

# Framing Ferguson: Fox News and the construction of US racism

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*Abstract:* In August 2014, police officer Darren Wilson shot unarmed Michael Brown, sparking months of protests in Ferguson, Missouri and other American cities and capturing worldwide media attention. This article presents a critical discourse analysis of Fox News Channel's segments from August 2014 to March 2015. It systematically uncovers themes and larger discourses within five major areas: blaming black victims in the characterisation of Michael Brown and his shooting death, blaming black leaders, blaming the black community, attacking the black protesters and their movement against police brutality, and discrediting attempts to address issues of racism as the 'politics of racial division'. Several major emergent discourses include: the criminal black (wo)man, blaming the victim, projection of racism on minorities, denial and counterattack, minimisation of racism, redistributing responsibility, personal responsibility, and deadbeat dads and unwed mothers. The author argues that Fox News in perpetuating these racist discourses helps to obstruct the addressing of racism in the criminal justice system.

*Keywords:* black protest, blaming the victim, critical discourse analysis, Darren Wilson, entitlement culture, Ferguson, Fox News, Michael Brown

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*Race & Class*

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10.1177/0306396816685030 journals.sagepub.com/home/rac

The controlled press, the white press, inflames the white public against Negroes. The police are able to use it to paint the Negro community as a criminal element. The police are able to use the press to make the white public think that 90% or 99% of the Negroes in the Negro community are criminals...

Malcolm X, Los Angeles, 5 May 1962

On 9 August 2014, Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson shot Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Given that Brown was an unarmed black teenager shot dead by a white police officer, the community immediately protested the shooting as police brutality. The shooting sparked months of protests in Ferguson, capturing widespread media attention on both the national and global stage. In the years since, Ferguson remained relevant as it sparked an ongoing process of protest and debate over policing of people of colour globally. Within two years, police violence claimed the lives of Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile and many others, while cities like Baltimore and Milwaukee saw unrest similar to Ferguson and protesters around the world remained steadfast in their solidarity movements against injustice.

Protests in Ferguson were met by intense law enforcement, including the use of military equipment, tear gas, rubber bullets and the arrests of peaceful protesters, outside observers and journalists.<sup>1</sup> Such tactics ultimately spurred discussion about police militarisation, relations between the police and the black community and the use of deadly force against unarmed black people. The event has been considered a flashpoint in race relations in the United States. While social media lit up with accounts from Ferguson, mainstream media lagged in its coverage, growing only once the events in Ferguson grew more tense and thus deemed worthy of being 'news'. As more reports of the police response to the protests surfaced, mainstream media turned their attention to America's heartland in the sleepy August news cycle. Fox News Channel was one such media outlet. Owned by Rupert Murdoch of the News Corp empire and considered a conservative outlet, Fox News presented much of its coverage through a prism of underlying ideologies, specifically those of white supremacy and racial capitalism. This study applies Norman Fairclough's method of examining a social wrong in its semiotic context, identifying obstacles to addressing that wrong and whether society 'needs' it,<sup>2</sup> and presents a critical discourse analysis of Fox News Channel's coverage of the events in Ferguson. Segments have been selected and analysed from the network's various news, current affairs and news/talk show programmes from August 2014 until March 2015, covering the initial August shooting and protests, through the November grand jury announcement that there would be no indictment against Wilson, to the March announcements regarding the Department of Justice (DOJ) reports on the shooting and the Ferguson Police Department.

Fox News was chosen because a recent national poll revealed it was the most trusted cable news network.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the poll shows that a majority of

Republican voters consider the network the most trustworthy as well. It bears noting that a 2012 poll shows that Fox News' viewers are the most uninformed Americans, more uninformed than those who watch no news at all.<sup>4</sup> Commenting on the power of the media, Hall argues:

the media construct for us a definition of what *race* [*sic*] is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the 'problem of race' is understood to be. They help to classify out the world in terms of the categories of race. The media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race. They are also one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed, and elaborated.<sup>5</sup>

The media thus interprets events involving issues of race and racism, utilising discourses that construct what happened, why, and what it means. Analysis of Fox News' coverage uncovers a number of important themes that serve larger, white supremacist discourses and ideologies. My analysis focuses on five major areas: blaming black victims in the characterisation of Michael Brown and his shooting; blaming black leaders; blaming the black community; attacking the black protesters and their movement against police brutality; and, discrediting attempts to address issues of racism as the 'politics of racial division'.

### **Blaming the black victim**

The first area of analysis addresses Fox's portrayal of Michael Brown, much of which centred on his appearance, emphasising his physicality. Writing an op-ed for the website *Fox News Latino* soon after the shooting, Geraldo Rivera describes the encounter as a 'six-year veteran with a spotless record is facing a belligerent 6'4" 250 pound kid'.<sup>6</sup> He highlights Brown's stature, calling him a 'big kid' and argues that 'efforts by activists to portray the unarmed teen as a choirboy maliciously murdered by a racist cop are misguided, unhelpful and untrue'.<sup>7</sup> As a guest on news programme and morning talk show *Fox and Friends*, Linda Chavez discusses her op-ed in the tabloid *New York Post*, in which she argued against viewing Brown as an 'unarmed teen'.<sup>8</sup> With *Fox and Friends* putting the headline screen caption 'Media bias: is "unarmed teen" description misleading' below her, Chavez remarks:

this mantra of the unarmed black teenager shot by a white cop. You know, that description in and of itself actually colours the way in which we look at this story. We're talking about an 18-year-old man who is six foot four and weighs almost three hundred pounds, who is videotaped just moments before the confrontation with a police officer strong arming an employee and robbing a convenience store.<sup>9</sup>

As Chavez is speaking, *Fox and Friends* shows footage of Brown in the convenience store, pushing the store clerk, alongside a picture of Officer Darren Wilson,

smiling in uniform. Both Rivera and Chavez emphasise the appearance of Brown, painting his appearance as a mitigating factor in his shooting death. By calling him 'violent' and 'belligerent', both evade the fact that Brown was unarmed.

In the following months, grand jury proceedings examined evidence to determine whether or not to indict Wilson in the shooting death of Brown. Once St Louis County prosecutor Bob McCulloch released the grand jury's decision to not indict Wilson, Fox News trained its cameras on Ferguson once again. Much of the coverage devotes attention to Wilson's account, presenting it as fact. Wilson's testimony presents a narrative in which he again emphasises the size and power of Brown. In one passage of his testimony, Wilson recollects:

I tried to hold his right arm and use my left hand to get out and have some type of control and not be trapped in my car any more. And when I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan ... Hulk Hogan, that's just how big he felt and how small I felt just from grasping his arm.<sup>10</sup>

Wilson uses hyperbolic language to compare his stature ('a 6'4", just a shy under 6'4" ... 210-ish [pound]'<sup>11</sup> man) with Brown's ('289 pounds ... [6'5"]').<sup>12</sup> Wilson portrays himself as a child, without any control, compared to Brown who was of the same height. Fox News uncritically accepts Wilson's account. On news programme *The Kelly File*, screened in November, host Megyn Kelly introduces Wilson's account by focusing on police-community conflict:

Look at this melee here in New York City ... Some throwing punches at the cops. Look at this. Unbelievable. And now tonight for the first time we hear from Officer Wilson, that he felt he had to shoot Michael Brown because he believed that Michael Brown would kill him. Watch.<sup>13</sup>

Kelly then airs Wilson's appearance on ABC News in which he presented his 'Hulk-child' story again: 'I mean, the way I've described it, it was like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan, that's how big this man was.'<sup>14</sup> By showing footage of clashes between the police and protesters, Fox constructs a context for Wilson's account, one in which police have to use force because of the threat posed to them. After airing the clip, Kelly and her guest, former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani, have the following conversation:

- Giuliani (G):* Also every time that Mr Brown is described, is described as a young man, and people forget he had committed a robbery ...
- Kelly (K):* Well, one of the things that jumped out at me in this interview is how young Darren Wilson seems, he's 28-years-old.
- G:* He's a kid.
- K:* He was ten years older than Michael Brown, but he's not some seasoned cop who's been on the beat for 30 years. He, too, is a young man.

- G: Yes.
- K: Who found himself in a very dangerous situation that was not of his own making.
- G: This should be described as a police officer who shot a man who had committed a robbery. It shouldn't be described as a police officer who shot some innocent young boy. He shot a man who had just committed a robbery.<sup>15</sup>

Supporting Wilson's 'Hulk-child' narrative, Giuliani and Kelly lament the youth of Wilson, he is 'young', 'a kid' – lending credence to his view of himself as a child in comparison to Brown, despite his ten years on the teenager. Brown's youth is simultaneously undermined by Giuliani and Kelly who call him a 'young man'. Giuliani concludes that Brown was not a 'young boy', but a 'man' by virtue of having committed a robbery, thus lining up with Rivera's and Chavez's assertions that Brown's behaviour mitigates Wilson shooting someone unarmed.

On news programme and talk show *America's Newsroom*, Fox News contributor Mark Fuhrman, the former Los Angeles Police Department detective convicted of perjury after his testimony in the O. J. Simpson trial, depicts Wilson as the victim, proclaiming 'Michael Brown was *the* suspect in this case and Officer Wilson was *the* victim [emphasis his].'<sup>16</sup> He further claims that '[Wilson's] career has been *stolen* from him because somebody targeted *him*, not the reverse [emphasis his].'<sup>17</sup> In addition to the 'child' theme, Fuhrman articulates another regarding Wilson: that of the 'victim of the criminal black man'. This discussion further negates Brown's victimhood by portraying Wilson as the 'real' victim. On the business news and talk show *Your World with Neil Cavuto*, guest Reverend Jesse Lee Peterson further assigns responsibility for Brown's death to Brown himself, saying:

Michael Brown is dead because of Michael Brown. Michael Brown is dead because he had failing parents, who were not together and raised him in the right way. When he decided that he was gonna rob a convenience store, attack the clerk, go out into the street and attack a police officer, Michael Brown decided that day that he was ready to die.<sup>18</sup>

Peterson goes on to assert that black leaders know this 'truth' but refuse to admit it. By blaming Brown for his death, Peterson essentially removes Wilson's agency, framing the shooting as a series of decisions made not by Wilson, who pulled the trigger, but Brown and even his parents.

Sean Hannity, host of political talk show *Hannity*, speaking with Darryl Parks, attorney for Brown's family, casts doubt on the shooting's racial implications. Parks takes issue with Wilson's language in his grand jury testimony. Wilson testified that 'he looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked.'<sup>19</sup> Responding to Parks' citation of 'demonic', Hannity questions the assertion: 'demonic? That's racial?'<sup>20</sup> Laughter in the studio pervades much of the conversation, with Hannity

at one point telling Parks that 'everybody in the studio's laughing ... because that's so absurd', in response to one of Parks' earlier assertions.<sup>21</sup>

All such coverage draws up a discourse of the criminal black man that emphasises the large physicality of Brown and effectively dehumanises him. From Wilson's initial description to its reiteration by Fox personalities, Brown is stripped of his humanity by being diminished to a demon, an inhuman state. (This of course chimes with studies of how the media similarly react to other stories involving crime and black youth and adults, often using metaphors to dehumanise black youth.<sup>22</sup>) In addition to the use of metaphors like 'demon' and 'Hulk Hogan' (evoking imagery from *The Incredible Hulk* of comics to the enormous World Wrestling Federation performer), Fox News finds more subtle ways to deny Brown's position as an unarmed teenager and reduce his status as a victim.

### **Blaming black leaders**

Another emergent theme in the coverage relates to Fox News' reaction to the words and actions of black leaders. Many Fox News hosts slip in references to the President being on vacation once the events in Ferguson escalate. Guest-hosting the news and talk show *The O'Reilly Factor*, Laura Ingraham repeatedly belittles US President Barack Obama with phrases like: 'Our presidential pundit ... interrupted his vacation', 'the leader of the free world with sagging approval numbers jumping into another local criminal justice situation' and 'there is supposed to be a difference between being President of United States and a liberal commentator on Salon.com'.<sup>23</sup>

Another prevalent note in Fox's coverage is the depiction of Obama and US Attorney General Eric Holder as siding with protesters over law enforcement. Though Obama also admonishes violence against the police, *Fox and Friends* only shows video of his statement in which he chides the police's use of excessive force.<sup>24</sup> On *The O'Reilly Factor with Laura Ingraham*, Ingraham refers to a 'Talking Point Memo' on the screen, reading 'these Obama administration interjections [by Obama and Holder] have stoked racial discord in America and sown more distrust between minorities and some local law enforcement'.<sup>25</sup> After saying that Obama 'fuels' racial tensions, guest David Clarke, Sheriff of Milwaukee County, asserts that 'I think when [Obama] called for calm after the rioting started, I believe it was done with a wink and a nod'.<sup>26</sup> All of these statements implicitly blame the President for the unrest, holding him responsible for endorsing a climate of unrest and violence.

Fox personas similarly implicate Attorney General Eric Holder in the unrest. Fox guest Chavez's *New York Post* op-ed headline read 'Eric the Arsonist: Holder Fans Ferguson Flames'.<sup>27</sup> Another Fox guest, Ron Hosko, a former assistant director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and President of the Law Enforcement Legal Defense Fund, likens Holder to a lyncher: 'Mr Holder, it's time to cut Darren Wilson down from that tree'.<sup>28</sup> Such imagery equates Holder with a murderer,

determining that the African American Attorney General has turned the tables on the predominantly white policing of blacks by stringing up a white police officer. To invoke a lynching, effectively paints the black Attorney General, the top law enforcement officer in the country, as the racist, not white police officers.

After two officers were shot outside the Ferguson Police Department in March 2015, *Fox and Friends*' co-host Steve Doocy opens the show on 12 March by proclaiming 'the new wave of violence comes just one week after Eric Holder vowed to dismantle that city's police department – remember?', airing a clip of Holder saying they will take action 'to ensure that the situation changes [in Ferguson]'. To this, Doocy responds, 'well the situation changed all right – is that what he wanted?'<sup>29</sup> Fox coverage framed the shooting as a result of the DOJ report with the headline screen caption: 'Street justice: police officers shot in wake of DOJ report.'<sup>30</sup> On daytime news and talk show *Outnumbered*, co-host Tantaros goes even further, asserting:

The Department of Justice has been inflaming this ... they couldn't bring charges against Darren Wilson because the physical evidence and Darren Wilson's testimony corroborated and matched up so they *had* [emphasis hers] to do something, because they intervened and they flamed the racial tensions and Eric Holder has proven time again he is an Attorney General for the criminal, by the criminal, and of the criminals in the United States of America.<sup>31</sup>

By repeatedly using words like 'inflame' and 'fuel', Fox's conversations connect Holder's Justice Department to the real fires of Ferguson unrest. They further serve to portray the DOJ's investigation as grasping at straws, as if it only reported on racial discrimination in the Ferguson Police Department as a way of saving face after being unable to charge Wilson. Furthermore, Tantaros paints Holder as an enemy who has thrown in his lot with criminals. On current affairs show *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren*, guest Niger Innis calls Holder Obama's 'consigliere',<sup>32</sup> a term typically associated with the Mafia.

Fox's treatment of black leaders, which fits into the discourse of the criminal black man fuelling violence and riots, and opposing law enforcement, serves to delegitimise black leaders' power and credibility with the public. And the projection of racism on to minorities is, according to Bonilla-Silva, a typical discourse in which white people evade responsibility for racism by accusing minorities of being the real racists.<sup>33</sup> More generally, however, much of the discourse relies on sustained allegations that black leaders are responsible for racial tensions and discord. Fox News engages in 'denial and counterattack', proclaiming it knows the truth behind anti-racism and that anti-racists are the real racists.<sup>34</sup> While using code words (e.g. 'race baiters'<sup>35</sup>) instead of saying outright that black leaders are racist, Fox asserts a series of 'truths': black leaders are stoking racial discord; they are fomenting unrest and violence; they are against law enforcement and on the side of criminals.

### Blaming the black community

From the beginning of its Ferguson coverage, Fox News consistently cited the intraracial aspect of black homicide rates as if this is not similar to trends of intraracial victimisation across other racial groups in the US generally.<sup>36</sup> Within one week of Brown's death, Fox News has turned its attention to 'black-on-black crime', particularly in Chicago.<sup>37</sup> Guest-hosting on *Hannity*, Tantaros interviews Reverend Jesse Jackson, a civil rights activist and former senator, and focuses much of the conversation on black-on-black crime. Tantaros first attacks Jackson by asserting that he and Reverend Al Sharpton, a fellow civil rights activist, fail to address intraracial violence in Chicago. When Jackson attempts to respond that he is engaged in the issues in Chicago, Tantaros immediately cuts him off, saying, 'Why don't we see the same type of outrage from the black community about these young black kids getting gunned down in the streets of Chicago every single day?'<sup>38</sup> Throughout the rest of the conversation, there is much cross-talk between Tantaros and Jackson as Jackson tries to address the issues affecting urban blacks. Tantaros holds Jackson and other black leaders responsible for intraracial violence in the black community by accusing them of not being involved in the community and not caring about such violence.

After the November announcement that Wilson would not be indicted, Fox News once again injected the 'black-on-black crime' theme into its coverage. In a segment with Giuliani, *Fox and Friends* uses several headline screen captions repeatedly referencing 'black-on-black crime', such as 'Not enough outrage: 93% of black victims murdered by same race' and 'Targeting the problem, Giuliani: they need to work on the 93%'.<sup>39</sup> The segment airs a clip of Giuliani arguing with sociologist Dr Michael Eric Dyson in which Giuliani asserts 'the white police officers wouldn't be there if you weren't killing each other'.<sup>40</sup> Giuliani uses 'you' to describe the black community at large and directs this at Dyson, suggesting that Dyson himself is responsible for any presence of violence in black communities. Much of the following discussion centres on the oft-repeated '93 per cent' statistic of black intraracial homicide. Giuliani minimises the issue of police killings of black persons and emphasises the 'black-on-black crime' theme, using menacing language to describe African Americans: 'the danger to a black child in America is not a white police officer – that's going to happen less than 1% of the time. The danger to a black child ... the danger is another black. 93% of the time they're going to be killed by another black.'<sup>41</sup>

On *Fox and Friends*, both hosts similarly minimise the policing-related issues raised by Ferguson in favour of pointing to those raised by Fox guest Sheriff David Clarke in an earlier interview:

*Doocy:* the problems are in the black community unemployment, you gotta look at education, you gotta look at opportunity as well ... those [emphasis his] are the things the President should be worried about.



*Hasselbeck:* The trap of government handouts ... a school system, which has them handcuffed ... to poverty.<sup>42</sup>

Doocy's inflection and language imply that the issues of policing should not be addressed by the President. Hasselbeck further lays blame with the government by invoking the (meagre) welfare state, coded in talk of 'the school system' and 'handouts', as responsible for the events in Ferguson. Hosts Bill O'Reilly and Ingraham, too, deride claims of racism and raise the spectre of entitlement programmes when discussing Ferguson:

*Ingraham (I):* [Obama coming from] the politics of racial division, Eric Holder obviously demonising our immigration laws as racist, voter ID is racist, American society is racist – that's what most people on the left believe, Bill. They want a system of racial spoils in place to level the playing field and so when you start at policy from that point of view, we're kind of an evil country with an evil history of slavery and you gotta make the non-minority people pay as much as possible as often possible, you're gonna have deteriorating race relations and that's just where we are today. [crosstalk] I think a lot of white people are sick of it and a lot of black people are sick of it.

*O'Reilly (O):* Yeah, but the entitlement culture has benefitted a lot of African Americans and why would they think that the race relations are deteriorating? I can see why the whites would.

*I:* ... People like Holder and Obama allow this narrative to continue to get ...

*O:* The grievance narrative ...

*I:* Yeah, it's the grievance culture, it's the system's rigged against you and that's all they hear in school, that's all they hear in history books and meanwhile though the white working class, I think out there, the non-minority working class is like 'wait a second, I'm just trying to get by every day okay, I'm just trying to help my family' and they're kind of sick of it as well.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to sarcastically addressing claims of racism in American society, Ingraham depicts social welfare programmes as 'a system of racial spoils', evoking imagery of conquest wherein African Americans are 'taking' from the white working class. While claiming African Americans play the victim with the 'grievance narrative', Ingraham also relegates racism to a thing of the past by referencing 'history books' and derisively referring to America's 'evil history'.

On *The O'Reilly Factor*, O'Reilly introduces a segment on why grand juries side with the police, in which he declares that fear of black men is reasonable given their disproportionate presence in the incarcerated population. He adds that

problems facing the black community are due to problems in the black community itself:

But most cops try to be fair ... Many politicians are too cowardly to tell you what Talking Points has just stated. They all know the truth. They all know the stats, but they refuse to discuss the core problems: poor education, poor family structure and an attitude of defiance toward law enforcement ... the collapse of the traditional family in African American precincts means fathers are not around, mothers are overwhelmed and parental guidance is scant ... That liberal attitude [demonising the police and not judging personal behaviour] empowers chaotic young people who are not held accountable from a very young age ... when [the regular folks] support the police by turning in violent people, when they speak out against teenage girls becoming pregnant and when they encourage solid family values, that's when the underclass crime problem will begin to subside.<sup>44</sup>

O'Reilly slowly addresses each of these points to present a narrative that blames the black community for police violence. First, he raises the idea of the 'reasonable racist'<sup>45</sup> as he assures Fox viewers that fear of black men is completely reasonable, especially given their overrepresentation in prisons and jails. He then extends this argument, portraying cops as being treated unfairly because they are being fair when they are policing black communities. Giuliani similarly refers to absentee black fathers as the 'real' problem facing the black community and that crime in the black community would be solved by charter schools and black men taking responsibility for their children.<sup>46</sup>

Much of the discussion about the black community centres on 'black-on-black' crime, which fits into the discourse of black criminality. Fox hosts often redirect the discussion from police violence to intraracial violence, effectively substantiating D. T. Goldberg's view that state-sanctioned racial violence is rationalised through robbing victims of their humanity and portraying state perpetrators (i.e. the police) as exceptional.<sup>47</sup> Once again, Fox puts forth the discourse of 'blaming the victim'<sup>48</sup> and 'redistributing responsibility'.<sup>49</sup> American society and its institutions (i.e. the police) are not responsible for police violence, rather, the fault lies with the fractured, dysfunctional black community. Fox essentially distracts from issues of police violence by arguing that the black community is to blame for any police violence because the police are forced to enter black communities.

O'Reilly and Giuliani, in particular, engage in this discourse of 'blaming the victim' through their sustained allegations of weak family structures and values – echoing the popular discourses of 'personal responsibility' and 'unwed mothers and deadbeat dads'.<sup>50</sup> They repeatedly criticise the black community, alleging that the bad behaviour of black youth is a direct consequence of teenage pregnancy, single mothers, and absent fathers. And Fox hosts often attack social welfare programmes as 'entitlement culture' and 'handouts' that the black community are taking from the white working class. The effect is to inflame racial animosity between whites and blacks across class.

Lastly, Fox plays repeatedly into the discourse of 'the past is the past'.<sup>51</sup> Fox personas repeatedly discredit the effects of racism throughout America's history that have shaped modern racism. Ingraham associates racism with 'history' and 'history books', implying racism is over in America. Niger Innis similarly attacks the notion of a continuing presence of racism in America, by commenting that Obama failed to say 'that America in 2014 is not Mississippi in 1964'.<sup>52</sup> It is, as Goldberg explains, that people 'rationalize that racism is a thing of the past, so contemporary racial inequities must be due to individual, or even group, inadequacies'.<sup>53</sup> And this complements discourses of personal responsibility which attack the black community over family, violence, and welfare, all of which serve to discredit the black community's legitimate objections to injustices.

### **Blaming black protesters**

From the outset, Fox News portrays the protests as a whole as violent, employing shocking headline screen captions and videos of activities designated as 'looting' and 'riots'. In the early days of the unrest, *Fox and Friends* uses headline screen captions invoking violent imagery: 'Missouri mayhem: riots, looting, gunfire and chaos in Ferguson'; 'violent vigil: peaceful protest turns into chaotic riot'.<sup>54</sup> It goes to considerable lengths to portray the protests both in Ferguson and across the country in a bad light. Various Fox News hosts and contributors blame the protests for any number of problems, for example: 'protesters who block traffic and keep people from getting to their jobs, which is probably increasing unemployment'.<sup>55</sup> They characterise protesters' acts as criminal: 'you cannot equate peace and justice and hold one hostage for the other';<sup>56</sup> 'lynch mob justice';<sup>57</sup> and 'People don't get to take a public bridge from the public ... if you close down streets in [NYC], you kill people'.<sup>58</sup>

Working to discredit the protesters yet further, *Fox and Friends'* hosts disparage them by saying that they are not 'out there for freedom of speech, they're out there to push their side'.<sup>59</sup> Portraying the protesters as degenerate party-goers, O'Reilly comments 'protesters ... running around [NY] ... they were partying, taking pictures of themselves, smoking pot, drinking, running around, having a gay old time'.<sup>60</sup> Days later, Hannity derides the oft-used protest chants of 'Hands up, don't shoot' and 'I can't breathe', going on to describe the protesters as ignorant, saying they do not know anything about the cases.<sup>61</sup> Sheriff David Clarke repeatedly attacks the foundation of the protests, asserting 'this whole thing was premised on a lie. This "hands up don't shoot", this "black lives matter"'.<sup>62</sup> Both Fox people attack the grievances expressed by the protesters by framing Brown as the only unarmed black person to ever be killed by police.

Fox also frames the protests as a threat to police. On several Fox News programmes, Giuliani appears to decry the demonstrations as violent. He alleges that protesters engaged in threats and violence against police officers:

If you hear what those people were saying at those rallies: 'Kill the police', 'destroy the police' there was a lot more violence at the rallies in New York

than was ever reported by any of the stations. Fox covered it, most others didn't. Police officers punched ... spat on, a police officer almost hit with an axe. There was a tremendous amount of violence, not just a little bit.<sup>63</sup>

As Giuliani speaks, Fox airs a clip of a small group of people chanting, 'What do we want? Dead cops. When do we want it? Now!' Fox gives the impression that this group was associated with the large-scale Millions March protest when it was not.<sup>64</sup> Giuliani attributes the more extreme anti-police rhetoric of the minority to the protesters at large.

We've had four months of propaganda starting with the president that everybody should hate the police ... The protests, even the ones that don't lead to violence, and a lot of them lead to violence, all lead to a conclusion: the police are bad, the police are racists – that is completely wrong. Actually, the people who do the most for the black community in America are the police.<sup>65</sup>

Giuliani discards the protest agenda against police brutality as propaganda, accusing the protesters of spreading hate against law enforcement. He then holds the police up as having done the most for the black community, which ignores all of the issues surrounding the police and African Americans such as over-policing of minorities, police misconduct, and police brutality.

Fox News often ties the protests to violence, even going so far as to accuse protesters of shooting police officers. With the headline screen caption 'Street justice: police officers shot in wake of DOJ report',<sup>66</sup> *Fox and Friends*' use of 'street justice' implies that a vigilante protester targeted the police to mete out punishment. On news and talk show *The Five*, hosts explicitly tie the protests to the shooting before the suspect (who allegedly was targeting a protester) was apprehended:

*Guilfoyle*: Let's set the scene. Protesters were angry from the start and their target was obvious. [shows video of anti-police language] Those words eventually gave way to violence.<sup>67</sup>

The hosts and guests repeatedly claim that protesters were responsible for the shooting by saying their demonstrations 'gave way to violence' and that 'they shot two cops'.<sup>68</sup> Host Bolling also minimises the protesters' cause by arguing that they are not protesting on the basis of any grievances.

Fox's coverage of the protest movement against police brutality uses several themes that sustain the discourse once again of criminal black (wo)men. Hosts and guests frequently exaggerate the violence that occurred during the protests, undercutting the protest movement and its cause. Previous incidents of protests in the wake of police shootings of black men demonstrate the media's strategy of denigrating protesters and their calls for social justice.<sup>69</sup> Fox often refers to the protests as 'riots', 'mayhem', 'looting' and 'chaos', while calling the protesters 'thugs',<sup>70</sup> 'criminals' and 'lynch mobs'. By discrediting the protesters and their

grievances, Fox, of course, obstructs any meaningful discussion of racism in the criminal justice system, and the possibility of change.

### **Blaming the 'politics of racial division'**

Even as Fox devotes extensive coverage to blaming racial inequalities and injustices on black people, it also dubs any other sort of explanation the 'politics of racial division'. On *The O'Reilly Factor with Laura Ingraham*, guest host Ingraham recites, 'these Obama Administration interjections have stoked racial discord in America and sown more distrust between minorities and some local law enforcement'.<sup>71</sup> She diminishes the issues surrounding Ferguson, saying 'the country is facing serious national issues every day. We have a demoralized middle class, mass illegal immigration, major foreign policy quandaries – all that deserve serious and sustained attention so he [Obama] should stop micromanaging local police and stop playing the politics of division.'<sup>72</sup>

On *Fox and Friends*, several headline screen captions criticise political fliers that reference the events in Ferguson and the shooting of unarmed black persons: 'Flier frenzy: Dem group uses Ferguson riots to get out vote'; and 'Crass campaign: ad: vote for Dems or Ferguson will repeat'.<sup>73</sup> Fox legal commentator Peter Johnson Jr attacks the ads, saying 'this is reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan, this is reminiscent of the worst part of our American history ... I have never seen anything like this in my entire life especially coming from an established party in this country.'<sup>74</sup> In addition to framing this group as 'the real racists' by comparing them to the KKK, Johnson presents the political strategy as the worst example of politicians capitalising on the politics of fear and racial tensions. This of course ignores 'tough on crime' political ads every year that play on such tensions, with the most glaring example being the Republican Party's 'Southern Strategy', specifically the infamous Willie Horton ads of the 1988 presidential election.<sup>75</sup>

The lines 'politics of racial division' and 'Ferguson is a distraction' further serve the previously noted reliance by Fox on 'denial and counterattack' and 'minimisation of racism'.<sup>76</sup> Johnson's commentary supports both positions. Discussing the political ads, he minimises concerns about racial injustice by calling the ads 'vile' and 'disgusting'. He rubbishes the idea that Ferguson could happen again if people do not vote for change (the death of Freddie Gray and subsequent unrest in Baltimore would occur only six months later). While framing racial injustice as a distraction, Ingraham, too, cites other issues facing the nation as much more important by focusing on those that speak to Fox viewers' interests: unemployment, the middle class, immigration, and the threat of terrorism. Fox News refuses meaningful discussion of racial injustice by constantly referring to other issues as more pressing for American society.

### **Fox News as an obstacle to addressing racism**

This analysis has revealed the major discourses in Fox News' coverage of Ferguson, all of which portray the shooting of Michael Brown and subsequent

police response as unrelated to the systemic racism of the American criminal justice system.<sup>77</sup> But the language in which such events are presented is key. Wacquant, for example, argues that using ostensibly colour-blind language allows American society to reproduce an ethnoracial hierarchy through which African Americans are controlled by incarceration.<sup>78</sup> As previously discussed, Fox News often uses apparently colour-blind – but coded – language such as ‘thugs’ and ‘criminals’ to demonise African Americans. For Wacquant, the criminal justice system works to divide Americans into the ‘admirable’ working class – white – and the criminal and undeserving urban underclass, defined by their blackness.<sup>79</sup> Fox News does just what Wacquant describes, often positing the opposition between ‘working people’ and the black community. Fox hosts are seen to criticise recipients of ‘entitlements’ and ‘handouts’ while simultaneously portraying the white working class as suffering. And such a position allows the state not only to maintain white dominance, but effectively to absolve itself of any guilt for the impact of underlying racism.<sup>80</sup>

In obstructing meaningful discussion of racism in the criminal justice system, Fox News sustains racial ideology – the matrix of explanations and justifications used by the dominant racial group to maintain the racial hierarchy across political, social, and economic structures,<sup>81</sup> described by Omi and Winant in their racial formation theory as the interplay between ideological beliefs and social structures.<sup>82</sup> Hall, too, describes how societies are structured in dominance by both class and race, with racism functioning to prevent the unity of the working class.<sup>83</sup> For Hall, there is “‘political compromise” between the white capitalist and the white working classes, and the consequent “supervising and policing” functions which white labour exerts over black’.<sup>84</sup>

But there are also very specific means through which police officially sustain racism in their interactions with African Americans.<sup>85</sup> Skolnick and Fyfe, for example, explain how the police have long held the role of upholding white supremacy in American society through controlling African Americans. ‘[L]ike lynching, [police] brutality is employed to control a population thought to be undesirable, undeserving, and underpunished by established law ... They go beyond and above the law to achieve a fantasized social order.’<sup>86</sup> In the aftermath of Ferguson, many argue that lynchings parallel modern police shootings. Commenting on the parallels between the two, Equality Justice Initiative Director Stevenson asserts ‘the lynching era created a narrative of racial difference, a presumption of guilt, a presumption of dangerousness that got assigned to African Americans in particular – and that’s the same presumption of guilt that burdens young kids living in urban areas who are sometimes menaced, threatened, or shot and killed by law enforcement officers’.<sup>87</sup>

Finally, after examining the themes, discourses and ideologies of Fox News’ coverage, the question remains, in the words of Norman Fairclough, as to whether or not ‘the social order “needs” this social wrong’.<sup>88</sup> In the sense of perpetuating racial ideologies, the answer would be yes. Fox News thus serves to manufacture

panic over African Americans, charging them with criminality, laziness and other undesirable traits, as well as blatantly framing them as directly victimising the white working class. Instead of using the Ferguson story to address racism in the criminal justice system, Fox News distracts its viewers from issues of racism with discussions of the black community as violent, welfare-abusing, and without family values.

In the words of Malcolm X:

As long as he is black and a member of the Negro community, the white public thinks that the white policeman is justified in going in there and trampling on that man's civil rights and on that man's human rights. Once the police have convinced the white public that the so-called Negro community is a criminal element, they can go in and question, brutalize, murder unarmed, innocent Negroes and the white public is gullible enough to back them up.<sup>89</sup>

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Lucia Trimbur for her invaluable guidance and also thank for their support on earlier drafts Courtney Benjamin, Brian Goddard, Maggie Schmuhl, Jasmine Louis, Brendan Mills and Sarah Hughes.

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