

# The White Lens Of Crime Media: Examining Minority Underrepresentation in American Media and its Consequences

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True crime's popularity has never been higher. However, true crime media largely ignores offenses by authority figures, and creators use their outreach to monetize viewership with cold cases rather than making critiques of the societal structures in the United States. Most true crime media also perpetuates "missing white woman syndrome" and ignores the plights of marginalized communities, including Black and Native American. This bias makes it harder for the stories of minority groups to be heard and can be damaging to their communities in the long run. Following this, my argument will use Huey P. Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide* as a historical representation and firsthand account of the ways in which the judicial system is inherently biased towards minority groups and how their representation in the media

makes them more likely to be targeted by police, as well as a contemporary comparison and analysis of these issues. The media around Newton's case, although he was later acquitted of all charges, painted Newton as a deviant simply because he was in a Black organization. Applying the lens of Critical Race Theory, as explained by Bryan Warde and Edward Taylor, to these events, we can begin to see the racist groundwork on which many of our institutions of law are built upon and how media's favoring of sensationalism over accurate representation is hurtful to already vulnerable members of the American public.

## Introduction

Nearly every facet of media in the United States is tainted by the racist precedent set by reporters over the course of the last two hundred years. This inherent racism not only demonizes members of minority groups daily but also completely erases their voice in the purposeful omission of their struggles. If more mass media outlets and popular influencers were willing to highlight the day-to-day injustices faced by the underprivileged members of our country, we could potentially see real social change and the regression of racist legislature as the public becomes more aware of the oppressive scaffolding holding the judicial system together, instead of continuing to cast minority groups as inherently deviant and making it harder for them to prove their innocence or receive help from government bodies.

To lay out the historical groundwork of these issues, this essay will draw heavily from Huey P. Newton's experience in the 1960s using his autobiography *Revolutionary Suicide* (1973), as well as the works of several critical race theorists including Bryan Warde, Angela Davis, and Edward Taylor. Newton's own experience with racism in the judicial system and how he was portrayed in public media provides a well-documented firsthand account of the inherent racial bias in both of these institutions, as well as fighting back against the pre-established narrative of Black Americans. While Newton's story did unfold in the 1960s, its relevance can still be directly applied to the current climate of The United States. While many like to pretend that institutionalized racism is a thing of the past, modern media and judicial issues prove otherwise.

These contemporary issues linked with a historical precedent provide a clear outline of the real-life damage that negative media representation inflicts upon the marginalized communities of our country. Were these communities to have a larger say in their own stories, or at the very least get to have their stories properly told through other outlets, they could potentially benefit in three major ways: these groups could remove the mark of demonization that has plagued them throughout American history, they could have a greater chance of combatting racist legislature and demanding structural change, and they could finally receive proper help from government bureaucrats (such as the police) rather than having their struggles be ignored or punished.

## Historical Precedent

A brief overview of the origins of the police force in the United States is helpful to understand the argument being presented before moving on. The first equivalent of

the police force can be traced back directly to Carolina slave patrols in the 1700s. While these groups would continue to grow and develop throughout America's early history, they flourished after the abolishment of slavery in 1865. Wealthy white communities, afraid of retribution from the now-freed Black population, needed a vanguard to protect them from perceived harm and continue the subservient role of the previous slaves. This job, which would lead directly into the modern police force, was given to former slave hunters (Spruill 43). From their very inception, the police have served white elites by purposefully combatting underprivileged communities, and their brutality has been overlooked by state governments in favor of pleasing the upper class. This was later followed by Jim Crow policies and mass segregation (enforced by the police and upheld by legislative and judicial bodies), the effects of which still permeate throughout American institutions (Warde 468).

In 1967, Newton, a co-founder of the Black Panthers, was charged with the murder of police officer John Frey. His trial began in 1968, and he was later acquitted of all charges after it was discovered that Frey was accidentally killed by his own partner in a panicked shooting. This case, as well as Newton's experiences leading up to it, will be used to demonstrate Newton's demonization by the media and how the opinions of him that were publicly broadcasted through various outlets allowed law enforcement officials to harass him, and further, to pass legislation to directly suppress the rights of Black Americans.

The media's negative representation of minority groups was not a new concept during Huey P. Newton's trial. On the contrary, it was a leading force that made Newton question the unfair treatment of him, his family, and his community at a very young age. On his entrance into the local school system, Newton reported, "I knew only that I constantly felt uncomfortable and ashamed of being Black. ... It was a result of the implicit understanding in the system that Whites were 'smart' and Blacks were 'stupid'" (17). This statement shows the permeating effect of negative minority representation in America, where a child inherently feels othered from their fellow children simply because of their skin color. Despite not having yet faced direct racism in his life, Newton had already been forced to internalize the racist status quo because of what public opinion had taught him about race relations.

As Newton grew older, he watched as both he and his community were routinely harassed and assaulted by police officials. At this time, these events did not gather any media attention. Whereas today, thankfully, bystanders can easily document instances of police misconduct, this was occurring at a time in which the marginalized communities being harassed had almost no outlet for help. When they did reach out, it boiled down to their word against the word of the white police officers. This is a nearly impossible battle for members of minority groups to win, as the societal

narrative broadcasted through all forms of media forces disenfranchised groups to have to prove that they are morally sound, whereas white people are naturally assumed by the public eye to be just (Patton & Ward 335). This is further reinforced by critical race theorist Angela Davis who describes a system through which an ever-perpetuating cycle forces Black Americans to be arrested after being assumed guilty, sent to jail in much greater quantities than whites because of racial bias, and then seen as criminals because of the large number of Black people in prison, creating a perceived “Black monopoly on criminality” (265).

Reflecting on this idea, Newton became aware of how severely minority groups were being deprived of their own voice. This concept would inspire a large portion of *Revolutionary Suicide* in which Newton emphasizes the importance of Black people being in charge of their own representation. He highlights this scarcity and the flaws with what little representation there is when reflecting on his first experiences with African American activists. Newton claims Donald Warden “is the only Black man I know with two weekly radio programs and one on television. The mass media, the oppressors, give him public exposure for only one reason: he will lead the people away from the truth of their situation” (66). As a way to combat this problem, Newton was driven to write this book without the influence of “the oppressors” to inspire others to resist these narratives upheld by the establishment.

After this, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale started The Black Panthers. The first course of action they took was to combat the harassment of innocent minorities by police officers. The Black Panthers started “police patrols” in which volunteers would gather in small groups with visible firearms and follow the police officers through Black communities in Oakland. During the process, they would also give legal advice near people who were being detained, often providing the victim with the knowledge they were being arrested under false pretenses and allowing them to go back home to their families while also forcing the police officer to admit their illegal actions (Newton 127-128).

These officers would not face charges, however, as there were no outlets for these groups to report officer misconduct and no popular media outlets broadcasted the struggles of inner-city communities. The complete omission of the Black narrative allowed the white power structure to publish false claims about The Panthers with no repercussions. White-owned newspapers began to print stories told by the police that The Panthers were a violent mob disrupting the peace, which allowed law enforcement to crack down on the group without public outcry (Figure 1).



Figure 1. "Panthers Indoctrinate the Young." Aug. 18, 1969, *Fascination and Fear: Covering the Black Panthers - The New York Times* ([nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com))

Consider here Bryan Warde's ideas on critical race theory in which he states:

This racial privilege comes by way of white people having unequal access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society by virtue of being a member of the dominant group. Because of this unequal access, white people as a group not only have and maintain an ongoing competitive edge over minority groups, such as black people, but they are also able to sustain this dominance in all areas of society through the shaping of law and practices that protect the status-quo. (463).

Warde's definition helps to underline the relationship between resource access and the subsequent ability to suppress minority groups. It is important to note that while the resources mentioned certainly apply to physical things like money and property, public resources also include more conceptual aspects such as time and executive representation. From this, we can begin to see that this symbiosis between white media and white lawmakers is not an accidental occurrence, but rather a product of the purposeful exclusion of Black voices which allows the powers that be to reap the social rewards, in this case being able to control social perceptions in a way that places them on top of the social hierarchy.

This unity of police and media narratives paved the way for racist public officials to change the law to directly combat their unease at the thought of organized Black people following the aforementioned police patrols carried out by The Black Panthers. Look no further for proof of how improper media representation can allow lawmakers to suppress minority groups than the following quote by Huey P. Newton. These are his own words on Donald Mulford, a republican state assemblyman, calling into a radio

show interview with Newton:

He told us that he planned to introduce a bill into the state legislature to make it illegal for us to patrol with our weapons. It was a bill, he said, that would “get” the Black Panthers. Mulford’s call was a logical response of the system. We know how the system operated. If we used the laws in our own interest and against theirs, then the power structure would simply change the laws... A few days later, the paper carried a story about Mulford’s “panther bill.” In its particulars it was what we had expected- a bill intended to suppress the people’s constitutional right to bear arms. Until then, White men had owned and carried weapons with impunity... Mulford had been asked by the Oakland police to introduce this bill because some “young Black toughs,” as they called us, were walking around with guns. The bill was further evidence of this country’s double standard against Blacks. (Newton 154)

This is a very potent historical event for several reasons once we begin to roll back the layers. Firstly, and perhaps most glaringly, Newton points out that white people (including the violent Ku Klux Klan at the time) had publicly brandished weapons in public protests throughout the country without ever being charged as criminals and without any intervention by lawmakers. Once minority groups in underprivileged communities began to practice this same right, laws were implemented in direct response to strip these communities of their power and uphold the status quo. This was made possible because of the media’s use of fear mongering, in which news outlets spread disinformation to paint the Panthers as a force of evil acting against the interest of American citizens. Fear goes hand in hand with racism, and this is a purposeful strategy utilized by oppressors because if citizens are afraid of a group of people and what they might do, they are more likely to overlook when they are brutalized under the guise of public safety (Davis 269).

Furthermore, we can see that this blatantly racist bill was able to be passed because of the media’s support and presentation of Mulford’s ideas, as well as the newspapers’ repeated characterization of Black Panthers as a militant force taking the streets by storm. By controlling the narrative through news media, Mulford was able to propose racist legislature in the public eye and simultaneously be seen as a protector of the community due to the papers’ inherent bias against minority groups. Below is an example and analysis of the impact of these press releases.





Figure 2. "The Sacramento Bee's front page story the day after the Panthers protest of the Mulford Act." May 2nd 1967, *The Panthers and the Press – Fourteen East* ([fourteeneastmag.com](http://fourteeneastmag.com)).

This article (Figure 2) was released in the Sacramento Bee after a protest at the Sacramento capitol building regarding the aforementioned "Panther bill." The images and opinions expressed in this article were not a new stance by the media, but they do highlight the lengths that the press was willing to go to uphold the narrative that most benefited the power structure. Simply put, the capitol was not invaded. The Panthers arrived at the capitol brandishing firearms (as was still legal at that time) and read a speech highlighting the importance of combatting racist lawmaking as well as simply walking around the building (Newton 156-158). However, the headline of this paper and the accompanying image instill a fear of an organized and hostile mob looking to overthrow the government. Within the article, there are also lies about how many Panthers there were, what they had been doing, and what they had said, as well as the use of negative vocabulary to describe normal legal actions. This was done to imply that the Panthers were criminals and deviants rather than the protesting civilians that they were (Pederson).

These Panthers would be arrested after their legal demonstration, which may not have happened had the public been more aware of what was actually happening. The media's portrayal of the Black Panthers prior to the incident made it simple for police

to round up the protestors without gaining public ire, whereas if the average citizen had been more aware of the true situation taking place, they may have been outraged to see innocent people being battered and arrested by the police.

This is a situation we still see all too often, in which the oppressed are robbed of their voices and are denied the opportunity to speak out in defense of themselves. Throughout the entirety of Huey P. Newton's lifespan, he was denied chances to speak on mass public broadcasts because of the representation that preceded him as a Black activist, something he attempted to counter with his autobiography. Without the ability to present their own narratives, minority groups are forced to endure whatever the established powers wish the public to believe, which is almost always a narrative that upholds the status quo and keeps those that benefit from the oppression of minority groups in control.

### Contemporary Application

While some may insist that these historical precedents are outdated and deny that there is any such thing as systemic racism, there is an alarming parallel connecting these past issues to the contemporary United States. I also argue that racism is just as pervasive in these institutions as ever, it has simply changed its form. In this section, each of the historical issues covered will be directly tied to recent events in this country that show little progress has been made regarding minority group representation and struggles within the judicial system.

First, representation of minority groups in media has only minutely changed in news media and true crime narratives. A glaring issue with both of these mediums is the erasure of minority stories. Several factors lead to this issue. Just as in the 1960s, minority groups are still assumed to be naturally at fault when presented in news stories, even when they themselves are the victims. Patton & Ward contend that "proving the worthiness of missing Black women is difficult when media narratives attempt to link these women to crime, mental illness, and other issues to suggest that they are somehow responsible for their predicament" (334). It has been so ingrained in the mass-scale culture industry of The United States that Black people are deviants that simply making their presence known in crime media will, by default, suggest guilt on their behalf.

With the lack of public outlets available to them, as mentioned by Bryan Warde, there is little hope for these oppressed groups to counter these narratives or begin the process of reversing their assumed guilt by white audiences, meaning that the audience is not only made unaware of the struggles of these communities but also becomes unsympathetic towards their struggles. Because of this, the stories of



minority groups are often simply left out of the media circuit. White people can be related to as a stand-in for the audience whereas a member of a minority group would ostracize the potential viewership (Patton & Ward 333). Just as the Panthers could not speak for themselves against allegations by the police, modern disenfranchised communities are still at the mercy of white media.

This erasure that strips minority groups of their voices is a symptom of a phenomenon known as “Missing White Woman Syndrome” (MWWS). MWWS is best described as “the information communicated to general audiences [is] influential and situate[s] ‘certain subgroups of women—often white, wealthy, and conventionally attractive—as deserving of our collective resources, while making the marginalization and victimization of other groups of women, such as low-income women of colour, seem natural” (Patton & Ward 334-335). MWWS arises from the media’s reliance on sensationalism and viewership monetization rather than reporting on the most pressing stories. This has life-altering consequences for those who are denied media representation and is widespread in both news and crime media.

Take for instance the recent true crime craze over Gabby Petito, a young white blogger who went missing in 2021. The events following the search and rescue efforts carried out by law enforcement highlight the sad reality of the underprivileged experience in our country. During the search for Petito, at least nine other dead bodies were found in the wild. These bodies would turn out to belong largely to minority groups, including Black, Native, and Hispanic women. Their stories were almost completely ignored, as they did not fit the public narrative of an innocent pure woman (Montell & Medina). Law enforcement agencies did not look for their killers, and their families were left without peace, which is another example of media representation directly affecting the course of policing. Without public outcry and interest, true crime media’s hyper-fixation on MWWS allowed the police to sideline the deaths of the underprivileged.

This is not a unique standalone occurrence. Whereas a young white woman’s story draws the national eye seemingly overnight, minority groups must fight to get even a passing glance from both media and law enforcement. Take for instance serial killer Jeremy Skibicki, who was charged with the murder of three Indigenous women in 2022. Normally, it would be assumed that a modern serial killer would attract true crime influencers like moths to a flame, but the deaths of Indigenous women don’t fit into the sensationalism addiction caused by MWWS, even though police believe that the bodies of two or more women may still be buried in the landfill where Skibicki dumped his victims. Even worse, the police refuse to search for these bodies despite pleas from the families of the victims (Morin). Being denied any semblance of justice is a reality minority groups face on a daily basis. If these police were held accountable

in news media, the pressure for the case to be solved would push law enforcement to assist its community. As it stands, the lack of public outcry allows law enforcement to avoid consequences for ignoring the needs of underprivileged Americans.

While MWWS is not immediately evident and media outlets may deny that they are favoring white people over minority groups, that only further aligns with the thoughts of Critical Race Theorist Edward Taylor, who states in a 1998 article, “[b]y relying on merit criteria or standards, the dominant group can justify its exclusion of blacks to positions of power, believing in its own neutrality” (123). Neutrality may at first sound positive regarding race relations. However, when it comes to oppression, neutrality naturally benefits the oppressor while further harming the efforts of the oppressed.

Neutrality leads to an issue sometimes conveyed as “colorblindness” towards race and is presented as a positive. “Colorblindness” often fails to see the white power structure oppressing minority groups or implies that underprivileged communities are already entirely equal with the white upper class, which is not true (Taylor 123). This pseudo-willful ignorance does more damage than good and only ensures that those without the ability to speak for themselves will remain suppressed and controlled by the established racist narrative. Instead, media owners should acknowledge the discrepancy present in their narratives and allow diverse journalists to highlight the problems in their communities.

Another direct correlation between the 1960s and today’s narrative structure arises whenever any member of a minority group stages a public protest. As seen during the Sacramento protest in 1967, the established media will skew the narrative whenever possible to mislead their audience into believing that peaceful protesters are organizing into violent mobs.

In this image (Figure 3), taken during a 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protest following the death of George Floyd, protestors can be seen standing in front of a flaming trash can on a public street. The headline speaks for itself. When comparing this reporting to that of the 1960s, there are many parallels with damaging implications. First, this report immediately relies on fear mongering. Tucker Carlson, pictured on the left, has often been accused of being a fear monger himself, and the headline along with the photo of fire is meant to instill a sense of panic in viewers. If the camera were to pan around this city, however, it would be evident that the city is not on fire and this was a contained incident, which can be proved by the documentation of these protests posted to social media. Although these more aggressive actions were largely isolated incidents, media outlets, such as Fox News, instead skew the facts in order to uphold the racist narrative that serves them best and allows for further discrimination against minority groups by fostering fear in their audience that these protestors are an active threat to their cities and their safety.



Figure 3. "Our Leaders Peddle Lies as Our Cities Burn." 2020, Foxnews.com

Consider also the combative attitude of "Our Leaders Peddle Lies" and the function that this part of the report serves for the narrative. The "Lies" mentioned here are the charges against the officer who murdered Floyd, as Fox News took the stance that the officer was within his legal right. By trying to undercut opposing views, this outlet is attempting to instill distrust in BLM spokespeople and any public officials who are sympathetic to them. This angle was also used to say that Floyd was deserving of his punishment by implying that he was a criminal and the officer was simply detaining a dangerous man, which was the same strategy used to justify the arrest of the Sacramento Panthers. Yet again, we see the symbiotic relationship between media fear mongering and presumed criminality used as a tool to pave the way for abuses by government bodies.

Finally, there is the issue of how separate events are reported and how the vocabulary and presentation of these issues serve to uphold the status quo. Take for instance January 6th. During the reporting of that event, Fox News took a sympathetic tone and praised the protestors for upholding civic duty and fighting for what they believed was right. They were painted as family-oriented patriots, and it's no coincidence that a majority of these protestors shown were white. When compared

to the reporting of BLM protests, we see a harsh contrast that bolsters Newton's exact critique in the 1960s in which violent white protesters were excused while Black activists were immediately reprimanded. Despite a vast majority of BLM protesters being nonviolent, Carlson described them as "crazed ideologues, grifters, criminals, antisocial thugs with no stake in society and nothing better to do than hurt people and destroy things."

However, unlike the Sacramento protest, there is a spark of light in the reporting of this event. It comes from the independent posters on social media that relayed the true motives and goals of these protesters, as well as clarifying that they did not participate in any violent or aggressive action. Because of the ease of internet access and widespread social media in this country, it is somewhat more possible for underprivileged communities to share their stories. We see a direct effect in this story, wherein the protestors were prevented from being entirely demonized because of the large public interest in the protests that encouraged interpersonal discussion and inspired content creators to report on the situation. Looking back at the events of Sacramento and even the foundation of the Black Panthers, you'll recall that there was no outlet for the group to clarify its own story en masse. They were entirely at the mercy of biased white media and therefore made deviant. Had they had this ability to present their narrative, the Mulford bill may not have been passed, and members of the Panthers may not have been unlawfully beaten and arrested.

This shows us the direct positive influence that proper media representation can have. Despite the longstanding racist narrative, the historic abuses by the police, and the racist legislature across the country, this group was protected and valued because they were given the chance to speak for themselves. They were not erased in favor of a trite and dated true crime story or demonized on the public news. Were more of these massively popular independent content creators driven to pick up on the stories of the underprivileged, we could see real public perception of these groups change entirely.

## Conclusion

It is a simple fact that institutionalized systemic racism permeates throughout many largely influential bodies throughout the United States. These issues have existed since the country's inception and have affected all levels of government. While these problems do not rest solely on the shoulders of the media, the assistance that the media has given (and continues to give) to uphold the power vacuum preventing minority groups from protecting themselves cannot be understated. Angela Davis argues, "What we have come to recognize as an open, explicit racism has in many ways begun to be replaced by a secluded, camouflaged kind of racism, whose influence on people's daily lives is as pervasive and systematic as the explicit forms of racism

associated with the era of the struggle for civil rights" (270-271).

As citizens, we have historically had little in the way of outlets for demanding social reform. However, with the rise of easy-access media, we have seen cases in which minor pushback has been inflicted on the power structure. If more media creators, specifically independent true crime influencers and news media reporters unbound by the limitations of broadcast networks, were to continue presenting the stories of the voiceless, these communities would gain an invaluable quantity of support. From finding missing persons to combatting the racist foundations of law enforcement bureaucrats, proper media attention could revolutionize how we communicate with our government.

In the words of Huey P. Newton, "There were enough laws on the books to permit Black people to deal with all their problems, but the laws were not enforced" (110). The pieces to social reform do exist in this country, but they will not be put into the proper place by those currently in charge, as that would upset the power vacuum that keeps them in charge. Through the mass social education available through independent media available to the public, we, as a united people, could hold the institutions around us responsible for their actions and demand an end to the injustices inflicted upon our marginalized countrymen by the judicial system.



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