

Media Representation of the Central Park Five
in New York City

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Introduction

When most recall the infamous case of the Central Park Five, we think of the injustices these individuals faced. The wrongfully convicted individuals were, Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise. The teens were accused of rape and assault in April of 1989. Wise, who was only 16 at the time, was tried as an adult and faced 12 years in jail. Salaam, Richardson, McCray, and Santana faced 5-7 years in jail. In 2002 DNA testing proved they were innocent and not connected to the crime which resulted in their exoneration. No one can replace the years of childhood these youth lost for simply hanging out with their friends in Central Park. So how did this even happen, and why did they plead guilty when they knew they did not commit this heinous crime?

The young men confessed to this crime due to strong coercion from the New York Police Department. False confessions are a huge issue within the juvenile justice field as they do not understand and recognize their rights. Various issues went wrong in this case, but this essay will focus on how the media represented them. I believe that The Central Park 5 case drew a lot of media attention and allowed authoritative figures to continue pushing the false narrative portraying Black Americans as perpetrators of crime. These individuals wanted more policing in New York City, and thus, the story they pushed supported their agenda. Therefore my research will view media representations from the beginning of the conviction to the present. There was a lot of racial tension during the conviction period of the Central Park Five, and it would be interesting to see how this case was portrayed over time. The

treatment of minority youth and the justice system has always been terrible due to the historic racism and discrimination of these groups. This research will allow us to understand the power of media representation and its impact on court cases.

Current Research on Media Representation and the Central Park Five

The article, “Transforming the Central Park Jogger into the Central Park Five: Shifting Narratives of Innocence and changing media discourse in the Attack on the Central Park Jogger, 1989–2014” by Greg Stratton finds six stages of media discourses. The stages are, initial crime reporting, first contact with the justice system, finalizing criminality, contesting the system, and narrative of innocence. I find establishing stages helpful in understanding how the media discussed this case. Stanton continues his theory by discussing the evolution of media he claims that, “A diversified media landscape and the emergence of social media have the potential to develop competing and parallel narratives. Social media, like the digitization of the newspapers, offer further opportunities to explore the development of narratives and the public response towards the wrongfully convicted” (Stratton, 2015). i Social media has progressed to being a popular news source for most individuals. Today popularized media is represented digitally removing the reliance of printed newspapers. Current research has made it clear that media does have the strength to alter public perceptions regarding a case. The evolution of social media has revolutionized this analysis as individuals can receive news faster as it is more advanced. The current research lacks information on how the unique case of the exonerated five was represented in the media

and how changing narratives can impact public perceptions.

Black Journalism

An alternate study focuses on the New York Amsterdam News and its portrayal of the Central Park Jogger case. The Amsterdam is a Black-owned newspaper with the purpose of protecting civil rights within the Black community. This study found that prior mainstream research has not accurately reported the tragic series of events and created a racist worldview and a false narrative of the victim, heroes, and villains (Beardsley and Teresa, 2017). I agree with this research as these minority youths were spoken of negatively in the media due to societal attitudes, perceptions, and biases surrounding race during the time. The recency of this research displays how racism in the United States has evolved. It also reveals that this research is developing and essential to the framework of media portrayal. This study also promotes that the incorporation of Black journalism when analyzing mainstream American journalism in the future is important to fully interpret a case (Beardsley and Teresa, 2017). I believe the research done after this case did not focus on the Black Journalism perspective on purpose. The persuaded public thought that these children were criminals due to the color of their skin, severe crime, and arrest. The case did not have proper proof to convict these children, and the false confessions made did not assist their case. The New Amsterdam referred to this event as a “legal lynching”, and this is something that many other platforms refrained from admitting.

Findings

I began my research by observing recent media discussions on the Central Park Five. The

New York Amsterdam News has an article from 2013 titled, “Ken Burns: De Blasio will settle ‘Central Park Five’ case”, by Stephon Johnson. It discusses the impact of the Central Park Five on our society and Ken Burns’ role in the case. Burns created a documentary surrounding the case and sparked an uproar in social media responses regarding justice for these people. The article also discusses the need for criminal justice reform and the effects of racial bias. The article also discussed important information regarding the fame of their case that I was unaware of. Yuseef Saalam discusses how Mayor Bloomberg had worked at the same company as the Central Park Jogger and how this impacted their settlement. Salaam says, “He was trying to drag this out, hoping something would happen to us. But the whole city saw, and what he failed to realize was that the more he held out, the more positive history continues to be written” (Johnson, 2013). It took the Mayor elect-Bill de Blasio to say that he would settle this case (Johnson, 2013).

In opposition, another article from the New York Times entitled, “Youths Rape and Beat Central Park Jogger” from 1989 discusses the details of this incident and those involved. The author provides a detailed description of the crime scene and the incident itself. Chief of Detectives, Robert Colangelo gave the Times a few comments concerning this article. He believed, “‘It would be wrong to characterize the group as a gang,’ Chief Colangelo said. ‘But, he added, it is likely the youths know one another’” (Wolff, 1989). He

added, "They went into the park to do some mischief, and this mischief led to this tragedy," he said. "It's safe to jog in the park. Certainly, there are precautions that should be taken" (Wolff, 1989).

More recently in 2019 a newspaper article titled, "Trump Will Not Apologize for Calling for Death Penalty Over Central Park Five" discusses the former President's comments in 1989. When asked about his comments in 2019, "President Trump said on Tuesday that he would not apologize for his harsh comments in 1989 about the Central Park Five, the five black and Latino men who as teenagers were wrongly convicted of the brutal rape of a jogger in New York City" (Ransom, 2019). He added to this by saying that former prosecutor Linda Fairstein who ran the sex crimes unit and others believed that the case should not have been settled" (Ransom, 2019). His comments were made when the incident first happened and the teens were arrested while the victim was still in a coma. Trump said, "I want to hate these murderers and I always will," Mr. Trump wrote in the May 1989 ad. "I am not looking to psychoanalyze or understand them, I am looking to punish them" (Ransom, 2019). He also expressed that he wanted these youths to face the death penalty (Ransom, 2019). Barry Scheck who is a founder of the Innocence Project and worked on assisting the youths wrongfully charged shared his thoughts about Trump's statement. "'It's shocking and deeply troubling that after all of these years, he would not have recognized that by calling for the reinstatement of the death penalty, it contributed to an atmosphere that deprived these men of a fair trial,' Mr. Scheck said" (Ransom, 2019).

The final article I looked at came from 1990 and is titled, “Judge Rejects Defense Claim In Central Park Jogger Case”. The article discusses how the judge permitted Santana, McCray, and Saalam to receive interrogations without a parent in the room and the judge argued that the law does not exactly require parents to be present for the questioning of the three youthful defendants (Sullivan, 1990). The author goes further by describing, “The ruling could damage the case of Raymond Santana, whose lawyer had repeatedly challenged the incriminating statements made by his client on the ground that his father was not present when detectives first questioned him” (Sullivan, 1990). Santana’s lawyer Peter Rivera, claimed that once Santana’s father went to get pizza is when he admitted to being a part of the attack on the Central Park Jogger (Sullivan, 1990). Rivera also strongly argued that Santana was questioned for hours with his grandmother in the room who did not speak English (Sullivan, 1990). Judge Justice Galligan described to the jury that “You may consider the age and the maturity of the defendants, and the time and length of their questioning or any promises made. The fact that a parent was not present during the questioning of a juvenile does not automatically mean that a statement was involuntary” (Sullivan, 1990). In response to this, a spokesperson to the district attorney claimed that “The law is whatever Justice Galligan says it is” (Sullivan, 1990). Manhattan prosecutors uphold that the policy of the police is to make all efforts to have parents present during questioning to ensure that the charges are upheld in court (Sullivan, 1990). “They also said that in recent years, with an increase in juveniles accused of violent crimes like murder and rape, the courts have allowed more leeway in their interpretation of the laws on handling youths” (Sullivan, 1990). The article also mentions that Santana and

McCray admitted to taking part in the attack and rape of the jogger via video statement (Sullivan, 1990). In addition, “In a statement that the police said Mr. Salaam had given but never signed, he admitted striking the woman twice with a pipe and grabbing her breasts” (Sullivan, 1990).

Discussion

After reviewing present and past literature it is clear that the media was used to coerce public interpretation of this case. Beginning with the article, “Ken Burns: De Blasio will settle ‘Central Park Five’ case” New York Amsterdam News does a great job of explaining the case. This article also pushed for criminal justice reform which was lacking in other ‘mainstream’ articles regarding this case. When I refer to mainstream articles I think of the New York Times, as a large population received their news from this newspaper. Amsterdam is important to mention as it relates to New York’s Black population which is smaller than the population of those that read the New York Times.

Politics

My research also made it evident that politics also played a large role in this case. I was especially surprised to learn in this article that Bloomberg, the mayor at the time of this incident, did not want to settle this case. Bloomberg mainly did not want to settle as he worked in the same company as the jogger. Most likely the former mayor did not want to sever any bridges with his old workplace and felt forced to go as far as not providing justice to the wrongfully accused.

It took the actions of the mayor-elect (at the time), Bill De Blasio to say that he would seek to settle the case and publicly recognize this injustice. Politics should not even play such a large role when discussing a case of injustice as it involves morals and not government decisions. Political agendas have the power to dangerously affect the outcomes of a case. This article displays how the opinion of these authoritative figures can sway the public, as the mayor-elect could have made this claim to improve his ratings in certain areas of the city. I noticed that the articles written after the public became aware of the incident due to documentaries like Ken Burns' film about the injustices of this case, the media began to side with the individuals. It is interesting to view this medial switch from 1989 when the incident first occurred as most believed that the minority children were guilty.

Politics is also discussed in the article, "Trump Will Not Apologize for Calling for Death Penalty Over Central Park Five". This was an alarming read as the former President, Donald Trump directly stated that this case should not have been settled and said, "I want to hate these murderers and I always will" (Ransom, 2019). For Trump to hold such a high authority and state this claim is very damaging to the case. Many believe a lot of what certain politicians claim to be true, so this statement can change the public perception regarding these individuals. It is purely factual that the justice system has failed them and to publicly not agree allows others to believe an unjust reality. The media using politics to discuss important cases shows the influence it can have on readers. It is unfortunate that only ten years ago, individuals believed that the Central Park Five should be charged despite their proven innocence. I found that most recent articles discuss the injustices of this case, but the older articles around the time of the conviction

did not.

The Corrupt Criminal Justice System

While observing one of the older articles, “Youths Rape and Beat Central Park Jogger” from 1989 described the case from the police's perspective. It provided a detailed timeline of events regarding the attack and rape of the jogger. The comments made by the chief were particularly concerning as he indirectly refers to the group as friends. Most likely because these black and brown children were “in the same area” as the crime. It was also recognizable that he referred to these children as creating mischief. Again, just because these youth happen to have been in a large park around the same time as an attack does not mean they are up to mischief. It reminds me of false claims created by white women during slavery that were inaccurate and led to the deaths of many black slaves. This form of media displays how young minorities were treated and thought of during this time. The comments from the chief were subjective and intertwined these children into the crime that was underhanded by the New York City Police Department.

Finally, the article, “Judge Rejects Defense Claim In Central Park Jogger Case” reveals the legal injustices these children underwent. Beginning with the title, it is straightforward and eye-catching in the sense that most are looking for updates regarding this case. Many are under the impression that the Central Park Five was guilty so glancing at this title would intrigue these readers. The article discusses that the Judge did not remotely care that Santana was questioned without a parent and promoted to the Jury that it was not a part of the law. I found it interesting that the New York Times also added a quote claiming that whatever the Judge says is

final, from a spokesperson of the Manhattan Attorney General. It persuades the audience to believe that this interrogation was okay and because these children admitted to the crime, it did not matter anyway.

Reflections

Overall, these findings reveal the details of injustice faced by, Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise. As the media shifted the focus of this case from politicians to the New York Justice system, it is clear that the media has misrepresented this case. In a perfect world these articles would have spoken about the wrongdoings of the police department and politicians within this period and now, but instead of just focusing on receiving justice for these youths the perspective was constantly shifted. This shift could have allowed readers to misinterpret the case as a whole and created a general lack of understanding and sympathy for these wrongly convicted individuals.

Conclusion

Although justice was received by the Central Park Five this research provides an analysis of the media representation of their case. This research revealed that there are stereotypes are imbedded in all forms of media, this fact displays the dire need for criminal justice reform and juvenile justice. Future research should look into media representations of other noteworthy cases like Emmett Till where his guilty accusation led to his brutal murder. The justice system was created to serve and protect individuals but has failed for those who were proven innocent after the initial verdict. Also,

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researchers should observe how the media can control public perception and the downsides to this. In regards to the Central Park Five, more research should be done on how the youth interrogation process needs to be improved to avoid false confessions. The media has misrepresented this case, and proper representation could have led to a quicker justice process, but instead played into the narrative that minority youths created mischief and committed a crime while not even being within the same area of Central Park.

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