

When They See Us: Thirty Years Since the Central Park Five Case *Improving Media Coverage of Black Men and Boys*

May 2019

This memo provides tips and resources to people advocating for fuller and more accurate reporting on African-American boys, men, and families, and reducing bias and stereotyping in media coverage. It accompanies the release of the film *When They See Us* and marks 30 years since the Central Park Five case. **The film and 30-year anniversary present important opportunities to advocate for improvements in reporting and mass communications, as well as equal justice.**

The Central Park Five case involved the assault and rape of a White female jogger and the wrongful arrest and conviction of four African-American and one Latinx teenagers—Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Yusef Salaam, Kharey Wise, and Raymond Santana. The young men spent between six and 13 years in prison before being exonerated in 2002 when another man confessed to the crime.

Created by Ava DuVernay for Netflix, *When They See Us* depicts the story of the Central Park Five and highlights how biased media coverage and harmful stereotypes contributed to the young men's arrest, public vilification, and unjust incarceration.

What's at Stake?

As the film *When They See Us* makes clear, improving media portrayals and coverage of Black boys, men, and families is critical because the stakes are so high. Media coverage powerfully shapes the ability of individuals and communities to receive fair and equal justice. Politicians, prosecutors, police, juries, and everyday people are influenced not only by the facts reported in stories, but also by the images, labels, framing, and narratives that those stories convey.

A large body of research (discussed later in this memo) finds a persistent trend of distorted media depictions of Black men and boys that contributes to negative

Tips for Improving Coverage

The Opportunity Agenda recommends these strategies when advocating for improved media coverage and depictions of Black men, boys, and families:

- **Call for Full and Accurate Reporting**, rather than just positive depictions.
- **Call Out Patterns *and* Problems.** Identify systemic blind spots and distortions as well as problematic stories, images, and language. Track coverage trends, as well as differences in reporting between journalists and outlets.
- **Highlight the Research.** Lift up the many research findings on distorted coverage and its harmful effects.
- **Point to Positive Examples.** Be ready with real-world examples of full and accurate coverage that can serve as positive examples to be emulated.
- **Prioritize Decisionmakers.** Engage editors, producers, corporate ownership, and advertisers who have the power to make systemic changes.
- **Demand Diversity.** Greater diversity in all roles within news organizations and companies helps to foster fuller and more nuanced coverage and reduce stereotyping.
- **Organize, Organize, Organize!** Online and traditional organizing and mobilization can move media gatekeepers to action.

stereotypes, inequitable treatment, and unequal opportunity in areas ranging from employment, to education, to policing and sentencing.

Help Improve Media Coverage

There is much that we can do together to improve media coverage of African-American boys and men, as well as of other communities that are often marginalized or caricatured in media coverage. Here are seven tips for making a difference:

1. **Call for Full and Accurate Reporting.** Most journalists are wary of demands for positive or negative coverage, which they see as conflicting with their proper role. But most aspire to report on stories fairly, accurately, and without bias. Most news outlets, moreover, seek to report fully on the issues, communities, and people whom they cover, especially across multiple stories.

In pushing for improved reporting, focus on a standard of full and accurate reporting. For example, the American Society of News Editors Statement of Principles states that “[g]ood faith with the reader is the foundation of good journalism. Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly.” Remind editors and producers that demands for fair presentation, elimination of bias, accuracy and context are, in fact, demands that they live up to their own articulated values.

2. **Monitor and Discuss Coverage Over Time.** Identify systemic blind spots and distortions as well as problematic stories, images, and language. While individual problem stories should be called out, patterns of bias or distortion are easiest to see when looking at multiple stories over time. Repetition of tropes and stereotypes also causes the greatest harm. Review multiple stories with an eye toward trends like over-association with violence, descriptions of neighborhoods and communities, and the context that is or is not provided. Get specific about different outlets and journalists, noting differences in their reporting.

3. **Highlight the Research.** Many media gatekeepers are still unaware of the large body of research on media coverage trends. In advocating for improved local coverage, combine your own specific observations with the many research findings on distorted coverage and its harmful effects. A number of organizations regularly produce or commission research on media depictions and other industry metrics, including The Opportunity Agenda; the American Society of News Editors; the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy; and the Columbia Journalism Review.

4. **Point to Positive Examples.** Be ready with real-world examples of full and accurate coverage that can serve as positive examples to be emulated. In addition to pointing out distortions and problematic trends, it’s important to identify and—where appropriate—to praise exemplary coverage and best practices. Many outlets track positive and negative social media comments, and all take note of direct audience feedback. In addition, providing positive examples from their peer institutions can both provide practical guidance and spark friendly competition from other outlets.

5. **Prioritize Decisionmakers.** Engage editors, producers, corporate ownership, and advertisers who have the power to make systemic changes. While news ombudspersons and community liaisons can be a good starting point, it's frequently necessary to demand meetings and action from more powerful decisionmakers and gatekeepers. The successful campaigns to oust biased media figures like Bill O'Reilly and Lou Dobbs by targeting their advertisers show that mass campaigns to demand fair reporting can be successful.

6. **Demand Diversity.** Greater diversity in all roles within news organizations and companies helps to foster fuller and more nuanced coverage and reduce stereotyping. Five decades ago, the Kerner Commission, appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson to examine the cause of racial strife in America's cities, concluded that the lack of diversity in newsrooms was partly responsible for the pernicious stereotypes, neglect, and discrimination that led to the era's urban uprisings: the Commission declared that "the journalistic profession has been shockingly backward in seeking out, hiring, and promoting Negroes." It added that "the press has too long basked in a white world looking out of it, if at all, with white men's eyes and white perspective. That is no longer good enough. The painful process of readjustment that is required of the American news media must begin now."¹ Yet, in 2017, for example, only 16.6% of journalists at daily newspapers were people of color, whereas the U.S. population was more than 37% non-white. Representation in broadcast media is similarly abysmal, and diversity of media ownership is still worse.

Pressing for greater diversity throughout the industry, though a tough and lengthy slog, is crucial to long-term improvement of coverage. One step is demanding that media organization make public the (anonymous) demographic breakdowns of staff and leadership that most are already required to collect under federal law. Transparency and accountability regarding proactive diversity efforts are crucial, as is advocating greater attention to this issue by the Federal Communications Commission, which regulates the industry.

Sample Messages to Media Decisionmakers

In order to deliver a consistent, well-framed message, we recommend structuring opening messages in terms of **Value, Problem, Solution, Action**. In particular, leading with shared values instead of dry facts or hot rhetoric helps start a conversation and provides a foundation to transition into more complex messages.

Value: Principles of accuracy, impartiality, and fair play are critical. They are also core to the journalism profession. The American Society of News Editors' Statement of Principles, for example, requires that "[e]very effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly."

¹ Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968).

Problem: But a decade of research² shows that too many news organizations are falling short of that standard when it comes to coverage of African-American men and boys. Trends include over-representing Black males in stories about crime, violence, and poverty— far beyond their actual association with those problems—and under-representation in their roles as fathers, workers, and problem solvers. Those patterns paint a picture of Black males that is inaccurate, biased, and harmful, contributing to racial stereotypes, discrimination, and other barriers.

Solution: Journalists and editors must strive for greater intentionality, accuracy and authenticity in how they are depicting the people featured in their coverage. They should provide information not only on the stories of individuals, but also on the systems that these individuals have – or don't have – access to. Just as individual stories must be fair and accurate, patterns of distorted reporting must trigger changes in story assignment, reporting, and editing practices. Greater in-depth reporting on systemic obstacles, prevention, and success stories are notably missing and important.

Action: Contact journalists and editorial boards and push them to learn more about how media portrayals impact Black male outcomes. Tell them that they should work to provide unbiased representation of the stories they cover. Watch *When They See Us* and have a dialogue about how the media portrayals then, and now, are impacting perceptions of Black men and boys such as the Central Park 5.

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Value: Our country's population is becoming increasingly diverse. If broadcasters want to compete for audiences in a more diverse America, their programming has to both reflect and respect our nation's diverse communities; their hopes, aspirations, struggles, and experiences.

Problem: After studying programming over many months, we're not seeing adequately representative depictions of African-American men and boys. Black male characters can tend to be more often depicted engaging in anti-social, dysfunctional, and violent behavior than other groups, and more so than in reality as well. That's irresponsible and harmful, and it's also bad business for any network struggling to build an audience in the 21st century.

Solution: Balance and fairness are critical in representation of *all* people, most primarily in how people of color, particularly Black men and boys, are

² [Media Portrayals and Black Male Outcomes: Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys](#)

depicted. Show the spectrum and fullness of the lives of Black males, just as is done with White characters.

Action: Call on networks to update Broadcast Standards and Practices systems to periodically review, identify, and avoid harmful stereotypes and one-dimensional portrayals as themes in programming.

The Research and the Central Park Five

Stereotypes and popular myths. Distorted media coverage and portrayals have contributed to the perception that Black men and boys should be viewed as threats and sources of violence. Our research shows that Black men and boys are more likely to be depicted as threatening, and news outlets are more likely to depict Black men and boys as committing crimes when compared to their arrest rates. These media stories contribute the myth of Black criminality contrary to what research shows.

For example, in 1989, the defendants in the Central Park 5 case were routinely labeled “a wolf pack” and worse. Donald Trump took out newspaper ads calling for restoration of the death penalty. And then-mayor Ed Koch routinely referred to the young men as “monsters.” The media picked up these examples, and others, countless times.

Systemic bias in the criminal system. As noted in our report on the topic, the “media world can be mistaken for the real world.”³ Distorted media coverage contributes to systemic bias. For example, when members of the public serve on juries, where they are expected to make objective judgments about the quality of evidence, media stories about Black men and boys as threatening criminals inform their perceptions of Black men and boys who are accused of crime, even when there is evidence of injustice in their prosecutions. Media stories shape popular perception and contribute to implicit biases that suggest that White people are more likely to be innocent victims and Black people are more likely to be guilty of crimes. These perceptions help to explain the persistent racial disparities in all areas of the criminal system, including unjust policing, overzealous prosecution, and harsh sentencing practices.

RESEARCH SUMMARY

The Opportunity Agenda examined perceptions of and by African-American men and boys and their relationship to the media, including (1) a social science literature review (2) a meta-analysis of existing public opinion research and (3) an analysis of black men's media consumption. The research revealed important trends, including:

- The media over-represent black males in depictions of violence, crime, and poverty.
- Important dimensions of black males' lives are largely ignored, such as fatherhood and work.
- Depictions of the systemic barriers facing members of this group are largely absent.
- Distorted media depictions can lead to negative attitudes toward African-American males, such as increased public support for punitive approaches and tolerance for racial disparities.
- They can also affect African-American males' self-perceptions and lead to diminished self-esteem.

To read the full report, go to:
<http://bit.ly/black-men-boys>

³ Black Men Report at 14.

Justifying inequality. Unfair media coverage may be used as an excuse for systemic inequality in our criminal justice system. Some commentators may claim that racial disparities are justified and are a natural consequence because they believe that Black men and boys are inherently more criminal. The racial disparities appear inevitable and a likely consequence of inferiority—rather than the result of historic inequality in this country—because biased media coverage is consistent with ensuing and persistent racial bias.

This justification was especially pronounced in the coverage of the Central Park 5 case, such as in Pete Hamill’s April 23, 1989 piece in the *NY Post*, which painted a menacing backdrop that would color the coverage of the defendants, and the case, to come:

“They were coming downtown from a world of crack, welfare, guns, knives, indifference and ignorance. They were coming from a land with no fathers ... They were coming from the anarchic province of the poor.”

Conclusion

As *When They See Us* makes clear, improving the quality of media coverage of Black men and boys is critical because the stakes are so high. Distorted media coverage and portrayals contribute to the perception that Black men and boys should be viewed as threats and burdens instead of valued and participating members of our society. Those perceptions play out in our justice systems, in employment, in education, and in other contexts that are crucial to opportunity, health, and happiness.

Through full and accurate reporting, journalists can counter these trends and be part of the solution. Just as individual stories must be fair and accurate, we hope that patterns of distorted reporting will trigger changes in story assignment, reporting, and editing practices.

The Opportunity Agenda is a social justice communication lab. We collaborate with leaders to move hearts and minds, driving lasting policy and culture change. We bring the inspirational voices of opportunity and possibility to social justice issues through communication expertise and creative engagement.

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