story. However, the narrator is in fact Native American, which complicates the racial issues at play. Alexie also emphasizes how clever editing of news segments can shape and frame a narrative, thereby suggesting that the news media have a profound influence on the perception of a particular news story.

The events that played out in “Breaking and Entering” are strikingly similar to those in the Trayvon Martin case. Though there are notable differences as well - most importantly the lack of a crime perpetrated by a young African American man – the reaction of the media and the ways in which the news media provided a narrative for this case is reminiscent of Alexie’s short story. On 26 February 2012, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, who claimed to have shot Martin in self-defense and the police decided against filing charges against Zimmerman (Dahl). Martin’s parents started a petition to ensure Zimmerman’s arrest and the news media began to pick up on the story (Dahl). News media framed the story in terms of a white man killing a young African American man, even though Zimmerman is part Hispanic (Dahl). The national news media started to cover the story mid-march and following a growing outrage, the Department of Justice decided to bring the case before a grand jury (Dahl). On 11 April 2012, Zimmerman was charged with second-degree murder and the trial started on 10 June 2013 (Dahl). While the prosecution claimed that Zimmerman shot Martin as a result of racial profiling, the defense argued that Martin beat Zimmerman’s head into the sidewalk and Zimmerman shot Martin in self-defense in accordance with Florida’s Stand Your Ground law (Wagstaff). Zimmerman was acquitted of all charges on 13 July 2013 (Alvarez and Buckley).

The news media followed the story closely and also addressed the racial issues present in this case. Across the political spectrum, various national news media attempted to shape the narrative by giving race a central role in this story, or by denying any racial influences in the case, thereby also following the line of argumentation of the prosecution and the defense respectively. While right-wing news media tended to be on Zimmerman’s side, arguing race did not play a role in these tragic events, leftist news media framed the story as one of clashing race relations in which a white man had attacked a young African American man due to the prejudiced belief that young African American men are dangerous. This in turn sparked

a discussion on race and race relations, to which satirical news media such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* also responded, adding to the ongoing debate. Much of the coverage was no longer specifically about Martin and Zimmerman, but much more about race relations in general. As such, political agendas shaped the ways in which the case was reported on by various news outlets. The central question is therefore in what ways did race and ethnicity come to the fore in the news media coverage before, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the George Zimmerman trial and what role did discrimination and stereotypes, particularly with regards to African American men, play in the politicization of and the dialogue surrounding the case?

Much of the research about news media coverage of crime, especially crimes involving young African American men, focuses on the general tendencies that news media coverage has with regards to this topic. Studies such as “Perceptions of Crime, Racial Attitudes, and Firearms Ownership” and “Race and Ethnic Representations of Lawbreakers and Victims in Crime News: A National Study of Television Coverage” look at the ways in which news media perpetuate an image of young African American men as violent, with the news media in turn confirming already existing stereotypes about this group. Other studies, such as “Education and the Interface between Racial Perceptions and Criminal Justice Attitudes,” provide a connection between attitudes towards crime, which is often racialized, and the ways in which people of color, particularly young African American men, are represented in the media. “The Racial Components of ‘Race-Neutral’ Crime Policy Attitudes” and “Perceptions of Crime, Racial Attitudes, and Firearms Ownership” assess the ways in which policies and laws themselves are racialized. This can be partly attributed to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes combined with a sense of post-raciality, promoting the idea that legislation is colorblind when in fact it does specifically affect people of color in different ways than whites. The overrepresentation of African American men as criminals and the post-racial attitudes towards punitive legislation all contributes to the ways in which young African American men are featured in the news media as well as how the general public perceives them. Moreover, the news media itself has changed and evolved in significant ways over the past few decades. News media as well as the general public have become more politicized, leading to news networks taking sides in the debate, rather than simply reporting on it. These themes will be explored more fully in chapter 1.

However, most of these studies do not look at specific case studies, as they tend to look at more general patterns of representation in the news media. The case surrounding Martin and Zimmerman is not only a specific case study, it will also shed light on an

interesting development. Considering that the liberal news media, which makes up the majority of news channels, overwhelmingly took Martin's side in this story and vilified Zimmerman, they thereby reversed the notion that young African American men are always perceived as criminals. Martin's death sparked an intense debate about racialized violence in the United States. The news media played a crucial role in bringing this case to light and starting the discussion. Examining the coverage of the trial, the case in general, and the subsequent focus in the news media on the racial elements of the case will shed a light on current race relations in the US, as well as on the type of discussions that events such as this trigger.

Furthermore, ever since the death of Mike Brown on 9 August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, protests against law enforcement officials shooting unarmed young African American men have been held all over the country. Mike Brown was shot by officer Darren Wilson while Brown was unarmed and some witnesses even said his hands were in the air, surrendering, when Wilson repeatedly shot him. The following day, the protests began, with "Hands up, don't shoot" and "No justice, no peace" being used as the protesters' key rallying cries. The police responded to these protests with heavy military gear, as if they were preparing for battle, rather than surveying protests. On 24 November 2014, it became clear that Darren Wilson would not be indicted for the shooting, as the grand jury, which consisted largely of white people, decided against it ("Tracking the Events"). Just over a week later, another grand jury decided not to indict a white police officer from Staten Island who, in July 2014, used a chokehold on an unarmed African American man named Eric Garner, who died as a result of that chokehold. Videos captured Garner telling the officer that he could not breathe, yet this was not considered sufficient evidence for a trial. Once again, protests erupted, though this time there were fewer arrests than in Ferguson (Goodman and Baker). In November 2014, a Cleveland police officer shot 12 year old Tamir Rice, an African American boy. He was playing in a park when someone called 911 because Rice was waving a gun around that the caller thought was most likely fake. Still, officers arrived on the scene and immediately shot Rice, whose gun was indeed merely a toy gun that fired plastic pellets. As of 8 June 2015, community leaders in Cleveland announced that they had no faith in Cleveland prosecutors, considering the grand juries who decided not to indict the officers in both the Mike Brown and the Eric Garner cases. Instead, they will request murder charges against the officer directly from a judge (Schmidt and Apuzzo). In April 2015, two more cases of unarmed African American being killed by police officers emerged. On 4 April, Walter Scott was shot eight times in the back while Scott was running away. The events were caught on

video (Swaine). This time, however, officer Michael Slager was indicted by a grand jury (Kim). On 12 April 2015, a young African American man from Baltimore named Freddie Gray was arrested and during the transport in the police van, he suffered a severe spinal injury, which proved to be fatal a week later. Protests followed and eventually, all six police officers involved in Gray's death were indicted by a grand jury (Laughland and Swaine). These are just a handful of cases and protests that have erupted since the death of Mike Brown. Clearly, the United States is currently dealing with some very severe racial tensions as a result of the deaths of these unarmed children and men. While there are some differences between these cases and the death of Trayvon Martin – mainly the fact that George Zimmerman was a neighborhood watchman and not a police officer – there are strikingly similar circumstances. An authority figure shot an unarmed African American and the shooter was initially not indicted, and later acquitted. The cases mentioned above are so recent that it would be difficult to provide an accurate account of what exactly happened; in fact, many of the cases are still ongoing, as Tamir Rice's shooter has not (yet) been charged with any crime and the officers who killed Walter Scott and Freddie Gray have not yet gone to trial. The response to Martin's death sheds a light on the way in which the news media handles these types of cases, which are now more relevant than ever. Moreover, these cases challenge the notion of colorblind politics, in which it is assumed that racism is a thing of the past, that we no longer see color, and that anyone who points to racial inequalities as the cause of a societal problem is simply "playing the race card," thereby effectively dismissing race as a relevant factor in social problems (Bonilla-Silva 1). The disturbing frequency with which unarmed African Americans are shot or abused by police officers certainly provides a strong counter-argument to those who believe race is no longer relevant. In order to provide an in-depth understanding of how these discussions unfold, a case study is required. A case study into the discussion that emerged out of the death of Trayvon Martin will show the specific ways in which the news media discusses these types of cases and the difficulties that arise when so many believe that society has moved past racism and into a state of colorblindness.

In order to understand the discussion that emerged out of Martin's death, news media from across the political spectrum will be analyzed. Fox News represents the far-right, CNN a more moderate view, and MSNBC provides a leftist take on the events. On top of that, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* will also be analyzed, as they comment critically on the ways in which regular news media reported this story as well as on the emerging race debate. The first chapter will contextualize news media and the coverage of race-related issues by looking at similar cases. The second chapter will focus on perceptions of and discussions

about Trayvon Martin across the news media mentioned above, while the third chapter will do the same for George Zimmerman.

1. Framing the News Media and Coverage of Race Related Issues

In order to fully understand the role the news media has played in the coverage of Trayvon Martin's death and the subsequent trial of George Zimmerman, it is crucial to look at how cable news media has come about and how American news media have developed into the format that is being used today, particularly with regards to political partisanship and ideological cues that are being used. Furthermore, the ways in which news media cover race-related issues in the past have also influenced the coverage of the George Zimmerman trial. There has been a history of casting white people as the victim of violent crime, whereas people of color, particularly young African American men, are overrepresented as the perpetrators of violent crime (Gilliam, Valentino, and Beckmann 758; Peffley and Hurwitz 61). These images of African Americans as violent are also contrasted against images of tragic deaths of young black men, who were not a part of the violence despite being surrounded by it (Márquez 626). The media representation of African Americans influenced the ways in which this case was covered across the ideological spectrum. Political partisanship and issues of racial inequality and prejudice intersected in the coverage of the case of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman. This framework of the news media and its representation of African Americans helps to understand the discussions that surrounded the coverage of this case, as it provides context for the differing stances on the case and on race in general varying news outlets presented to its viewers.

1.1. Cable News, Political Ideology, and Bias

CNN was the first network to air news around the clock, seven days a week. The first broadcast aired on June 1, 1980 ("CNN Worldwide Fact Sheet"). For over a decade and a half, CNN had no competition from other news networks, as it was the only one of its kind. Even now, it is a tremendously successful network, reaching 100 million households in the United States and 284 million households outside of the US ("CNN Worldwide Fact Sheet"). With that kind of reach, both domestically and abroad, it is fair to say that CNN is hugely influential within news media and potentially has the power to shape how viewers will respond to a news story.

The competition for CNN began when the Fox News Channel (FNC) was launched in 1996 (Jones 178). The founder of FNC, Roger Ailes, had been struggling to come up with a conservative show on other networks, which all failed to attract audiences. It was not until he launched FNC that he found a format that worked: one that combined well-known conservatives and the news media (Jones 178). FNC deliberately moved away from what they

perceived as the liberal mainstream in news media, thereby aligning themselves with a conservative ideology (Jones 179; Coe et al. 201). Still, FNC did not market itself as being necessarily conservative, as their slogan “Fair and Balanced” indicates. FNC deliberately contrasted itself to liberal mainstream media through this slogan, which implied that they do not present a biased point of view (Norton 320). In reality, however, FNC does lean towards a conservative perspective (Morris 725). Instead of trying to appeal to a mass audience, FNC targeted a niche audience by combining a clear ideological point of view with news programs, that ran consistently throughout the network (Jones 179). This link to ideology connects FNC to its viewers, which creates a reliable and loyal audience that will keep coming back to the network, creating a consistent viewership (Jones 180). Fox also ensures that the audience will return to their network by discussing issues that they, the viewers, find important. Moreover, Fox does not leave room for a nuanced point of view, or any mediated position when it comes to these issues. Either you are with them or against them, thereby creating a strong dichotomy between liberals and conservatives, which once again enforces the loyalty that a conservative audience will have towards the network (Jones 183). The network distances viewers from liberal points of view, thereby spending little to no time on voices that disagree with Republican points of view, only reinforcing what the audience already believes and stands for (Jones 181). According to Stuart Hall, television is “a primary myth maker” (Laughey 63). The choice of segments and editing are all intended to convey certain meanings to the audience (Laughey 63). In this way, a conservative ideology is evident throughout the network, coloring the ways in which certain news items are presented.

Moreover, as Jeffrey P. Jones explains in his article “Fox News and the Performance of Ideology,” FNC’s reporting is often performative, meaning “a recognition that language often produces, not just reflects upon, that which it names” (183). This occurs when one of the news programs talks about ‘facts’ that are often unconfirmed or sometimes even fabricated. As these statements are made by news programs, it lends a certain veracity to the statements and they are more likely to be taken as fact by the audience. The issue at hand, which in some cases is based on incomplete information at best, is essentially brought into being by being spoken of on the network (Jones 183). Since many of these statements are based on unconfirmed information, they are not outright lies. However, framing them as facts would certainly convey to viewers that the reporting is based on confirmed information. The truth therefore becomes muddy and malleable. This is in accordance with agenda-setting theory, which posits that “journalists in particular influence public opinion according to the salience they give to certain news items” (Laughey 22). The importance of a news item is to a large

extent determined by the news media according to this theory (Laughey 22). As political scientist Bernard Cohen put it, the media “may not be successful much of the time in telling readers what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about” (qtd. in Sparrow 7). The salience of such a news item can be determined by looking at four factors. The first is “the frequency of repetition” (Laughey 22). The more often a news item is repeated, the more important the viewers will think that item to be. Secondly, “the prominence with which news items are displayed,” in which headline news will be considered most salient (Laughey 22). “The degree of conflict present in the news item” is the third factor: the more conflict, the more prominent the item will be (Laughey 22). Finally, “the framing of a news item – in what context and when it appears” affects salience (Laughey 22). In different times of the year, different issues matter more. In shaping the salience of a news item, FNC relies on locution, which is the act of naming a problem; illocution, the intent of naming that problem, usually functioning as a warning; and perlocution, the effect of naming the problem, which can spur viewers into action. When FNC focuses its attention on any given topic, there is usually an implicit warning present of the dangers that topic might pose to American society, which then encourages viewers to actively speak out for or against a certain issue (Jones 184). Due to the already ideological and political nature of the network, these warnings or perceived threats are likely to be colored by a conservative political ideology.

However, there are of course other factors that influence the making of the news. For example, reporters are likely to rely on standard practices, which are based on similar types of reporting which went unquestioned or were otherwise successful (Sparrow 14). Moreover, there is pressure from within the marketplace to create a brand in order to remain economically successful (Sparrow 16). Pressures from stockholders, managers, and executives can lead to a news network to adjust their content to suit the needs of those with an economic interest in the network (Sparrow 74). Advertisers also have a great deal of influence as they are the ones who generate the networks’ incomes. Advertisers can demand that content be tailored in order to maximize their own profits (Sparrow 77, 80). Furthermore, the influence of advertisers has led to news media targeting smaller audiences instead of trying to appeal to the masses, once again to maximize the advertisers’ profits (Sparrow 82). Considering this development, it is unsurprising that networks such as FNC and MSNBC have been successful in targeting smaller audiences. These economic circumstances ensure that there is a constant bid for ratings. As a station manager at a news network noted, “all that really matters is how we look in the ratings” (qtd. in Sparrow 84). In their pursuit of ratings,

news networks have developed a number of rules to maximize ratings: “(1) seek images over ideas, (2) seek emotion over analysis (with corollaries being to avoid complexity and dramatize where possible), (3) exaggerate, if needed, to appeal, and (4) avoid extensive news gathering” (Sparrow 84). In short, dramatizing the news is highly desirable according to this model. Such drama is best created by stories in which there are two easily identifiable opposing sides, such as whites vs blacks (Sparrow 110). This in turn determines which stories are considered newsworthy and which are considered to be most salient (Sparrow 108-9). On top of these economic concerns, reporters also often deal with uncertainty about the facts of a particular news story. As a result, there is considerable leeway for reporters to shape a story in a way that conforms to their own or their employers’ political or ideological affiliations (Sparrow 114). Ideological and political cues in the news are thus also born from a pursuit of good ratings and pressures from executives, stockholders, and advertisers.

In response to FNC’s overt affiliation with ideology, other news networks and programs such as CNN and MSNBC began to do the same. News has become more political and more politicized in recent years (Coe et al. 201). Such a shift is likely the result of culture wars which stretch “across virtually every facet of contemporary American society” and are “ideologically charged battles over opposing moral values and fundamental belief systems” (Darts 104). Similar to FNC, other networks also began using their editing and selection choices to convey a certain ideology (Laughey 63). Although FNC’s conservative views on news certainly contributed to the increase in partisanship in news media, another trend has also greatly influenced the politicization of news, namely the emergence of so-called soft news media (Coe et al 201). These soft news programs “package political information in an entertaining form, often through the use of an interview format wherein the interaction between host and guest provides ample comedy or conflict” (Coe et al 201-2). In other words, soft news does not simply present the facts of a news item, but encourages political discussion about the news item. This is part of a larger shift within news media where the objectivity that was so crucial for much of the 20th century has been replaced by a need for entertainment. Purely informational news is not as valued as it used to be by mass audiences, nor is it considered to be interesting. In fact, FNC, CNN, and MSNBC only use approximately one-third of its programming time for traditional news; the rest is filled by soft news programming (Norton 316). The need for entertainment combined with overt political ideologies also causes news to be far more subjective, which further undermines the standard of objectivity of 20th century journalism (Coe et al. 203).

These soft news programs do not only occur on 24-hour cable news networks, they also exist on other platforms. Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are both examples of soft news programs that engage the audience by commenting on the news, rather than simply presenting it. However, *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* take it a step further by imitating and parodying news programs on networks such as CNN, FNC, and MSNBC. *The Colbert Report* explicitly imitates FNC's Bill O'Reilly and his soft news program *The O'Reilly Factor*. Stephen Colbert, host of *The Colbert Report*, plays a persona that is without a doubt right-wing and quite nationalist in order to expose the inconsistencies and logical flaws in O'Reilly's thinking, and by extension in the reasoning of FNC and Republicans in general (Norton 320). In this way, these shows can mock news media conventions, while at the same time creating a space to respond critically to the news media (Gurney 6). Comedy and satire have the ability to "comment upon and reveal potential failings or hypocrisies of American society, especially those perpetrated by individuals in a position of political and/or economic power" (Gurney 3). This puts *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* in a position that is different from that of cable news networks, as they can use their format not just to comment on the news and push a liberal agenda, as some accuse them of doing, but also to comment critically on the way in which news is reported (Coe et al. 205). Thus, due to the comedic format of these shows, they can take a step back and critically assess the news media from a distance.

The emergence of soft news programs has led to news media being perceived as biased, with both liberals and conservatives accusing media of being biased against them (Morris 708). In fact, in 2004, a poll found that 69% of the US population saw bias in the news (Morris 708). Partisanship has only increased since then, so that figure will likely not have diminished. The ideological views of an audience influence the ways in which the content is interpreted, even if that content is quite objective. Therefore, what the audience brings to any given news program will influence their interpretation of the news itself. The bias, then, may happen on the side of the audience, and not necessarily on the side of the news itself (Turner 443). Moreover, once a news network is seen as liberal or conservative, viewers will interpret their message as such, regardless of the actual ideological bias that may or may not exist in the reporting of news (Turner 444). Perceived bias within any given news program may be the result of what is called the hostile media phenomenon, which states that neutral news messages may be perceived as biased against the viewer's own beliefs or ideological standpoint (Coe et al. 204). For instance, conservatives who watch CNN will perceive the news to be liberally biased, while liberals who watch the same news item on

CNN will think that item is biased in favor of conservatives (Turner 443). Moreover, because the hostile media phenomenon states that partisans will perceive bias against their own position, they are less likely to perceive bias in favor of their position (Morris 715). Partisans are therefore much more focused on whether the media is biased against them than on whether some media might exhibit bias that favors them.

However, this definition of the hostile media phenomenon assumes that the message itself is fairly objective and thus does very little to help understand what happens in terms of perceived bias when the news message *is* biased. The definition as given above can therefore be seen as the absolute hostile media phenomenon. In instances where the media message is clearly biased, we can speak of a relative hostile media phenomenon (Coe et al. 204). In the case of a relative hostile media phenomenon “partisans on both sides perceive the story to be biased in the same direction, but they perceive the coverage as more unfavorable toward their position than others” (Coe et al. 204). In other words, even though both liberals and conservatives may be able to acknowledge that a given news story contains a liberal or conservative bias, liberals will react more strongly against conservative bias and vice versa (Coe et al. 205). Liberal viewers who watch MSNBC, for instance, will be more likely to interpret their reporting as liberal and since that corresponds with its core audience’s personal ideological views, they will more easily accept the news that is being reported. On the other hand, if liberal viewers watch Fox News, they will be far more likely to reject any reporting on that network, simply because Fox News has a reputation as conservative (Turner 444). On top of that, viewers are more likely to be engaged by and interested in programs that conform to their own partisan views. In their article “Hostile News: Partisan Use and Perceptions of Cable News Programming,” Kevin Coe et al. have found that, when looking at *The Daily Show*, CNN, and FNC, liberals feel more informed after watching *The Daily Show* and are also more interested in that show than conservatives were. Conservatives also felt more informed by and were more interested in FNC than liberals. CNN, on the other hand, was found roughly equally informative by both liberals and conservatives (Coe et al. 214). Partisan responses are therefore enhanced by the partisan nature of news programs. *The Daily Show*’s liberal nature and FNC’s conservative reporting have elicited stronger responses from both liberals and conservatives. CNN, with its more neutral, though not entirely objective stance, garners far more moderate responses from partisan viewers.

This complicates the ways in which bias is perceived in any news report. While cable news has become increasingly political, that does not necessarily mean every news report is ideologically biased. However, even under the best of circumstances, due to the absolute

hostile media phenomenon, viewers will perceive media as being biased against them. Once it is known that cable news networks such as FNC and MSNBC lean towards conservative and liberal ideologies respectively, that bias is perceived even more strongly, regardless of whether it actually exists in that particular news item (Turner 444).

This effect is enhanced even more by group attachments, which ensure that “people are motivated to protect their own groups. For example, social identity theory holds that individuals categorize themselves through membership in stratified groups, effectively contrasting their in-group with contrasting out-groups” (Coe et al. 205). This can in turn affect a viewer’s evaluation of the news, as they will want to protect their in-group, which in the current environment of partisanship is likely to be defined along political and ideological lines. Moreover, the stronger someone’s partisan affiliation is, the stronger their perception of bias will be. This is especially due to stronger identification with a certain in-group, which then also contrasts itself more strongly against the opposite group (Coe et al. 205). Essentially, strong group attachments enhance the effects of the hostile media phenomenon because viewers’ motivation to protect their own in-groups will lead them to be more defensive about the news they are watching and any bias they may perceive in it.

The developments in cable news media have led to an increase in politicization of the news, which has become more about ideology and partisanship and less about objective reporting. On top of that, ideological views within the population has led to the hostile media phenomenon, which is only exacerbated by the bias that already exists in the news media itself and the increase in partisanship among viewers. The fragmented nature of cable news also ensures that viewers do not have to be exposed to viewpoints that clash with their own, thereby strengthening their ideological standpoint. It is in the context of these developments that the case of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman needs to be assessed, as the networks and programs that reported on the case have all been influenced heavily by these developments.

1.2 Media Coverage of Race-Related Issues and Young Black Men as Violent Perpetrators

In today’s society, Americans get most of their information and news from television and for many television news is the most important and most trustworthy source of information they have (Bjornstrom et al. 270). On top of that, public opinion on race and racial stereotypes is strongly influenced by news media in modern society (Gilliam, Valentino, and Beckman 757). This is especially true of crime related news, as most people

do not have any direct experiences with crime and therefore get their information on crime from news media (Kort-Butler and Hartshorn 40).

Many white viewers receive their information about African Americans through the news, especially when those whites live in neighborhoods that are predominantly white (Gilliam, Valentino, and Beckmann 769). Stereotypes sustained by the news media about blacks being “a violent underclass of ‘welfare blacks,’ ‘streetwise blacks,’ and ‘ghetto blacks’” have replaced racial prejudices based on genetic inferiority (Peffley and Hurwitz 64). Reports on crime encourage two popular notions about crime: that crime is violent and that the perpetrators of those violent crimes are not white. Whites, on the other hand, are portrayed as the victims of violent crime in news media. Moreover, blacks are overrepresented in reports on criminal activity, while whites are typically underrepresented (Gilliam, Valentino, and Beckmann 758; Peffley and Hurwitz 61). In fact, a 2002 study by Theodore Chiricos and Sarah Eschholz which looked at the ways in which ethnic minorities were represented in the news found that African Americans and Hispanics were four times more likely to be portrayed as suspects than as victims, whereas whites were approximately equally likely to be portrayed as suspects or victims (Bjornstrom et al. 272).

In doing so, television news provides stereotypes that in turn increase support for more severe punitive measures, such as increased support for capital punishment and longer prison sentences (Gilliam, Valentino, and Beckmann 759; Federico and Holmes 48). Simultaneously, it decreases support for measures that would benefit African Americans (Gilliam, Valentino, and Beckmann 759; Peffley and Hurwitz 67). Opposition by whites to measures such as welfare, for instance, is often shaped by negative perceptions of blacks, who are seen as lazy (Peffley and Hurwitz 61). This is especially true of whites who live in white neighborhoods and whose information on African Americans is based on the predominantly negative news reports (Gilliam, Valentino, and Beckmann 770). Moreover, education does not necessarily change whites’ perceptions of blacks. While educated people are often more aware of the racial inequalities that still exist, that does not automatically translate to adopting a point of view that favors less severe punitive measures. Instead, most whites do not change their standpoint on punitive measures based on education, instead using education to support their preexisting point of view on the matter (Federico and Holmes 51). Stereotypes and prejudices about African Americans are therefore likely to increase support for strong punitive measures, which are implicitly race-coded as they are more likely to affect African Americans (Federico and Holmes 48).

In order to strengthen the stereotype that sees regular African Americans as perpetrators of violent crime, the narratives that often surround the high profile deaths of young black men are about the exceptional nature of those young black men. These are the stories that receive attention in the national news. Their future was one that was promising, a future that was sure to get them out of the ghetto and away from gang violence. These young black men would have a successful future, which has been brutally taken from them (Márquez 633). This creates a dichotomy between the success stories, or the “noble savages” on the one hand, and the average African American and Hispanic population, or the “bloody savages” on the other hand (Márquez 626). The exceptional nature of the success stories is used against a backdrop of violent neighborhoods surrounded by gang violence and other violent crime.

Consider the case of Ben Wilson, a black teen who was shot in 1984 in Chicago by two other teenagers, William Moore and Omar Dixon (Myers). The case was seen as especially tragic because Wilson was a rising star in basketball and despite living in a tough neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side, he was doing well and he was becoming a respected member of the community (Márquez 634). 17 year old Moore was sentenced to the maximum of 40 years for firing the fatal shot, while 16 year old Dixon received a sentence of 30 years (Myers). Though their lawyers protested by saying that Moore and Dixon had only been punished so severely because Wilson was a rising star, the prosecution denied this (Myers). However, State Attorney Kenneth Malatesta did say that “The victim in this case was a person who had made something of himself...The community was outraged at the loss” (qtd. in Myers). Precisely because Wilson was a prominent figure and not like all the other black boys in his neighborhood, the loss of his life was considered tragic (Márquez 634).

In a case strikingly similar to Wilson’s, Blair Holt, a 16 year old African American boy was killed on a Chicago city bus in 2007 (Márquez 634). In the news, Holt was referred to as an honors student and as someone who did not get involved with gangs. Moreover, both of Holt’s parents had college degrees and were middle class Americans (Márquez 634). Though Holt would rap about the street lifestyle of his peers, he steered clear of violence and gangs, making him an exceptional figure in the violence and gang-ridden streets of the South Side of Chicago (Márquez 635). Similar to the case of Ben Wilson, Holt’s killer, 18 year old Michael Pace, was sentenced to a long term in prison: 100 years (“Blair Holt’s Killer”). The tragedy of Holt’s death lies in his exceptionality, in his ability to escape the typical African American neighborhood and by extension, the typical African American way of life (Márquez 635).

The contrast between the lives of exceptional young men of color and the lives of mediocre young men of color becomes especially clear when looking at the deaths of 16 year old Derrion Albert, an African American boy, and 15 year old Alex Arellano, a Hispanic boy, in 2009 (Márquez 635). Albert got caught in a gang fight, even though he was an innocent bystander, and was brutally beaten to death (Khan). Like Wilson and Holt, Albert was also presented as an honors student who steered clear of gangs even though his neighborhood was plagued by gang violence (Márquez 636). In response to his death, President Obama provided more funds to prevent gang violence. The exceptionality of Albert, an honors student in a gang-riddled environment, warranted such action (Márquez 636). Arellano's death, on the other hand, did not receive national attention, nor did it prompt more institutional action (Márquez 637). Arellano died only a few months before Albert, after having been "beaten with baseball bats, shot in the head, run over by a car, and lit aflame by peers" (Márquez 635). His death was at least as brutal as Albert's, yet received little attention in the media because he was not exceptional. He was not doing well in school and he was bound to get involved with the gangs in his neighborhood (Márquez 637). His death was seen as simply a consequence of the violence that is so prominent in neighborhoods inhabited by African Americans and Hispanics, whereas the deaths of Wilson, Holt, and Albert were deserving of national attention because they were exceptional. This creates a narrative that supports the idea that some childhood murders are more tragic than others, depending on the life of the child that has been killed (Márquez 635).

In conclusion, African Americans are seen as violent perpetrators due to an overrepresentation of this role in news media, which in turn leads to stereotypes about African Americans being more dangerous and an increase in support for severe punitive measures. At the same time, these images are being contrasted with images of young black men who were on a path towards success and whose life was tragically cut short by their violent environments. Meanwhile, the news media, with its focus on soft news programming and increased partisan affiliations, wants to cover news items that play into an ideological and social debate. Race becomes the prominent issue that news media focus on, either to reinforce the idea that racism is still extremely prevalent in current society, or to deny the existence of racial inequality altogether. Regardless, the killing of an African American teen by a white man provided the news media with opportunities for intense ideologically fraught debates. It is against this backdrop that the case of Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman played out. The news media's increased politicization and bias, the population's increased partisanship,

the already existing racial prejudices that were confirmed and strengthened by news media coverage of black men as violent perpetrators and white people as victims, and the narratives of the tragic deaths of innocent and potentially successful young black men all came together to create an intense discussion in the news media on the state of race relations in the United States, while also playing out along partisan lines.

2. Trayvon Martin and Race: Perceptions and Discussions in News Media

This chapter will look at the coverage of the case, with a focus on Trayvon Martin and his racial background as an African American teenager. Building on the previous chapter, this chapter will analyze the coverage of Trayvon Martin in the context of politicized news media and its previous coverage of race-related criminal cases. CNN will be analyzed first, as it provides the most mainstream coverage of the case of the three major news networks. Next is FNC, providing the right-wing view, followed by MSNBC which brings a more left-wing perspective to the table. Finally, Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* will be analyzed as they provided some meta-commentary with regards to the news media, as well as addressing issues of race.

2.1. CNN

CNN's online archive contains 467 videos concerning Trayvon Martin, the earliest dating back to 12 March 2012, a little over two weeks after Martin's death. Soon after the first report on Martin's death, discussions of the racial nature of the case became an integral part of the reporting on this network, though the various hosts and commentators did not always agree on the influence race may or may not have had in this case. The earliest video about the case on CNN's website is a statement made by the Sanford Police Department, presented without further commentary from CNN hosts or newscasters ("Teen Killed"). Not long after this first report, there is an interview with Martin's family and their attorney, who points out that if the roles had been reversed and Martin had been the one to shoot, an arrest would definitely have been made, so it is baffling to him that Zimmerman has not been arrested at that point ("Trayvon Martin family"). The implication of the Martin family attorney here being that a black shooter would never be given the same trust as Zimmerman had been awarded by the police, which introduces a distinct racial element to the way in which this case was perceived by the Martin family and, by extension, by CNN and its audience. This sentiment is echoed a few days later, when Anderson Cooper and his guests Sunny Hostin and Jeffrey Toobin, both of whom are legal analysts, talk about the racial implications of this case. Hostin and Toobin also believe that a black shooter would have been arrested, despite the Stand Your Ground law in Florida. On top of that, Cooper remarks that if a white teen had been wearing a hoodie and tennis shoes, which Martin was wearing that night, Zimmerman would not have perceived Martin as a threat ("Florida Law"). This is supported by the overrepresentation of African Americans as criminals in the news. Crime becomes associated

with a particular group. (Federico and Holmes 48). The hoodie does not necessarily raise suspicion; rather, the hoodie in combination with its wearer, an African American youth, is the factor that warrant suspicion. At this point, a week after the initial reporting of the case, race has become a crucial part of the conversation on CNN, in which the absence of an arrest is viewed in a racialized context.

Though CNN has been fairly quick to include race in the conversation, not every contributor on the network feels the same about the case. During one of CNN's soft news programs, *Starting Point*, guest Michael Skolnik argues that there should be an acknowledgement that there is a problem concerning the deaths of so many young African American and Latino men. One of the contributors to the program, however, does not want to comment on the case until he knows all the facts and is reluctant to talk about the case in such a way. Skolnik replies that while this may be true from a legal standpoint, he thinks it is crucial for people to speak up about racial profiling, of which this case is a clear example according to him ("Racial Issues"). The conversations surrounding the case definitely imply that Zimmerman racially profiled Martin and that he is undoubtedly guilty, but there are some dissenting voices who are not willing to jump to conclusions. The case is mostly discussed in terms typical of larger patterns, rather than looking at the specificity of the situation. However, taking into account that Sanford PD had not made an arrest and that there had been virtually no official investigation into the events of that night, it would be difficult to discuss any case specifics. At the same time, that is also emblematic of 24-hour news media: the constant request for news turns into speculation and discussion, rather than objective fact-based reporting. After all, soft news programs value entertainment over information and objectivity (Coe et al. 203).

While the primary racial element of the case in these discussions initially centered around the lack of an arrest, the focus started to shift towards racial profiling quite quickly. As the content of the abovementioned segment already suggests, conversations begin to include more mentions of racial profiling. Former NBA star Chris Webber even suggests that Martin was killed because he was "holding the suspicions and the weight of the world on [his] shoulders" ("Chris Webber"). He implies that purely for being a young African American man, Martin was seen as suspicious, which clearly references the racial profiling argument. This is consistent with the image of young African American men as criminals that is constantly reinforced by the news media (Young 475). Though published in 1985, the article "Perceptions of Crime, Racial Attitudes, and Firearms Ownership" by Robert L. Young suggests that if the predominant image of criminals is that of African American men, it is

likely to increase aggressive responses (476). While this particular study may appear dated at this time, more recent studies have also found that overrepresentation of African American men in the news media is still a prominent issue (Bjornstrom et al. 287; Federico and Holmes 48). Considering that most Americans get their news from watching television, this overrepresentation is significant (Bjornstrom et al., 270). It is therefore not unthinkable that Zimmerman assumed Martin was a criminal largely based on the color of his skin. After all, the predominant image of criminals in the minds of Americans will be African American.

The following day, the host of *Early Start* reads an op-ed piece from the *Washington Post*, which argued that African American men wear a bulls-eye throughout their lives, painting the case in explicitly racial terms. In the same segment, pastor Valerie Houston mentions the deaths of 18 young African American men who were shot in Sanford, Florida, in some case by the police, with no investigation whatsoever (“Pastor Houston”). This not only constructs the case in racial terms, but also in local terms, as the specificity of deaths in Sanford is mentioned by the pastor. That same day, representative Frederica Wilson claims that racial profiling happens to African Americans on a daily basis and explicitly says that Martin’s death was racially motivated (“Rep. Wilson”). Wilson’s comments are somewhat different from those made by pastor Houston and Chris Webber, considering that she is a representative, thereby politicizing the case. Thus, not only did the conversation shift to a focus on racial profiling as the cause of death, but various prominent figures, such as representative Wilson and Chris Webber began to insert themselves into the conversation, adding to the visibility of the case. With Wilson’s comments specifically, the case also took on a more political nature.

With the steady increase in media attention and the continued discussion on race, which became politicized, CNN also began to respond to other media outlets. Less than ten days after the initial report on CNN, *Reliable Sources* host Howard Kurtz discusses media bias in the coverage of the case. He refers to MSNBC’s Al Sharpton, who attended a rally in support of Zimmerman’s arrest, which Sharpton then also discussed on his own show on MSNBC. Kurtz sees this as a conflict of interest and an example of media bias, since it is impossible to report on a case objectively when Sharpton is also attending rallies that are clearly in support of Martin, particularly given Sharpton’s reputation as a civil rights leader (“Media Bias”). There is also a brief discussion of FNC’s Geraldo Rivera and his argument that African American and Hispanic youths should not wear hoodies because of the criminal association with that item of clothing, which is referred to as victim-blaming in the segment (“Media Bias”). In this way, CNN is responding not only to the larger national discussion, but

also to specific news outlets that have very different views on the situation: MSNBC's Sharpton strongly focuses on the lack of an arrest, while FNC's Rivera directs his attention to an item of clothing as the culprit.

The politicization of the debate continues when President Obama comments publicly on the case and he suggests that his son would have looked like Trayvon. Many Republicans did not respond well to those comments, calling them divisive at a time when the President should be uniting the American people. CNN's Don Lemon responds to that by accusing Republicans of divisive and politicizing behavior, thereby making it clear where he stands on the issue ("No Talking Points"). However, CNN does not have a unified opinion on the case across all different programs and hosts. Heated debates do occur, specifically with Will Cain, who does not want to talk about the case in racial terms until he has all the facts, while his opponents think this is an excellent opportunity to talk about race in the United States ("The Politics of Trayvon Martin"). CNN has made race part of the conversation by discussing it frequently, but at the same time, there is dissent within the network itself and therefore, it does not provide a unified picture of how to interpret this case. While many of the individual hosts and guests have clear opinions on the case and do not shy away from sharing those opinions, there is at least some variety in the kinds of opinions that are discussed, which leaves some room for the viewer to make up their own mind. At the same time, many of the discussions concerning the case do focus on race, which could influence the ways in which viewers interpret the case.

Conflicting images of Martin began to surface quite quickly, complicating the narrative of innocent teenager and evil neighborhood watchman that had been dominating the news up to that point. Some of the images of Martin that had been shown in news reports were made when Martin was much younger than he was at the time of his death, which made him look far more like a child and by extension, more innocent ("Trayvon Martin Witness"). On top of that, reports surfaced claiming that Martin had been suspended from school at the time of his death for marijuana possession ("Trayvon Martin Witness"). When this information is discussed on the network, it becomes clear that the Martin family views this as a type of character assassination ("Character Assassination"). Martin's school records should not have been allowed to be released to the public, as Martin was a minor and therefore his records should have been protected. His records were likely released to paint him in a bad light ("Trayvon Martin's School Records"). Furthermore, it is suggested that Zimmerman thought of Martin as suspicious without knowing about Martin's suspension from school, which has racial implications according to journalist Roland Martin ("Character

Assassination”). Several weeks later, CNN also gives a voice to those who knew Martin and who claim Martin was never violent or aggressive (“Fmr. Coach”; “Martin’s Brother”). In this way, CNN is providing strong counter arguments to those who might want to typify Martin as a thug.

However, the network continues to include voices that are more careful to judge the case. Clay Aiken, a Democrat, suggests that while the media has played an important role in bringing this case to light, the case should not be tried in the media. On top of that, he argues that the public feels so strongly about this situation is because it could happen to anyone (“Trump, Aiken on Trayvon Martin”). In doing so, he rejects the notion that this case is specifically racial. After all, if it could happen to anyone, there must not be a specific racial component that led to Zimmerman’s suspicion and Martin’s death. At this point, people like Aiken, who attempt to take race out of the conversation regarding this case, are definitely a minority on CNN, but opinions like these are heard with some regularity.

There is also some self-awareness of the effect that the discussion has on the individual case. CNN contributor Pete Dominick argues that in the midst of all the outrage concerning race, Martin is lost in the discussion. Furthermore, he suggests people are capitalizing on Martin’s death by using him to incite divisive discussions. At the same time, he still discusses racial profiling and the ways in which poverty and the war on drugs intersect with race (“Capitalizing on Trayvon Martin’s Death?”). In this way, he attempts to bring the conversation back to Trayvon Martin and George Zimmerman without excluding the possibility that there were racial factors at play that transcend the specificities of the case.

Moreover, CNN’s *Reliable Sources* discusses the polarization of the debate by looking at MSNBC and FNC. According to Howard Kurtz, the show’s host, MSNBC is acting as prosecutor on top of badgering those on Zimmerman’s side. FNC, on the other hand, acts as the defense by actively questioning Martin’s side of the story. In comparing these two news outlets and commenting on their bias, CNN posits itself as a more neutral observer, one who is capable of participating in the debate in a more objective way. Kurtz also wonders if the constant media coverage is only exacerbating the polarization of the discussion. Of course, CNN has been just as much a part of this onslaught of coverage, but by asking this question, the network removes itself from such implications. The segment also comments on the need for such biased reporting by arguing that due to the lack of an official investigation by the police, news reporters have essentially taken on the role of investigators (“The Polarization of Trayvon Martin”). CNN thus suggests that the absence of a police investigation has led to more intense investigating on the part of reporters, which in turn has led to reporters and

networks taking sides and increased polarization. However, the segment does not appear to apply these terms to CNN as a network, instead limiting their critical analysis to MSNBC and FNC.

When in May 2012, approximately a month after the arrest of Zimmerman, new evidence is released in the case, the discussion surrounding Martin's culpability in his own death resurfaces. It becomes clear that Martin had traces of THC in his system at the time of his death. The newly released evidence also shows that Zimmerman had a prescription for Adderall, though it is unclear whether he used this medication on the night of the shooting because, as a CNN commentator points out, Zimmerman was not tested for drugs after the shooting ("Trayvon Martin Autopsy"). The surveillance footage of the 7/11 where Martin last went on the night of his death was also released at this time, showing that Martin was not doing anything illegal, nor did he seem intoxicated ("New Video"). During the trial, commentator Nancy Grace insists that THC is not likely to make a person violent. In fact, the opposite effect is often created, as the person will most likely become lethargic ("Nancy Grace"). CNN therefore does not interpret the new evidence as a sign that Martin was culpable in his own death. Even though he had traces of THC in his system, the commentator argues that this did not have a visible effect on him, considering that mere minutes before the altercation started, he seemed fine as seen on the surveillance footage. Moreover, Grace argues that the drugs would not have made Martin violent, therefore the drugs would not have led to Martin starting the altercation. Instead, the segments question what drugs Zimmerman may have been using, thereby implicating that Zimmerman's use of Adderall may have caused him to react violently towards Martin.

This discussion flares up again several weeks before the trial is set to start, in May and June 2013. Once again, information is released, this time by the defense, about Martin that might paint him in a bad light. Pictures and texts taken from Martin's phone are used to show that Martin was no stranger to fights, guns, and drugs ("Is the Defense Trashing Trayvon Martin?"). The title of this segment, with its use of the word 'trashing' indicates that CNN does not regard this release of information favorably. Indeed, the segment raises the question whether the defense is deliberately trying to make Martin look like a thug in order to justify Zimmerman's actions ("Is the Defense Trashing Trayvon Martin?"). This new evidence contrasts with the idea that Martin is an innocent teenager whose life was tragically cut short, as discussed in the previous chapter. There is a curious tension between the images of Martin as a drug user and gun aficionado and CNN's continued efforts to portray Martin as an innocent teen. On the one hand, Martin's interest in soft drugs and guns do not change the fact

that he was unarmed the night he was shot. On the other hand, given news networks' history of reporting on tragic deaths of African American teenagers, it is debatable whether networks would have given this much salience to the news item had they known in advance that Martin was not a perfect student with an unproblematic future ahead of him. CNN's sympathies certainly appear to lie with Martin. At this stage in the case, dissent within the network is far less common than it was at the start. The network defends Martin regularly, while questioning Zimmerman's words and actions, thereby leaving the impression that CNN is more favorable towards the prosecution than it is towards the defense.

After Zimmerman was found not guilty on 13 July 2013, Benjamin Crump, the Martin family attorney, speaks for the family, emphasizing their grief ("Martin Family Attorney"). In doing so, the humanity of Martin and his family is stressed, which allows viewers to sympathize with the family. While CNN attempted to remain relatively neutral in the debate and tried to showcase its own objectivity by analyzing MSNBC and FNC, its sympathies do appear to lie with Martin. Moreover, CNN was more than willing to engage in the discussion on race and the effects racial bias may have had on the case. This is also evidenced by their coverage of President Obama's reaction to the acquittal, in which the commentators suggest that he spoke as an African-American about an African-American experience. Moreover, they argue that he attempted to contextualize race at a time when many white people do not want to think about what life is like for people of color ("Analysis of President's Remarks"). In this way, the network expresses sympathy for the struggles of people of color, while simultaneously making it clear that they perceive a connection between racial issues and the death of Trayvon Martin.

2.2 Fox News Channel

FNC's website shows results for 467 videos about Trayvon Martin starting on 19 March 2012. In one of the earliest reports on FNC, on 21 March 2012, the host expresses disbelief because the killer has not yet been arrested and argues that Zimmerman should be charged with first degree murder. Race is even mentioned as a possible factor in the shooting ("Should George Zimmerman"). That same day, similar disbelief about the lack of an arrest is shown and there is a discussion of Zimmerman's apparent use of a racial slur during his 911-call and its implications. The guest in this segment even argues that in Florida, shooting a dog would lead to a prison sentence, but shooting a young African American man does not ("The Killing of Trayvon Martin"). In yet another segment that same day, one of the guests on the show, who is a judge, mentions race as a factor in the lack of arrest ("Trayvon Martin Case").

A few days later, Geraldo Rivera, correspondent on FNC, comments on Martin's choice to wear a hoodie. He urges parents of African American and Hispanic youths not to wear a hoodie because of its association with crime. Rivera argues this creates a menacing sight. He does call for Zimmerman to be investigated, but he also states that he believes the hoodie is just as responsible for Martin's death as Zimmerman is ("Geraldo Rivera"). Rivera shifts the focus of the blame from the shooter to an item of clothing, thereby essentially blaming the victim. Moreover, the overrepresentation of African Americans as perpetrators of violent crime has led to the racialization of crime in the minds of many Americans (Peffley and Hurwitz 61). As such, the suggestion that an item of clothing and not the constant barrage of violent African American men on the news is responsible for the way in which Zimmerman responded to Martin is indicative of Rivera's lack of understanding of this particular issue. At this point in the case, there was no indication that Martin was anything but a victim and as indicated above, FNC's hosts and guests alike were convinced of Zimmerman's guilt. Rivera's comments are therefore peculiar, as everyone seemed convinced Zimmerman had shot Martin for no reason.

When President Obama comments on the case, FNC does not react negatively to it at first. Bill O'Reilly calls Obama's comments "appropriate" ("President Obama"). However, several days later, more criticisms to Obama as well as to Martin as an innocent victim begin to appear. O'Reilly, having noticed that the case is getting a lot of media attention, says he does not want to try the case in the media and he emphasizes fairness. Reports of a witness claiming Martin was on top of Zimmerman have created a more complicated picture. O'Reilly also argues that Obama should have been more careful with his words when he referred to Martin as a son. This sentiment is later echoed by a guest on the show, who calls Obama's comments divisive and he argues that Obama made white parents feel marginalized ("Were Obama's Comments"). Furthermore, O'Reilly criticizes MSNBC, and Al Sharpton in particular, for being partial in the case ("Trayvon Martin Case Takes an Intense Turn"). Here, O'Reilly uses the same argument that CNN commentators used; namely that Sharpton cannot report on the case and be an activist on behalf of the Martin family. However, the sudden shift in tone is remarkable. Within a week, FNC shifted its stance from being supportive of Martin and condemning Zimmerman, even complimenting President Obama's involvement, to actively questioning Martin's victim status, as well as criticizing President Obama. This shift occurs after O'Reilly's assessment that the media is too heavily involved in the case, as well as after observing that MSNBC is partial in the case. It seems as if, after noting the intense media attention which is generally in favor of Martin, FNC felt the need to assert its own

identity by suddenly becoming more critical of the case and the attention around it. Of course, at the time of initial reporting, few facts were known. Indeed, the facts of what happened that night are still unclear today. However, that did not stop FNC from calling for Zimmerman's arrest when they first reported on the case. It was not until other networks, MSNBC specifically, became actively involved in supporting the Martin family, that FNC felt the need to hold off judgment until all the facts were known.

From this point onwards, FNC begins to reject the notion that race was a relevant factor in this case. FNC's Megyn Kelly wonders why other news outlets are not concerned with African Americans killing other African Americans. Rush Limbaugh accuses liberals of always casting certain groups, i.e. women and people of color, as victims. Bernie Goldberg, the host of this particular segment, claims that the civil rights establishment is using this case to their own benefit ("Bernie Goldberg"). In this way, FNC is questioning the role race played in this case. More than that, according to FNC, liberal ideology perpetuates the notion that African Americans are automatically victims, which allows them to profit off the deaths of young African American men, all the while ignoring the systemic violence that occurs within African American communities. By positing the problems that African Americans face as issues that only occur within African American communities, FNC supports the notion that any failings in African American communities are to blame on the communities themselves. This is a typical post-racial argument, as this line of reasoning is based on the idea that in the post-Civil Rights Movement era, "racial disparities are caused by black failings" (Dowd Hall 1262). Moreover, it conveniently ignores the events that followed the Civil Rights Movement, when schools and neighborhoods became once again segregated, the income gap increased, and unemployment and imprisonment became major issues within African American communities (Dowd Hall 1261). FNC uses the Civil Rights Movement as a means to deracialize the African American experience and is therefore unwilling to discuss systemic racism any further. As described above, FNC is clearly moving away from anything they perceive as liberal. In this case, discussing the racial aspects of Martin's death is associated with the left, so naturally, FNC rejects the idea entirely. Their own take on the case is then presented as the only common-sense one, emphasized by Goldberg's frequent use of the phrase "reasonable people" ("Bernie Goldberg"). Such words leave little room for disagreement, nor are they indicative of objective reporting.

On the topic of racial profiling, FNC is also cautious to suggest it was a factor in this case or that it is a problem at all. O'Reilly even goes so far as to argue that African Americans are more likely to commit crimes, therefore they should be racially profiled ("Racial

Profiling”). However, “national crime statistics indicate that violent perpetrators are predominantly white” (Bjornstrom et al. 282). The notion that African Americans are more likely to commit crimes is therefore most likely based on the overrepresentation of African American men as criminals, as mentioned earlier. In other instances, hosts and guests alike refuse to acknowledge race could have been relevant in this situation or refer to the activism on behalf of the Martin family as part of “an historical model” (“Is the Trayvon Martin Case”). By this, they are referring to the Civil Rights Movement, which is perceived as an outdated model. In this sense, FNC is adopting a post-racial rhetoric that assumes the Civil Rights Movement fixed white racism and therefore, Martin’s death had nothing to do with his race. Once again, FNC is using post-racial arguments to prove that systemic and institutionalized racism is a thing of the past, when in reality, systemic inequalities and injustices are very much alive (Dowd Hall 1261-2). At the same time, FNC continues to use black-on-black crime as a way to avoid talking about race in the Martin/Zimmerman case (“Is the Trayvon Martin Case”). Instead of talking about the specifics of this case, FNC repeatedly asks why the liberal media is not outraged about African Americans killing other African Americans or the pervasive drug problems in African American communities (“Is the Trayvon Martin Case”; “Racial Profiling”; “Dr. Alveda King”). FNC regularly invites African Americans to talk about the case, all of whom claim that this case is not about race and the real crisis is black-on-black crime (“Exploiting Trayvon Martin’s Death”). Most prominent among these is Dr. Alveda King, who is a niece of Dr. Martin Luther King. She believes Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson need to “stop playing the race card” (“Dr. Alveda King”). Having MLK’s niece say that Sharpton and Jackson are overreacting and pulling race into the conversation where it does not belong lends a certain kind of authority to these comments. As such, FNC can launch a criticism of liberal media, while also excusing itself of having to discuss race in a nuanced and honest way.

FNC had another reason to criticize the liberal media when NBC News aired Zimmerman’s 911-call. They edited out the dispatcher’s question of what race Martin appeared to be, but left Zimmerman’s answer that Martin was African American in the broadcast. As a result, it sounded as if Zimmerman mentioned Martin’s race unprompted, thereby adding credibility to the racial profiling argument. FNC was outraged by this grievous mistake, calling it “a complete falsehood” and “despicable” (“Did NBC News”). Over the course of the following week, this mistake is mentioned and discussed repeatedly (“Is the Media Shaping”; “Did the Mainstream Media”; “Bernie Goldberg on Media’s Handling”; “Bias Bash”). While FNC was entirely justified in pointing out the mistake made by NBC, it

is questionable why they continue to bring it up. Even a year after Martin's death, they make a mention of NBC's editing gaffe ("One Year"). In any case, by continuing to emphasize this mistake, FNC can maintain its image as a strong counterpoint to liberal mainstream media. MSNBC is also criticized by FNC after evidence of Martin's bruised knuckles, indicating a fight, was released. FNC accused MSNBC of suddenly dramatically decreasing the coverage of the case, now that evidence in support of Zimmerman was released ("Grapevine"). FNC inserts criticism of another network rather than covering the actual proceedings of the case.

Another common theme on FNC's coverage of the case is its claim that the media coverage is sensationalist and disproportionate. The news media is being exploitative, according to FNC ("Bias Bash"; "NRA's Response"). The same sentiment was expressed when the Civil Rights Movement was mentioned as being an outdated model. Civil Rights leaders are using Martin's death for their own benefit, the argument goes ("Is the Trayvon Martin Case"). Yet, despite all these claims of the liberal media's extreme attention to this case, FNC continues to cover it just as much as other outlets do. The number of results on FNC's website are approximately the same as those on CNN's and MSNBC's websites. FNC therefore did not talk of the case any less, they simply discussed it in a different way: by responding explicitly to other news outlets and by asking themselves why this case is receiving this much attention. It apparently never occurred to them to stop covering the item if they felt it was getting too much coverage.

After text messages and pictures that detailed Martin's involvement with marijuana and guns were released, FNC host Gregg Jarrett argued they could point to Martin's aggressive nature, though the guests on his show disagreed with him. Still, there was a focus on Martin's potential dangerous nature, whereas CNN spent much more time discussing why the texts and images were released in the first place ("Do Trayvon Martin's Texts"). A different segment appears to argue that the release of this evidence was a smart move on the defense's part ("Trayvon Martin's Text Messages"). There is no discussion of the implications or the legality of releasing such evidence. Where CNN is concerned with the image the defense was trying to create of Martin, FNC does not seem to think this is a serious issue. By refraining from discussing the relevance of this evidence for the case, FNC appears to tacitly support the defense.

As the case is coming to an end, FNC begins to steer the conversation even more towards a post-racial discourse. Bernie Goldberg claims that "race is the wound that never quite seems to heal" because people like Al Sharpton keep addressing it ("Media and the Trayvon Martin"). In this way, Goldberg suggests that as long as race is not discussed, it is

not an issue for anyone. In several recaps of the case, the influence of the media, politicians, and civil rights leaders is seen as a deciding factor in the case's racialization ("Why Trayvon Martin"; "Why Fight"). In FNC's opinion, the case is not inherently racial, but it is *made* racial by discussing race. Bill O'Reilly makes a similar argument by suggesting that African Americans "buy into the narrative" that the odds are stacked against them ("Media and the Trayvon Martin"). This once again showcases FNC's post-racial attitude. O'Reilly can claim that the odds are not stacked against African Americans because there are success stories within that community, most notably President Obama. By using success stories as proof that other systemic inequalities are simply no longer valid, FNC can dismiss racism altogether and instead blame any failings of African Americans squarely on the shoulders of African Americans, as opposed to blaming power relations (Márquez 646). However, these power struggles are not just found in the past; they are part of on-going struggles, especially after the Reagan administration decided to cut antidiscrimination enforcement (Dowd Hall 1255, 1260). This sentiment becomes even more pronounced when discussing the testimony of Rachel Jeantel, who was a friend of Martin's and on the phone with him as he was being followed by Zimmerman. FNC criticizes her manner of speech, and particularly her use of the word "cracker," which Martin used at the time to describe Zimmerman to her on the phone ("Racial Tension"). Jeantel did not think the word is racist, for which she and liberals who agree with her are called "insane" by host Laura Ingraham, who also claimed that "for many non-blacks, this was shocking to hear" ("Racial Tension"). It seems that the only time FNC is truly upset about anything concerning race is when it pertains to a word used to describe white people. Even more strikingly however, Ingraham suggests that Jeantel's behavior should not be excused as it only sets a low bar for African Americans, which she refers to as "the soft bigotry of low expectations" ("Racial Tension"). In other words, liberals who excuse 'bad' behavior by African Americans are complicit in keeping that demographic in lower class and criminal circles. Such a reasoning conveniently ignores the link between certain punitive policies and race. For instance, in the 1980s, the war on drugs focused much more on "crack cocaine" than it did on powder cocaine. The former was more likely to be used by African Americans, while the latter was favored by white people. As a result, many more African Americans were incarcerated than white people (Peffley and Hurwitz 68). Ingraham therefore completely decontextualizes the issue of criminal justice and race in order to suggest that liberals are to blame for African Americans overrepresentation in the lower classes and prisons. As such, FNC denies the existence of white privilege and suggests that African Americans are wholly responsible for their own fate, as race does not have anything to do

with their disadvantageous position in life. This is further emphasized by O'Reilly's claim that he will agree with the verdict no matter what, indicating complete faith in the workings of the justice system ("The Trayvon Martin Murder Case"). By excluding race as an important factor in Martin's death itself as well as in the initial lack of arrest and eventual trial, O'Reilly can rely completely on the justice system. After all, the odds are not stacked against African Americans according to O'Reilly and therefore, the trial can be nothing but fair. However, given that nearly one in four African American men between the ages of twenty and thirty are in some way under the supervision of the criminal justice system, such a reasoning appears to once again decontextualize the racial issues at hand (Roberts 1274). This, coupled with laws that are more likely to affect African Americans, indicates that O'Reilly is not willing to look into the various ways in which systemic racism can manifest itself (Peffley and Hurwitz 68; Federico and Holmes 65-6). In general, FNC's stance on racial issues appears to be that they only exist when talked about and by extension, the experiences of African Americans as raced subjects are invalid.

2.3. *MSNBC*

MSNBC's website yields 478 videos about Trayvon Martin, the earliest mention of the case being 15 March 2012. In one of the earliest reports by MSNBC, reporter Melissa Harris-Perry clearly implies that Zimmerman profiled Martin. She plays the audio tape of Zimmerman's 911 recording, pausing it to highlight that Zimmerman thought Martin's "walking around, looking about" was considered suspicious. Though at that point she does not link it explicitly to Martin's race, by the end of the video, she speaks of young African American men losing their lives because they are presumed to be criminals by "overzealous vigilantes" ("Melissa Harris-Perry"). At the start of the video, when she relays the details of the case, she speaks of "the undisputed facts" ("Melissa Harris-Perry"). From this video, it is clear that Harris-Perry believes Martin was profiled by Zimmerman, though she also mentions it is actually unclear what happened during the altercation between Zimmerman and Martin. That admission is somewhat overshadowed by the link she makes between Martin's death and the deaths of many other innocent young African American men. Similarly, when discussing the screams heard on other 911 calls made that night, Lawrence O'Donnell has called in two forensic experts who have determined whether or not it was Zimmerman screaming on those recordings. They both claim to have determined it was not Zimmerman, which means it must have been Martin screaming. One of the experts has been in the field for so long that he claims his ears are well trained enough to be able to tell whether it was Zimmerman without

the use of any type of software. Furthermore, when asked how certain he is about his findings, he responds that he is at least 90% certain it is not Zimmerman (“Trayvon Martin Murder”). While this expert may indeed be highly trained, it is questionable whether such a method would be admissible in court. MSNBC certainly appears to be steering the conversation towards Zimmerman’s unequivocal guilt at this point. The same expert also claims he can clearly hear Zimmerman’s usage of a racial slur (“Trayvon Martin Murder”). This is also a highly disputed point in the case and MSNBC is clearly taking a stand on it.

The network does not shy away from the idea that this case is connected to larger racial issues; in fact, it encourages such a line of thought. Looking back on the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles twenty years prior, the reverend Al Sharpton interviews King and discusses the Martin’s death with him. King suggests that the screams heard on the 911 recordings are all too familiar to him, since he screamed those same screams all those years ago (“Rodney King Reflects”). Not only does this link Martin’s death to a larger pattern of violence against African American men, and particularly violence perpetrated by law enforcement and those who are meant to keep the peace, it also suggests that King, and by extension, MSNBC, assumes the screams are indeed Martin’s. Furthermore, the way King describes those screams creates an emotional response, as they are clearly meant to be interpreted as the screams of the oppressed crying for help in the face of brutal violence. While the screams may indeed have been Martin’s, it is by no means unequivocally confirmed. MSNBC leaves little room for disagreement on this issue however and essentially only provides its viewers with one interpretation of the case. This is typical of the highly politicized news environment that we currently find ourselves in (Coe et al. 201).

Melissa Harris-Perry takes a clear stand on the case when she is discussing the newly released evidence of Zimmerman’s injuries and Martin’s bloodied knuckles, which indicate a physical altercation occurred, and of the traces of marijuana found in Martin’s system. She refers to the Stand Your Ground law as a victim blaming law (“Evidence Made Public”). In doing so, she suggests that the Stand Your Ground law encourages extreme scrutiny of the victim in order to justify the shooting, making every indiscretion by the victim a cause of their own death, while exonerating the person who injured or killed the victim. Harris-Perry is thus suggesting that it does not matter that Martin most likely fought with Zimmerman and that he was possibly high. These factors should not have led to his death and should not be used to excuse Zimmerman’s shooting of Martin, according to Harris-Perry. Furthermore, she ties the case in again with larger racial issues, as she suggests that the two things that matter most about this case is that Zimmerman is investigated, thereby ensuring that justice is served, and

that the larger context of issues of racial profiling is not ignored. She even goes so far as to say that “regardless of the facts of this one case,” racial injustices still exist (“Evidence Made Public”). It seems then, that the death of Martin is not just seen as a tragedy by MSNBC, but also as a tool to address larger racial issues, regardless of whether they were true in this one particular case.

This becomes even more evident when MSNBC commemorates Martin on the one year anniversary of his death. The case is discussed in light of gun control laws (or lack thereof) and its racial aspects. Martin’s death is once again seen as symptomatic of larger issues: gun violence and racism (“Gun Control Debate”). In fact, there is barely any attention to the individual aspects of the case, such as Martin’s life or his family, which creates a political edge to the commemoration of his death. Instead of focusing on his life and who he was as a person, MSNBC chose to once again address the larger political issues that affect the case.

The notion that Martin is being victim blamed continues when photos of him looking dangerous are released by Zimmerman’s defense team shortly before the trial is due to begin. Criminal defense attorney Ken Padowitz argues that the photos are only meant to “prejudice the jury,” especially considering that these photos will not be admissible in court as they are not relevant to the case (“Zimmerman Defense Releases Photos”). At the same time, Zimmerman’s defense releases photos of Zimmerman at his graduation. The segment suggests that these photos were released intentionally to create a picture of Martin as a thug, while Zimmerman is simply an educated man doing his duty as a neighborhood watchman (“Zimmerman Defense Releases Photos”). Similarly, when some of Martin’s text messages are released to the public, MSNBC’s Martin Bashir argues that the only reason these messages were made public was to “tarnish this young man’s character” (“Bashir: Are Trayvon Martin Texts Relevant”). Given the amount of time MSNBC spends reporting on these issues, it is not surprising that they mostly refrain from discussing Zimmerman’s injuries and Martin’s confirmed drug use. After all, any discussion of these elements of the case are seen as victim blaming tactics by MSNBC, which they will not participate in.

Once the trial has begun, MSNBC also spends a considerable amount of time discussing Rachel Jeantel’s testimony, who was on the phone with Martin as he was being followed by Zimmerman. However, whereas FNC suggested that the jurors were leaning in closely because they had trouble understanding her due to her poor enunciation and her soft voice, MSNBC argues the jurors were simply listening intently (“A Key Witness”). Lawrence O’Donnell also responds to Laura Ingraham’s claims about “the soft bigotry of low

expectations” (“Racial Tension”). O’Donnell points out that English is Jeantel’s third language, which explains why she was occasionally more difficult to understand and why she spoke in such an unusual way. Furthermore, he argues that Ingraham’s assessment of Jeantel’s usage of language is hypocritical, as white teenagers across the country use expletives and slurs on a regular basis, regardless of their socio-economic background. Finally, as a stab towards FNC, O’Donnell points out that the quote about “the soft bigotry of low expectations” was falsely attributed by Ingraham to political and sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, when in fact, it was George W. Bush who first uttered the phrase. O’Donnell concludes by saying “no one expects Fox News to get the facts right” (“O’Donnell”). In this segment, O’Donnell participates in the highly politicized news environment that has created such a rivalry between MSNBC and FNC. However, at the same time, he uses the opportunity to criticize the often racist and classist assumption that someone’s manner of speech is a reflection of their behavior, without looking into the validity of African American dialects and the ways in which non-native speakers adopt a second or in this case third language. Furthermore, O’Donnell deconstructs Ingraham’s post-racial assertion that Jeantel was being held to a lower standard by liberals, which would only lead to people like her remaining confined to the lower and criminal classes. After all, Ingraham is basing these statements on the post-racial notion that African Americans are “deficient, lacking agency, lost in chaos, violent, in short, pathological – and thus in need of perpetual guardianship or vigilant policing” (Márquez 626). By ridiculing Ingraham, O’Donnell, and by extension MSNBC, is clearly distancing himself from such post-racial ideology.

Ultimately, the most striking difference between FNC and MSNBC is that where FNC denies all historical context with regards to racial issues, MSNBC focuses almost exclusively on the historical and racial context of the case. When the verdict is expected to be announced shortly, CNN and FNC discuss the possibility of race riots in the wake of a not guilty verdict. Melissa Harris-Perry refers to these predictions as “fear mongering” (“Panelists Discuss Fear Mongering”). She mocks the notion that African Americans will immediately riot if things do not go their way. On top of that, she indicates that the phrase “race riot” adds a racial dimension to a phenomenon that is not necessarily raced; after all, white people riot too. She connects this to the larger issues of racial profiling and the asymmetric ways in which people perceive violence perpetrated by African Americans or other people of color and the violence perpetrated by white people. The segment speaks of “white anxiety” for “black bodies” and the notion that “public space and infrastructure in the hands of an African American youth constitutes a weapon” (“Panelists Discuss Fear Mongering”). This may be the result of the

overrepresentation of African Americans in news broadcasts, specifically as violent perpetrators. Moreover, African American suspects of violent crimes are usually portrayed as much more dangerous than their white counterparts (Peffley and Hurwitz 61). Violence perpetrated by African Americans can therefore be perceived as much more menacing than white violence. As such, the case is once again mostly connected to a larger racial context. The segment does not necessarily focus on the specific circumstances surrounding this case that could potentially lead to a riot, but rather on the implications of even suggesting that a riot would happen and the ways in which protests led by African Americans are often interpreted as riotous, regardless of their nature. In the aftermath of the verdict, this focus on historical contexts only increases, as comparisons to Emmett Till and Rodney King are made (“Kornacki”; “What the Murder of Emmett Till”). Furthermore, there is a suggestion that the country’s racism is reflected in its laws and justice system by arguing that the jurors should not be vilified, considering that they simply followed the law (“What the Murder of Emmett Till”). This assertion is supported by the overrepresentation of people of color, particularly African American and Latino men and the laws that have assured this overrepresentation in the first place (Márquez 645; Federico and Holmes 65-6). In a different segment, Chris Matthews concludes that Martin died as a result of Zimmerman’s profiling: Zimmerman saw an African American teenager, assumed he did not belong in that neighborhood and began following him. The police and the justice system then failed to get justice in this case due to the dehumanization of young African American men (“After Trayvon Martin”). From this, it is quite clear that MSNBC disagreed with the verdict and saw it as symptomatic of the larger racial inequality in the United States and its justice system.

MSNBC’s reporting on the case thus focused mostly on larger racial issues. However, its one-sided approach to the case did not allow for much discussion; after all, dissent within the network was practically unheard of in this case. Furthermore, MSNBC rarely focused on Martin as a person, thereby lending credibility to FNC’s exploitation argument that MSNBC only reported on the case as a means to further their own liberal agenda with regards to issues of racial inequality.

2.4 The Colbert Report and The Daily Show

The Colbert Report featured thirteen videos about Trayvon Martin, while *The Daily Show* featured twenty-one. Colbert’s first video about the case is in response to the President’s comments on the tragedy of Martin’s death, as well as in response to FNC’s Geraldo Rivera’s comments on the hoodie. Colbert suggests that while the public could blame the shooter, the

Stand Your Ground law, the accessibility of guns, or the “borderline pathological distrust of young black men,” Rivera suggests the real blame lies with Martin’s hoodie (“The Word”). Colbert openly mocks Rivera and suggests that Congress should pass strict hoodie-control legislation, thereby also commenting on the lack of gun control laws in the United States. Colbert concludes the segment by suggesting that African Americans pick one item of clothing that is considered threatening so that white people know who they should fear (“The Word”). Colbert is clearly mocking the notion that an item of clothing can be the culprit in this situation, while also emphasizing that the lack of gun control laws and a systemic fear of young black men are legitimate problems in American society. This fear of African American men is not new. In fact, a study conducted in 1985 found that fear of this particular group is linked to the overrepresentation of African American violent perpetrators (Young 475). Considering that this overrepresentation is still occurring today, levels of fear will likely not have changed much either (Bjornstrom et al. 282). Over a year later, when the trial has started, Colbert has not forgotten the hoodie comments as he refers to the case as “either a senseless tragedy or a sensible response to a case of aggravated hoodie” (“George Zimmerman’s Murder Trial”). While race is not addressed in this segment, it is clear from this description that Colbert believes Zimmerman should be found guilty, considering his earlier juxtaposition between the “senseless tragedy” and “case of aggravated hoodie” (“George Zimmerman’s Murder Trial”). This point is further emphasized when Zimmerman is acquitted of all charges. Colbert states that the acquittal is “a victory for the rule of law, in that Florida apparently no longer has rules or laws” (“George Zimmerman Verdict”). Furthermore, he mockingly states that racism is now over and all discussions on the topic should therefore end, indicating that he does believe there was a racial component to the case.

Finally, Colbert also offers a comment on the news media coverage of the case after the verdict. News networks, citing CNN, FNC, and MSNBC, had been warning viewers for riots that were likely to break out after the not-guilty verdict. In reality, Colbert shows that protests have been largely peaceful and respectful of the Martin family (“Tip/Wag”). He suggests that the news media have been sensationalizing the case. By emphasizing the danger and violence that is likely to erupt after the verdict, these networks have created a panic where there was no reason for one. On top of that, by referring to the situation as “non-rioting black people,” Colbert adds a racial element to the expectation that there were going to be riots (“Tip/Wag”).

The Daily Show mainly focuses on the media’s coverage of the case, providing some meta-commentary while simultaneously discussing the influence of race in this case. The first

mention of the case also includes a discussion of Geraldo Rivera's comments on hoodies. White correspondent John Oliver has donned a hoodie, claiming that anyone who does not wear a hoodie must be racist ("C.N.I.: Hoodie Threat"). This is clearly intended to mock the extreme responses of other news media. Meanwhile African American correspondent Wyatt Cenac has opted for a silly hat instead of a hoodie because he wants to look innocent. He argues that ultimately, it does not matter what African Americans wear because the people are perceived as dangerous, not the items of clothing ("C.N.I.: Hoodie Threat"). In the same episode, Jon Stewart discusses the supposed use of a racial slur during Zimmerman's 911 call. Stewart argues that it is impossible to make out what Zimmerman is saying and accuses the media of sensationalizing. He also mocks the reporters wearing hoodies, seeing it as an attempt to be a part of the conversation ("C.N.I.: Dick Cheney's Heart").

When NBC's editing mistake comes to light, Stewart criticizes NBC for making such a serious mistake, but also criticizes FNC for immediately jumping on the opportunity to be outraged, especially considering that FNC has made its fair share of mistakes in the past ("The Splice Channel"). The mocking of news media continues when in a different segment, all of *The Daily Show's* correspondents are in Florida to report on the case in response to Zimmerman's arrest, each parroting the other ("The Trial of the Millennium"). A different segment of that same episode contrasts the calm responses of the Martin family and Zimmerman's attorney to those of the news media, which are sensationalizing and dramatizing the case ("Zimdecision 2012"). There is no room for a calm conversation on this case in the news media because they have to sensationalize everything, even when the Martin family and Zimmerman's lawyer are calm and rational.

While many of *The Daily Show's* segments are devoted to the media coverage itself, there are some discussions of race. African American correspondent Larry Wilmore is invited several times to discuss racial issues. Larry Wilmore suggests that the conversation is so caught up in accusations of racism, that it becomes impossible to have a productive discussion. He argues that if accusations of racism are removed from the conversation, the country can finally have a discussion on the racial elements of the case. When Stewart asks Wilmore who or what is racist in this case, Wilmore suggests it is the benefit of the doubt ("Racist Timeout"). This is essentially an alternative description of white privilege, as Wilmore implies that white people are granted the benefit of the doubt, even after shooting someone, whereas African Americans do not receive that same benefit of the doubt.

After the trial is over, Wilmore returns to discuss race. He argues that discussions of race in the United States are so difficult and unproductive because white Americans and

African Americans are “not on the same page” (“A Conversation on Race”). While most whites believe that the United States has reached a state of colorblindness, 80% of African Americans do not feel that way (“A Conversation on Race”). Therefore, in order for a productive conversation on race to occur, these discrepancies need to be taken into account. This same idea is echoed a few weeks later when correspondents Samantha Bee and Jessica Williams host a panel on race relations. Bee, who is white, sits down with five African Americans to talk about their experiences, while the African American Williams does the same with five white people. Over the course of this panel discussion, it becomes clear that while all five African Americans say they experience racism very frequently, the five white people believe that racism is as good as over (“The R Word”).

Ultimately, *The Daily Show* managed to criticize the news media quite harshly for sensationalizing the case by mockingly imitating them or by showing clips that indicate how much they are overreacting. At the same time, *The Daily Show* was one of the few places where an actual conversation on race took place. Where news networks tried to argue for or against the importance of race in this case, *The Daily Show* took a different approach and discussed why a conversation on race causes so much difficulty in the first place, thereby getting at the root of issues such as colorblind politics and white privilege.

Where CNN provided its viewers with some variety in opinions, FNC and MSNBC mostly followed conservative and liberal scripts, respectively. There was not much room for dissent within those two networks, meaning that discussions with varying sides represented rarely took place. Both CNN and MSNBC exhibited some awareness with regards to larger racial issues, especially in connection to crime and the overrepresentation of African Americans as criminals in the news media. FNC used a post-racial rhetoric based on the belief that any failings in African American communities are to blame on nobody but themselves. FNC employed this line of reasoning to deracialize the case and to counter the more liberal reporting found on CNN and MSNBC. The deliberate nature of FNC’s contrary stance on the case is especially emphasized by the stark difference in their initial reporting on the case, when Zimmerman was believed to be guilty and commentators across the network felt he should have been arrested, compared to their reporting a week later, after having realized that CNN and MSNBC were explicitly and repeatedly adding racial arguments to their coverage of the case. Meanwhile, *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* managed to provide some meta-commentary on this media coverage by mocking their sensationalizing approach while also discussing the racial elements of the case in a much calmer way by removing accusations

of racism and instead focusing on larger patterns of racial inequality in the law and its execution.

3. George Zimmerman: Perceptions and Discussions in News Media

Following the format of the previous chapter, this chapter examines the coverage of George Zimmerman. Once again this coverage will be analyzed in the context of partisanship in the news media and the ways in which that partisanship expresses itself in race-related cases. Though his ethnic background is mixed, namely white and Hispanic, this rarely comes up in the reporting on the case on any of the networks. The discussion centered mostly on Zimmerman's possible profiling of Martin, but his own ethnic background is either deemed irrelevant by news media or is perhaps thought to confuse the issue, considering his mixed heritage. Whatever the reason, it is rarely mentioned. Instead, there is tension between the networks on the question of Zimmerman's guilt, which often relates to the question of his profiling Martin. If he profiled Martin, he must be guilty. Moreover, that would be indicative of larger issues of racial inequality. However, if racial inequality is a thing of the past, Zimmerman could not have profiled Martin, meaning he must be innocent. Hence, the discussion concerning Zimmerman focuses largely on his guilt or innocence, depending on the network, while using that standpoint to push agendas related to the belief in larger racial issues, or the lack thereof, in society.

3.1 CNN

The search term 'George Zimmerman' produces 478 results on the CNN video search, dating back to 21 March 2012. In one of the earliest videos on the case, CNN speaks to a former neighborhood watchman who was quite close to Zimmerman. He claims that Zimmerman was absolutely not a racist; he was simply protecting the neighborhood. At the same time, the neighbor does say no formal training is required to become a neighborhood watchman and that he did not carry a gun when he took up this position ("Florida Shooter"). As such, one of the earliest reports immediately addressed the question of whether Zimmerman was racist, indicating that on the first day of reporting on the case, the conversation on race had already started at CNN. A week later, another friend speaks on Zimmerman's behalf. Joe Oliver, an African American, supports the claim that Zimmerman is not racist. The host of the segment, Nancy Grace, then plays the 911 call that Zimmerman made the night Martin died, claiming she can hear him use a racial slur, namely "coon" ("Zimmerman's Friend"). The recording itself, however, is of poor quality and it is almost impossible to make out what he is saying. In this case, Grace is making a clear effort to paint Zimmerman as racist, even though the recording is anything but conclusive on this point. In fact, a week after this interview, CNN aired a segment featuring two experts who tried to

clean up the audio in order to understand what Zimmerman was saying. They each used a different method and each came up with a different result. While one argues Zimmerman said “fucking close,” the other argues he said “fucking coon” (“911 audio”). Even experts did not manage to agree on this matter. However, as seen in the previous chapter, CNN is not the only network that attempted to uncover what Zimmerman was saying. MSNBC’s experts claimed to be able to hear that he used a racial slur, even though from the disagreement on this matter by CNN’s experts, it is clear this is a highly contested matter. Furthermore, Joe Oliver points out that while Zimmerman has been called a white man in the media, he is in fact a Hispanic American (“Zimmerman’s Friend”). While being part of an ethnic minority does not exempt Zimmerman from being prejudiced towards African Americans, it does complicate the narrative. After all, this was not a white man shooting an African American teen, which means any racial prejudice Zimmerman may have had would have been far more complicated than the usual narrative of white racism.

CNN questions Zimmerman’s version of events quite frequently, as evidenced by the interpretation of the 911 call. Similarly, when former police officer Lou Palumbo appears on two separate shows on the network, he argues that Zimmerman’s injuries did not look very serious on tape and that it is likely that Zimmerman “precipitated the incident” (“Probable Cause”; “Zimmerman Trying to Create Cover Up?”). In one of these segments, CNN’s Will Cain argues he cannot possibly know if Zimmerman started the confrontation, whereas in the other segment, Palumbo’s assertions go unchallenged. In this way, the mild internal disagreement between CNN correspondents is evident again, as it was when they discussed Trayvon Martin. Not coincidentally, it is once again Will Cain who is reluctant to assume Zimmerman’s guilt, while most other reporters appear to lean more towards Martin’s side of the story. For instance, when Piers Morgan interviews Zimmerman’s brother, Robert, who claims Zimmerman was defending his own life, Morgan is skeptical of that claim (“Shooter’s Brother”). When Morgan interviews Robert Zimmerman again a few weeks later, he even goes so far as to say that if Zimmerman had just gone back to his car and left, Martin would still be alive, but Martin died because Zimmerman saw a young African American man in a hoodie and deemed him suspicious (“Robert Zimmerman”). As mentioned in the previous chapter, such a line of reasoning is based on racial profiling arguments as a result of the image of African American men as criminals (Federico and Holmes 48). However, at the time of that last interview with Robert Zimmerman, no arrest had been made, which also influenced the way Zimmerman was portrayed. CNN generally does not explicitly claim Zimmerman is necessarily guilty and there seems to be more outrage over the general lack of arrest than over

Zimmerman's actions. The skepticism towards Zimmerman's claims of innocence should thus be read in the light of a lack of arrest, which seemed to be the first priority for both the Martin family and political activists at this time. At the same time, CNN, and Piers Morgan and Nancy Grace in particular, do make their skepticism towards Zimmerman's version of events abundantly clear, which indicates bias on their part.

However, CNN does not utilize every opportunity to criticize Zimmerman. When reports broke about Zimmerman asking for financial support for his defense, a correspondent argues that it is perfectly reasonable for Zimmerman to do so, considering that he cannot find a job at the moment and the case is going to be expensive ("Zimmerman's Plea"). The following day, when discussing Zimmerman's going into hiding, a guest suggests it might look like an admission of guilt, but the segment's host counters that this is not a typical case; the bounty on his head has forced him into hiding ("Charles"). These segments do not discuss whether he is guilty or innocent, instead focusing on the proceedings of the case and the impact that has on Zimmerman as a person. In this way, Zimmerman is humanized.

Over the next few months, the reporting continues in this way. Zimmerman is never actively condemned for his actions, but CNN does appear somewhat suspicious of Zimmerman's account. One segment discusses Zimmerman's ties to the police department: he had an interest in law enforcement and appeared to be friendly with the police. The question of whether he received preferential treatment on the night of the shooting is raised ("Zimmerman Police Connection"). Though CNN again avoids talking about Zimmerman's guilt or innocence, they do imply that his police connections worked in his favor and thus express suspicion. Similarly, when reports surface that Zimmerman's wife lied during his bond hearing about their financial means, failing to disclose the money that was raised online to pay for Zimmerman's legal expenses, Anderson Cooper talks about Zimmerman deceiving the court ("Judge Revokes"). Still, these discussions are more about technicalities than about a question of guilt or innocence.

Whenever the conversation does begin to shift towards assigning guilt to Zimmerman, the host tends to take a more neutral point of view than their guests. When footage of Zimmerman's reenactment of the shooting, which was filmed the day after the shooting, is released, CNN's Ashleigh Banfield and her guest, attorney Midwin Charles, discuss if there are any inconsistencies. Charles definitely thinks Zimmerman's account is inconsistent, but Banfield is reluctant to concede that point. She does agree that Zimmerman's credibility has been damaged by the events following his bond hearing, but she is not willing to actively doubt him or his story any further ("Does Zimmerman's Story Add Up?"). Similarly, when

Zimmerman's attorney brings up Zimmerman's injuries as proof of his innocence, the host argues that the prosecution would tell a completely different story ("O'Mara"). Either way, CNN is reluctant to agree with anyone definitively claiming that Zimmerman is guilty or innocent. While questioning Zimmerman's actions does not create a positive picture of him, in general, the reporters are at least reluctant to take a clear stand on the case.

This pattern does not change during the trial. When asking African American lawyer Chris Darden about the case, he responds by saying he probably would not have charged Zimmerman, considering the laws in Florida that are designed to protect people like Zimmerman. Furthermore, according to him, the prosecution has not proved beyond a reasonable doubt that Zimmerman is guilty of second degree murder ("Darden"). In discussing the videotaped interrogation of Zimmerman after the shooting, it is concluded that his story remained relatively consistent. This clearly works in Zimmerman's favor, especially considering that, due to the use of recordings of previous interrogations, Zimmerman would not be cross-examined ("Does George Zimmerman Need to Testify?"). These reports focus more on the technicalities of the case, without attaching a value judgment to them.

Interestingly, the question of whether Zimmerman is racist does not come up very frequently. CNN spent a considerable amount of time discussing the racial implications of this case, as was outlined in the previous chapter when discussing Trayvon Martin. However, when speaking about Zimmerman and the trial, race does not enter the conversation as often as it did when CNN talked about Martin. Near the close of the trial, history professor Jelani Cobb does ask if Martin was not part of the community that Zimmerman was protecting and therefore should have been protected. Though he never says so explicitly, there is an implication that because Martin was an African American boy wearing a hoodie, Zimmerman assumed he was not part of the neighborhood and thus posed a threat ("Analysis: Protecting Trayvon Martin"). Still, this does not necessarily mean Zimmerman is guilty in the eyes of the law, which CNN recognizes and acknowledges by refraining from explicitly choosing a side. CNN therefore occupies a peculiar position: on the one hand, they immediately included race as a crucial factor in the case and Martin was mostly portrayed as a victim of racial profiling; on the other hand, CNN appears to acknowledge that the particular laws in Florida work in Zimmerman's favor and that acquittal is quite likely, especially when taking into account that there were no eye witnesses or other conclusive evidence that proves beyond a reasonable doubt that Zimmerman was not defending himself ("Higginbotham"). So while the impact of race was always acknowledged by CNN in this case, the question of Zimmerman's guilt, at least in the legal sense of the word, remained up in the air throughout the case.

3.2. Fox News Channel

The video search on FNC's website produces 844 results for George Zimmerman, which is considerably more than CNN's and MSNBC's results, as well as FNC's own results for Trayvon Martin. Evidently, this network has spent much more time talking about Zimmerman than the other networks have. In general, the videos found on FNC's website are also quite a bit longer than CNN's videos. While CNN generally ranges from two to five minutes, FNC's videos tend to be between five and ten minutes long. This emphasizes the more soft news approach that FNC employs. After all, there is more emphasis on entertainment and discussion, which would make the segments run longer (Coe et al. 202-3). While much of CNN's reports can also be categorized as soft news, their videos tend to be more to the point and less focused on discussion between different panelists, which is one of the major markers of a soft news approach.

Approximately five days after the first reports on the case aired, Bill O'Reilly discusses whether Zimmerman should be arrested. His guests certainly think so; they argue that considering Zimmerman was carrying a gun and likely followed Martin, the Stand Your Ground law would not apply. O'Reilly is reluctant to agree and does not appear to think Zimmerman should be arrested ("Should George Zimmerman Be Arrested?"). O'Reilly does not speak for the entire network however, as evidenced by a segment aired that very same day, in which the host interviews Zimmerman's friend Joe Oliver, who also appeared on CNN. In this segment, the host questions Zimmerman's role as a neighborhood watchman and why he was "walking around with a gun" ("George Zimmerman's Friend"). This is not a very positive way to describe Zimmerman, as Oliver also points out. At this point in the reporting, opinions within FNC were quite clearly divided over whether Zimmerman should be arrested. Even when an eye witness account surfaces of a man who claims he saw Martin on top of Zimmerman during the struggle, both the host and the guests remain suspicious of Zimmerman, mostly because they still consider him the aggressor, considering that he followed Martin ("Police: George Zimmerman Claims").

Once the arrest has been made, however, the tone shifts. Sean Hannity discusses the second degree murder charge, claiming it is an overcharge. When his guest expresses disagreement by arguing that it is impossible to know if the prosecutor overcharged Zimmerman, considering that not all the facts are known, Hannity uses that opportunity to applaud his own network's objectivity in the case. Whereas NBC, ABC, and CNN all claimed to have evidence that pointed to Zimmerman's guilt – evidence which they later retracted – FNC never did such a thing, making FNC the only reliable source on the matter ("Did the

Prosecutor Overcharge”). Though it is true that the other networks interpreted footage in such a way that it made Zimmerman look guilty – through the now infamous editing of Zimmerman’s 911 call, claiming Zimmerman’s injuries were not visible on tape, and assuming Zimmerman used a racial slur during his 911 call when that was impossible to definitively determine – FNC was not initially exempt from assuming Zimmerman’s guilt, as was also shown in the previous chapter. When discussing Zimmerman’s injuries, O’Reilly echoes Hannity by claiming FNC was the only network that did not jump to conclusions, specifically adding that O’Reilly himself called for restraint in the interpretation of the case. The injuries prove to him that he was right, considering that the injuries are consistent with Martin beating Zimmerman. Furthermore, O’Reilly continues to emphasize that he does not want to try the case on television, yet he continues to discuss the case in a seven-minute long segment (“New Evidence in Trayvon Martin Case”). The Martin family attorney, Benjamin Crump, is also present to discuss the case, and O’Reilly is forced to agree with Crump that if Zimmerman had simply gone back to his car and left, like the police instructed him to do, Martin would still be alive (“New Evidence in Trayvon Martin Case”). This is especially remarkable, given that O’Reilly generally refuses to paint Zimmerman as the guilty party in any way, yet he agrees on this point, while at the same time still arguing that Zimmerman should not have been arrested in the first place, given Florida’s laws.

When FNC reports on the allegations made by an ex-fiancée about domestic abuse, these claims are virtually immediately dismissed as irrelevant (“Documents Released on George Zimmerman”). However, a history of violence could be crucial in understanding Zimmerman’s state of mind the night of the shooting, but this issue is never addressed. Similarly, when discussing the FBI report that was released on Zimmerman, FNC points out that the report paints a picture of Zimmerman as “a concerned citizen who was trying to fix his community” (“New Profile Reveals Details”). The segment also mentions that Zimmerman was raised in an interracial family and that a string of home invasions was what led to Zimmerman becoming a neighborhood watch captain (“New Profile Reveals Details”). This decision on Zimmerman’s part may have been indicative of his fear of crime. The more fearful someone is, the less likely they are to trust traditional law enforcement to solve criminal issues (Kort-Butler and Hartshorn 51). On top of that, the fact that he had a gun could very well have been motivated by anger, particularly if that anger was a result of racial prejudice towards African Americans (Young 474). However, what the segment does not mention is that the same report concluded that Zimmerman was trying very hard to be like a police officer, pointing to the possibility of vigilante justice (Luscombe). In this case, FNC

focused on the positive outcomes of the report in order to actively make Zimmerman look like nothing more than a concerned citizen, even though the findings of the actual reports were much more complex and nuanced. This trend continues with the reports of Zimmerman's bond hearing and his failure to mention the \$100,000 that had been raised online for his legal defense. A guest on the show argues that while it was stupid of Zimmerman to not disclose these funds, he does not believe Zimmerman "intentionally deceived the court" ("How Will Accusations?"). Though it is mentioned this is bad for his overall credibility, Zimmerman is given the benefit of the doubt by FNC when it comes to his failure to disclose these funds. Much like CNN, at this point, FNC refrains from actively discussing Zimmerman's innocence or guilt, but the way in which they portray Zimmerman does have the ability to sway the viewer to one particular point of view. Where CNN is more suspicious of Zimmerman and therefore might lead their viewers to conclude Zimmerman must be guilty, FNC continues to imply that Zimmerman is simply a good man who was caught up in a terrible situation, which would lead viewers to conclude he is innocent.

However, there is some dissent within FNC, as evidenced by Megyn Kelly's discussion of the case in June 2012. When the video of Zimmerman's reenactment of that night is released, she points out that Zimmerman can claim anything without being contradicted because the only other person who knows what happened that night is dead. Furthermore, a guest argues there are at least some inconsistencies between the 911 call Zimmerman made and this reenactment ("George Zimmerman's Re-enactment"). A different video mentions the claims of Zimmerman's ex that he is violent, as well as a discriminatory comment Zimmerman made about Mexicans on his Myspace page a few years earlier ("New Evidence Released in George Zimmerman Case"). This evidence is not commented on, as it is presented in a more hard news style. In any case, these videos, while not necessarily condemning Zimmerman, certainly do not portray him as merely a concerned citizen either.

Once the trial begins, it becomes quite clear where FNC stands on the matter. While a legal correspondent argues that race is definitely a factor in the case, he also argues that race has no place in a courtroom because the justice system does not see color ("Did George Zimmerman Have the Right?"). In this way, the correspondent assumes that the legal system, at the very least, is colorblind. However, given that a disproportionate number of African American men are imprisoned, the reality of the justice system may be more complicated (Roberts 1274). The war on drugs ensured that African Americans were more likely to be targeted, and thus arrested and imprisoned, than white people (Peffley and Hurwitz 68). Moreover, the cut in enforcing antidiscrimination legislation during the Reagan presidency

led to a decline in the economic status of many African Americans, as rules against job discrimination were now no longer strictly enforced, leading to the renewed segregation of neighborhoods and school and more crime (Dowd Hall 1260-1). On top of these socio-economic circumstances within African American communities, stronger punitive measures which are more likely to affect African Americans are being enforced. The image of African Americans as violent perpetrators has contributed to the overwhelming support for these harsher methods (Federico and Holmes 48, 65-6; Peffley and Hurwitz 61). The overwhelming number of African American men who are shown to have committed violent crimes is not the only factor. The way in which these perpetrators are portrayed – usually as “evil thugs” or “animals” – also contributes to the support for harsher punitive measures (Laughey 143). As such, the assertion that the justice system is colorblind seems ignorant at best in the face of these studies. Similar to the way CNN approached the case, this video indicates a separation between race relations in the United States and its effect on this particular case on the one hand, and the justice system on the other. Implicitly, both networks appear to argue that the justice system exists outside of race relations and society in general, instead of being informed by it. In reality, the legal system is heavily influenced by the perceptions in society of African American men as violent criminals.

Megyn Kelly, who in June 2012 actively questioned Zimmerman’s version of events that night, has evidently changed her mind during the trial one year later. When discussing the opening statements, she asks if Zimmerman intended to kill Martin and “profiled” him – highlighting the word ‘profiled’ by using air quotes – or if he was simply a neighborhood watchman who was protecting his neighborhood (“A Look at Opening Statements”). Her use of air quotes and her tone certainly seem to suggest that she believes the latter to be the case. Furthermore, one of the videos on the trial is titled “Did Zimmerman Prosecutors Already Lose the Case?” While the content of the video does not explicitly say Zimmerman should be acquitted, the title certainly suggests that FNC believes this will happen. In this way, the tone of the network shifts from lightly implying that Zimmerman is innocent, to clearly taking a side. This is where the network differs from CNN, since they never explicitly express their opinion on Zimmerman’s guilt or innocence.

FNC continues to assume their position as being different from and more objective than other news networks. There is talk of media having “an invisible hand in directing the case” (“Should Zimmerman’s Criminal-Justice Background Matter?”). By referring to the media as the culprit, the host places FNC outside of the regular news media. At the very least, he denies that FNC itself may have a hand in directing the news surrounding this case. As

such, FNC can be presented as completely neutral and objective, simply reporting the facts of the case, while all the other news networks have political agendas to fuel with their talk of race relations.

Near the end of the trial, FNC takes a clear position on the case, especially by outright stating that the only reason the case went to trial in the first place was because of political pressure as a result of accusations of racism. There is even an assertion that this case was prosecuted because of the threat of riots (“Has Zimmerman Trial Become Too Politicized?”). In this way, the mostly peaceful protesting organized by the African American community after Martin’s death is being portrayed as riotous. Moreover, considering that FNC was quite adamant about refraining from trying the case on television, it is surprising that these kinds of statements are being made near the end of the trial. While it was likely Zimmerman was going to be acquitted due to the laws in Florida, actively celebrating this fact is a different matter altogether. If FNC had truly wanted to refrain from trying the case on television, they would not have responded in such a way to the trial. It seems that the refusal to discuss the case in any significant way prior to the trial was merely a way to avoid talking about the racial implications of the case. Once the trial appeared to go Zimmerman’s way, FNC could feel vindicated about their assertion of his innocence and they could continue ignoring race relations. This is further evidenced by a discussion FNC’s Sean Hannity and Ann Coulter have about race, in which Coulter refers to accusations of racism in general as “nonsense” (“Mainstream Media’s Coverage of the Zimmerman Trial”). This is indicative of the post-racial belief that racism ended with the end of the Civil Rights Movement. Once Zimmerman was acquitted, FNC’s Geraldo Rivera reiterated that the case should not have gone to trial; at the most, Martin’s parents could have sued Zimmerman, but it should not have been a criminal case according to him. He even refers to the trial as “an abuse of justice” and tries to imply that Obama’s comments in the month after Martin’s death caused the political pressure to take this case to trial (“Race Politics Responsible for Zimmerman Trial?”). In this way, FNC goes one step further than agreeing with Zimmerman’s acquittal by entirely dismissing the validity of the criminal case. Zimmerman’s acquittal was interpreted by FNC as a reason to dismiss all racial components of this case, whereas CNN found a middle ground: they acknowledged that legally, Zimmerman was innocent, but never denied that race was a factor in the case.

3.3 MSNBC

MSNBC's website yields 504 videos for the search term George Zimmerman. Not long after the news of Martin's death reaches headlines, MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell has planned an interview with Zimmerman's then-lawyer, Craig Sonner. However, Sonner leaves the studio before the interview is set to begin, thereby leaving O'Donnell with no guest. O'Donnell frames it as a case of cowardice: Sonner was afraid to face O'Donnell's questions. Moreover, O'Donnell emphasizes that his questions would have been different from the questions Sonner was asked on other networks, saying "he wasn't gonna get out of here with an easy interviewer" ("MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell"). In this way, he aims to show that MSNBC has a different approach to this situation: they are more direct and by extension, more honest. O'Donnell goes on to tie Sonner's refusal to answer his questions to Sonner's apparent inability to represent Zimmerman as innocent ("MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell"). Sonner's absence is seen as suspect and interpreted as evidence of Zimmerman's guilt. As such, it is quite clear early on the case what MSNBC thinks of Zimmerman. In a rather bizarre part of the segment, the empty chair in which Sonner should have been seated is shown, followed by O'Donnell asking the questions he was going to ask had Sonner not left, leaving O'Donnell to address an empty chair ("MSNBC's Lawrence O'Donnell"). The effect of such an interrogation without a respondent is that Zimmerman only looks more guilty. After all, O'Donnell can insinuate a history of violence without being contradicted and he can make accusatory remarks without being reprimanded.

Similarly, O'Donnell's conclusion about Zimmerman's 911 call is essentially proof of guilt. As discussed in the previous chapter, O'Donnell invited two experts to analyze the recording of a 911 call made by a neighbor, where screams are heard in the background, to determine whose screams they are. Both experts conclude the screams must be Martin's, since the sample of Zimmerman's voice that they have obtained does not match. The experts also analyzed Zimmerman's own 911 call, in which he may have used a racial slur. One of the experts claims he can clearly hear Zimmerman using a racial slur, even though the sound quality is so poor it is hard to believe anyone could conclusively determine what Zimmerman was saying ("Trayvon Martin Murder"). However, by having experts on the show who claim to know exactly what happened that night, viewers would likely come to the conclusion that Zimmerman must be guilty. There is no room for any other interpretation on the network.

This trend continues when new evidence is released concerning Zimmerman's and Martin's injuries, which indicate that a fight took place between them that night. Though one of the MSNBC contributors argues that it helps Zimmerman's case, he also indicates that

these injuries do not tell us who started the altercation (“Martin Lawyer”). Thus, there is an implication that Zimmerman started the altercation, thereby invalidating the self-defense argument that is so crucial to Stand Your Ground. Moreover, when Zimmerman’s bond is revoked a few weeks later, the insinuations of guilt continue. His bond was revoked in part because he did not turn in his second passport, making him a flight risk to South America. In the discussion of these events, an insinuation is made that Zimmerman hid the information about his second passport from his lawyer (“Zimmerman’s Bond Revoked”). Such comments suggest that Zimmerman did not hand over his second passport on purpose, instead of it being a mistake. While we do not know why Zimmerman failed to mention this second passport, MSNBC leaves no room for disagreement. Not long after, it also becomes clear that Zimmerman misrepresented the amount of money he had access to, considering that many donated to his PayPal account to help him pay for his legal fees. He failed to mention this considerable amount of money to the judge when his bond was set. MSNBC reporting on these events implies that Zimmerman is not trustworthy (“Prosecutors Release Zimmerman”; “Prosecutors: Zimmerman’s Wife Lied”). Once again, MSNBC is clearly steering the conversation in one direction, as opposed to reporting on all facets of the case and letting viewers make up their own minds.

Race also enters the discussion with regards to Zimmerman specifically, when a witness who lived in the same neighborhood as Zimmerman claimed that the Zimmerman family was prejudiced against African Americans; they were only accepting of African Americans if they acted like white people. However, the witness could not cite any specific incidents of Zimmerman expressing these beliefs (“Witness #9”). In this way, MSNBC paints a vague picture of Zimmerman as a racist, thereby strengthening the argument that Zimmerman profiled Martin.

Shortly before the trial starts, MSNBC’s stance on Zimmerman’s guilt has not changed. Reverend Al Sharpton says he hopes justice will have prevailed by the end of the trial because “people can’t just do things and walk away without being held accountable” (“Sharpton Reflects on Interview”). Such comments clearly indicate that Sharpton believes Zimmerman did not shoot Martin in self-defense; after all, he wants Zimmerman to be held accountable for his actions. Similarly, when the matter of 911 recordings comes up again, it becomes clear that any expert testimony on the matter has been ruled out by the courts. It must have been impossible to determine who was screaming on that recording, contrary to what the experts that Lawrence O’Donnell invited the previous year claimed at the time. Therefore, determining whether it was Zimmerman or Martin screaming on that recording

relies entirely on the likelihood of the different scenarios the prosecution and the defense present. O'Donnell argues that the most likely scenario is that it was Martin who was screaming, considering that the screaming stops immediately after the gunshot goes off, suggesting that the person who was screaming was killed by that gunshot ("Zimmerman Trial Gets Underway"). Though he does not explicitly say so, this certainly indicates O'Donnell still believes Zimmerman is guilty.

Furthermore, MSNBC continues to believe that Zimmerman racially profiled Martin. Proof of this, according to the network's reporters, are the repeated 911 calls made by Zimmerman about suspected burglaries and other possible criminal activity in the neighborhood, especially when those calls are compared to the 911 call Zimmerman made the night Martin was killed. In that final call, Zimmerman referred to Martin as part of a group. MSNBC legal analyst Lisa Bloom suggests he may be referring to criminals, but he could also be referring to African Americans as criminals in particular ("Will George Zimmerman's Calls"). As such, Zimmerman is believed to have racially profiled Martin. At the very least, there is a suggestion that he did not see Martin as an individual, but rather as part of some group, whatever that group may have been. This is further emphasized by another video in which host Chris Hayes explains in a rather heated way that even if Zimmerman's claim that Martin started the altercation is true, there is still the matter of Zimmerman following Martin, which Hayes sees as the true instigator of the altercation. One of his guests supports this sentiment by suggesting that white people can follow and shoot African American men with no consequences ("The Zimmerman Trial"). This happens again when the trial reveals that Zimmerman must have known about the Stand Your Ground law, considering that he was an A student in a class in which it was discussed, even though he had previously claimed he had never heard of Stand Your Ground. O'Donnell implies that if he lied about this, he may very well be lying about other aspects of his story as well ("Witness: Zimmerman 'A' Student"). MSNBC's reporting on the case therefore leaves no doubt as to the guilt of Zimmerman, providing viewers with only one type of opinion, instead of a multitudes of opinions.

Towards the end of the trial and after the verdict is announced, the conversation on MSNBC shifts back primarily to the matter of race. During the trial, a guest argues that in order for Zimmerman to be found not guilty, there must be an assumption that there was something about Martin that was inherently suspicious and threatening. Zimmerman saw an African American teen and assumed this teenager was threatening. The guest goes on to argue that if Zimmerman is found not guilty, it is essentially a tacit confirmation that African American men are to be feared ("What Zimmerman Trial Tells Us"). This is consistent with

the reaction which the prevalence of African Americans as criminals in news stories has created. Being African American and being a criminal have become inextricably linked in the minds of many Americans, thereby creating a fear response to African Americans, regardless of their behavior (Peffley and Hurwitz 61). Thus, Zimmerman is seen as someone who racially profiles African Americans, but at the same time, there is a focus on the larger implications of the case and the fear-based reaction that is inherent in so many white Americans when encountering African Americans, particularly African American men.

After the verdict is announced, these sentiments continue. Melissa Harris-Perry, when asked about her opinion concerning the verdict, says that “it does feel to me as though Trayvon Martin was tried and found guilty for his own death” (“Reflections after Zimmerman Trial”). Here, she is referring to the victim-blaming tactics that were discussed in the previous chapter, wherein Martin is portrayed as someone who posed a threat because he was suspended and smoked marijuana. However, it is also a clear indication that she does not agree with the verdict, thereby confirming that MSNBC’s stance on this case has always centered around Zimmerman’s guilt. Unlike CNN, who mostly avoided explicit discussion of Zimmerman’s guilt or innocence, MSNBC has gone beyond implying in its coverage of the case. The network has consistently provided its viewers with evidence pointing in the direction of Zimmerman’s guilt, with practically no dissention from within the network. In a different segment that same day, the focus is on definitions of racism. A guest argues that while current definitions of racism mostly revolve around the idea that someone is explicitly racist all the time, the reality is far more complicated and nuanced. What mattered in this case, according to this guest, is whether Zimmerman acted in a way that upheld white supremacy and white privilege on the night that he shot Martin. Whether he has expressed explicitly racist opinions is irrelevant, as someone who does not hold such opinions might still racially profile African Americans. This is in part the result of black bodies being interpreted by society at large as threatening and fear-inducing (“The Role of Age, Race”). MSNBC therefore sees race as an integral part of the case, both in the events that played out the night Martin was killed, as well as in the subsequent arrest and trial of Zimmerman. The racial profiling of and fear towards African Americans is seen as endemic in American society and in dire need of being addressed. While CNN touches upon these issues from time to time, FNC’s belief is that race does not play a role, not only in this particular case, but also in society in general. Thus, there is a fairly clear divide in how this case was approached in the news media across the political spectrum.

3.4 *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*

The Daily Show website features 21 videos about George Zimmerman, while *The Colbert Report* features 22. Colbert does not discuss the matter of Zimmerman's guilt or innocence much. In fact, while *The Colbert Report* website features more videos on the topic than that of *The Daily Show*, many of these are either recaps or focus entirely on Martin and barely mention Zimmerman. While the trial is in process, Colbert references Geraldo Rivera's hoodie comments. He describes the death of Martin as "either a terrible tragedy or a sensible response to a case of aggravated hoodie" ("George Zimmerman's Murder Trial"). In this way, Colbert makes it quite clear that he thinks Zimmerman overreacted, yet there is no discussion of his legal guilt or innocence. Colbert's general lack of segments focusing on Zimmerman could indicate that he did not want to address that subject as it would include mostly speculation instead of substantial evidence. When Zimmerman is acquitted, Colbert calls it "a victory for the rule of law, in that Florida apparently no longer has rules or laws" ("George Zimmerman Verdict"). On the one hand, this clearly expresses Colbert's displeasure with the verdict and indicates that he would have preferred to see a conviction. However, it is also indicative of the laws in Florida and how they are being used in favor of white people, while African Americans are not granted that same leniency. Colbert is suggesting that the jury did indeed follow the law by not convicting Zimmerman, but the law itself is so deeply flawed that it leads to a state of virtual lawlessness in which young unarmed African American men can be shot and their killers can still be acquitted.

In *The Daily Show*'s first discussion of the case, Jon Stewart focuses on the 911 call made by George Zimmerman and his supposed use of a racial slur during that call. Stewart shows a clip from CNN in which a reporter has asked a specialist to play the 1.6 second soundbite that may contain a slur, followed by a request to play the soundbite ten times in a row. The soundbite, which hardly contained any clearly distinguishable words to begin with, becomes garbled nonsense, as Stewart also points out. However, the CNN reporter claims with an air of confidence that he can make out what Zimmerman is saying on the tape and that it definitely sounds like a racial slur ("C.N.I.: Cable News Investigators"). Stewart simultaneously exposes the ludicrous nature of the request to play the soundbite ten times in a row, while also undermining the assertion of the CNN reporter that Zimmerman used a racial slur. Stewart does not explicitly take a side in the matter, though he is clearly shocked by the circumstances of Martin's death. Still, he is able to assess the 911 call without jumping to the conclusion that Zimmerman used a racial slur. It is simply not possible to tell, considering the

poor quality of the recording and therefore there is no point in attempting to draw a conclusion on the matter.

Stewart's response to NBC's editing mistake is similarly scathing towards the news media. He begins by pointing out that NBC's edit of Zimmerman's 911 call does make him look like a racist, when in reality, he was simply answering the dispatcher's question. When NBC claims that it was simply a mistake, Stewart jokingly says, "They must have hit the remove context button" ("The Splice Channel"). In this way, he indicates that claiming this happened accidentally is unlikely at best. However, Stewart does not believe this gives FNC a free pass to repeatedly criticize NBC for misrepresenting evidence. When FNC correspondent Judith Miller responds indignantly to NBC's explanation, Stewart points out that neither FNC nor Miller herself are strangers to misrepresenting evidence ("The Splice Channel"). Here, he is referring to the series of influential stories Miller had written about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq ("The Source of the Trouble"). To Stewart, this is evidence of hypocrisy on FNC's part. They were right to condemn NBC's edit, but if they continue to bring the issue up, claiming it is absolutely irresponsible to misrepresent evidence, it will only serve to expose their own twisting of the facts. As such, Stewart condemns both NBC and FNC for their poor quality of reporting.

The question of Zimmerman's guilt is carefully evaded for the most part. While it is clear that *The Daily Show* believes Martin's death to be unnecessary and tragic, it does not explicitly appoint legal blame to Zimmerman. In fact, in a discussion on the racial elements of the case featuring Senior Black Correspondent Larry Wilmore, the culprit is not necessarily Zimmerman, but the benefit of the doubt. Wilmore argues that we simply cannot know the circumstances of the case: we cannot know if Martin attacked Zimmerman at any point, if Zimmerman's life was truly threatened, or if Zimmerman profiled Martin, leading to Martin's death. However, the benefit of the doubt would never have been given to an African American who shot a white person. The fact that the police so readily believed Zimmerman's side of the story without launching an official investigation is the real racial element in this case, according to Wilmore ("Racist Timeout"). In this way, *The Daily Show* cleverly manages to remain neutral on whether Zimmerman should legally be found guilty, while still discussing the racial elements of the case. It does not speculate about the details of what happened that night, but unlike the major news networks, *The Daily Show* does not need to know all the details in order to recognize that there are distinctly racial issues at hand. Furthermore, by shifting the focus from the events of that night to the subsequent investigation, or lack thereof, *The Daily Show* removes the need for speculation. After all, we

know what happened after Martin was shot; at this point in time it was public knowledge that the police believed Zimmerman without a second thought. As such, a conversation on race can emerge that does not rely on speculative and sensationalist reporting.

When the not guilty verdict is announced, John Oliver is hosting the show. The verdict is met with booing from the audience, which clearly indicates they do not agree with the verdict. However, Oliver is quick to point out that the truly tragic part about the outcome of this case is not the verdict itself, but that the verdict was inevitable if the jury was to follow the law. According to current Florida law, it is entirely legal to follow an unarmed teenager for no particular reason, have the 911 dispatcher say you should not follow the teenager, ignore that dispatcher's instructions, which may or may not lead to an altercation, and then shoot the unarmed teenager because you were afraid for your life ("Acquitted Development"). Thus, Oliver reluctantly concedes that Zimmerman is legally not guilty, but he clearly does not agree with the law. The segment continues with a clip from Mark O'Mara, Zimmerman's attorney, who comments on the racial elements of the case by arguing that if Zimmerman had been African American, he would not have been charged with a crime. Oliver responds by mockingly stating that the American justice system is notorious for its leniency towards African Americans ("Acquitted Development"). Approximately one-third of African American men between the ages of 20 and 30 are either in prison or in some other way under the supervision of the criminal justice system (Roberts 1272). Taking this into consideration, O'Mara's comment comes across as absurd at best and willfully ignorant at worst. To further prove his point, Oliver cites the case of an African American Florida woman who fired a warning shot into the air to scare off her abusive husband. She attempted to use the Stand Your Ground defense, but was convicted by a jury to twenty years in prison ("Acquitted Development"). This especially highlights what Wilmore was talking about in a different episode: the benefit of the doubt is given to white people, but not to African Americans. This woman did not fire her gun at a person, but the jury could not give her the benefit of the doubt that she only fired the gun to defend herself from her abusive husband. Yet, when Zimmerman claims Martin attacked him and he was simply defending his own life, the jury needs absolute conclusive evidence that Martin did not attack Zimmerman, and, lacking such evidence, he is given the benefit of the doubt. Once again, *The Daily Show* does not necessarily believe Zimmerman is legally guilty, but that question is largely irrelevant when discussing the racial elements of the case. What is unequivocally racial, according to *The Daily Show*, is the treatment of Zimmerman following the shooting, especially in comparison to the treatment of similar cases involving African American shooters.

Both *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* evade the question of Zimmerman's guilt. *The Colbert Report* does so by barely addressing Zimmerman at all, while *The Daily Show* chooses to focus on the events following the shooting, instead of the shooting itself. In doing so, they both step away from the kind of speculative and sensationalist reporting that CNN, FNC, and MSNBC have indulged in over the course of this case. On top of that, *The Daily Show's* approach has actually led to a potentially productive conversation on the racial elements surrounding Martin's death. While such conversations may not have traveled outside of the realm of *The Daily Show* and into viewers' personal spheres, the fact that *The Daily Show* managed to address some of the most pertinent issues without falling into the trap of constantly debating Zimmerman's guilt or innocence, is admirable. None of the 24 hour news networks managed to look beyond the events of that night in order to produce an actual discussion.

Similar to the coverage of Trayvon Martin, the reporting on George Zimmerman on CNN and MSNBC was also characterized by more liberal tendencies, while FNC maintained a conservative interpretation of the case. CNN continued to discuss the racial elements of the case, though without explicitly appointing legal blame to Zimmerman. MSNBC, however, clearly took a side in the case, portraying Zimmerman as guilty throughout their reporting. FNC was on the other end of the spectrum, denying that race was an important factor in this case altogether, concluding that Zimmerman must therefore be innocent. *The Colbert Report* remained mostly silent on the topic of Zimmerman and *The Daily Show* likewise did not say much about Zimmerman's guilt or innocence, though both expressed disappointment at his acquittal. *The Daily Show* did however manage to separate the discussion surrounding Zimmerman's possible guilt from the discussions concerning racial elements, thereby indicating that the racial problem in this case does not lie so much with Zimmerman, but more with a system that allows people like Zimmerman to shoot unarmed African American teenagers without being questioned on his side of the story, at least not until public outrage forces officials to act.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the networks' respective political agendas have informed the ways in which the case was reported on. Even though FNC initially supported the Martin side of the story, this quickly changed when CNN and especially MSNBC began to vocalize their support for the Martin family. From that moment on, just a week or so after national media outlets began to report on the case, FNC took a much more conservative point of view. Where they were initially convinced of Zimmerman's guilt and the role that race must have played in Martin's death, FNC suddenly rejected the notion that race was an important factor after the first week of reporting. During the trial, the network even took a stand on the outcome of the case, heavily implying that Zimmerman should be found not guilty. Meanwhile, MSNBC, with its more left-leaning philosophies discussed the racial aspects of the case to such an extent that the individuality of Martin was completely drowned by the political debates on racial profiling and systemic racism. As such, Martin's death became a tool in a larger discussion on race, giving some credence to FNC's argument that MSNBC's reporting was exploitative of this teenager's death. As expected, CNN presented the most neutral argument of the three, though this is relative. It became quite clear that CNN, while accepting of the laws that acquitted Zimmerman, mostly took the Martin family's side in this case. However, of the three networks, CNN is the only one that, with some regularity, exposed viewers to various opinions. Even though the network's reporting was most definitely skewed in Martin's favor, this was not the only point of view on the network, as opposed to the opinions presented on MSNBC and FNC, which were almost exclusively uniform in their judgment of the case.

However, because of the ideological stances the networks have taken, true discussions on race rarely took place. On FNC, there was absolutely no room to discuss race in a nuanced way, failing to take into account the various ways in which systemic racism manifests itself. In one notable segment, FNC's Ann Coulter even calls accusations of racism "nonsense" ("Mainstream Media's Coverage of the Zimmerman Trial"). On MSNBC, on the other hand, the entire case is about race. However, the network focuses so much on the racial profiling argument that the discussions are easily undermined. After all, there is no evidence that Zimmerman profiled Martin, as it is still not entirely clear what happened that night. Though the overrepresentation of African Americans as criminals on the news could have easily contributed to Zimmerman's response that night, there is no proof. And therein lies the problem. When the discussion of the racial aspects of the case rely entirely on speculation, as it often did on MSNBC and CNN, the case itself gets lost in the discussion. MSNBC

correspondents even repeatedly argue that the individual facts of the case do not matter; what matter is the larger issue of racial profiling in the United States. While this is certainly an issue that needs to be addressed, it does undermine the discussion of this case in particular.

Furthermore, the ways in which these networks respond to each other has also influenced the reporting. Once FNC realized that CNN and MSNBC were focusing on the racial aspects of the story, FNC changed its mind about the case. Where the first week of reporting on FNC included some mentions of race as a potential factor, FNC suddenly shifted to a much more colorblind approach after that first week. Most likely, FNC felt the need to provide a counterpoint to the liberal reporting found on CNN and MSNBC, in order to continue its established image as a conservative network. Similarly, MSNBC's almost exclusive focus on larger racial problems as opposed to the specifics of the case could also be in response to FNC's outright denial of racial issues. The heavily politicized nature of news networks is brought to the fore by this phenomenon, as reporting is not merely based on what the reporters believe is happening in a case, but also on what other networks are reporting to which they then need to provide a counterpoint.

The approach of *The Daily Show* is therefore refreshing. Moving beyond the events of that particular night, which will never be entirely clear, *The Daily Show* still manages to discuss the racial aspects of this specific case without getting lost in discussions of Zimmerman's guilt or innocence and without ignoring the case itself in favor of painting a larger picture of systemic racism. By focusing on the events following Martin's death, *The Daily Show* cleverly connects this case to larger racial issues of white privilege and mass incarceration, without ever losing sight of what exactly happened after Zimmerman shot Martin. The most pertinent problem, so *The Daily Show* argues, is not whether Zimmerman is a racist, but the implicit bias in law enforcement and the American justice system. As such, accusations of individual racism are removed from the discussion, instead choosing to redirect the focus to systemic inequalities, which are not necessarily the result of people explicitly hating African Americans, but rather of implicit biases which then come to the fore in laws and law enforcement. As a result, Zimmerman could kill an unarmed teenager without being arrested for close to two months and when he was finally arrested and brought to trial, he could be acquitted. After all, the system implicitly worked in his favor.

At the same time, *The Daily Show* is clearly not unbiased in its reporting, nor is *The Colbert Report*. Both shows express disappointment at Zimmerman's acquittal, indicating they did not believe he was innocent. However, these beliefs are not necessarily part of their discussion on race, at least not to the extent that the other news networks have linked the two.

On FNC, the predominant belief is that racism is a thing of the past, therefore Zimmerman must be innocent. CNN and MSNBC believe that race played a role in Martin's death, therefore Zimmerman must be guilty. While *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* do not agree with the acquittal, their focus is more on the law itself, which allows for someone to successfully argue self-defense in the killing of an unarmed teenager. Especially *The Daily Show* connects this to the implicit bias in these laws, which allow leniency towards white shooters, while African American shooters are convicted, illustrated by John Oliver's example of the African American woman who received a twenty-year jail sentence for firing a warning shot into the air to scare off her abusive husband. *The Daily Show* therefore shifts the focus from Zimmerman's innocence or guilt to systemic racism as found in laws and the execution of those laws.

The reporting was clearly influenced by the ways in which African Americans are portrayed in the news media. CNN and MSNBC focused on racial profiling arguments, which are born of a systemic fear of African American men due in part to the overrepresentation of African Americans as criminals on TV as seen in the literature addressed in chapter 1. However, neither network ever explicitly named this as a cause of racial profiling, possibly because it is likely that they, too, have engaged in this overrepresentation of African Americans as criminals. Meanwhile, FNC adopted a colorblind rhetoric by claiming that racial profiling is not a problem in the United States. Statistics on incarceration rates of African Americans and their overrepresentation as criminals certainly beg to differ. What these statistics cannot reveal is how they are interpreted by the media. This case study has shown what happens when a racialized story becomes a major national news story: the story itself is likely to get lost in discussions about the influence of racial factors, without creating and sustaining a productive conversation about the state of race relations in the United States.

However, what is conspicuously absent from all of these discussions is Zimmerman's own ethnic background. Martin is constantly presented as a raced subject, yet Zimmerman is almost never raced in any way. FNC occasionally mentions that Zimmerman is part Hispanic, but only in the context of rebutting the arguments made by networks such as CNN and MSNBC that this was a matter of racial profiling. In any case, Martin's racial background was always brought to the fore, while Zimmerman's remained in the background, apparently impervious to critical analysis due to his assumed whiteness. Zimmerman is neutral, Martin is raced (Carbado 817). The ways in which these subjects, especially white-coded subjects, are raced could be a topic for further research.

Furthermore, the frequency with which unarmed African Americans are shot by law enforcement officials is concerning. Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott, and Freddie Gray are just a few of the names of African American children and men who were killed by the police since August 2014. The attention these cases have garnered could certainly be researched further. The ways in which overrepresentation of African Americans as criminals is connected to fear of African American bodies and the resulting deadly violence by law enforcement is especially relevant today, as many of these cases are still unfolding and new incidents occur weekly. The discussion that unfolded after Martin's death could be useful in attempting to make sense of the current debates, as it provides some context for how the news media deals with discussions on race. The politically polarized landscape of the news media and American society in general certainly complicates these discussions, considering that they become fraught with ideology, as has been shown to be the case in the reporting on Martin and Zimmerman.

If anything, the coverage of Trayvon Martin's death and George Zimmerman's trial has shown how politicized the debate about race has become. FNC cannot bear to mention race in the present tense, while MSNBC would favor speculative racial arguments over basing their arguments on the known elements of the case, thereby opening themselves up to criticism from networks such as FNC, who can then point to MSNBC's disregard for the facts of the case and use it to bolster their own post-racial narrative. However, a discussion on race is clearly sorely needed. The deaths of the men mentioned above have led to intense protests and activism from African American communities. The frequency with which these cases occur is worrying and the effects of police officers shooting unarmed African Americans cannot be ignored. While the case of Martin and Zimmerman was slightly different, considering that Zimmerman was not a police officer, he still represented a figure who was supposed to guard the neighborhood from criminals, albeit unofficially. In such a heavily politicized landscape however, it is questionable whether these discussions will be fruitful. If news networks only present viewers with their own point of view, never giving viewers a chance to see a different perspective, there is not much room for discussion. Viewers have the ability to choose a network that aligns with their own personal political perspective, meaning exposure to opinions contrary to their own will be limited. Martin's death and its subsequent coverage was an indication of how the media handles and politicizes these cases. In the end, the news media's inability to create a productive conversation on the racial aspects of the case, such as the influence of white privilege, is depressing in a cultural and political landscape in which so many unarmed African Americans die at the hands of law enforcement.

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