Chapter 3

Media Communication Perspectives of African American Males Regarding Criminal Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

The representation of African Americans in the media has been a major concern in mainstream American culture and is also a component of media bias in the United States. Representation, in itself, refers to the construction in any medium of aspects of “reality” such as people, places, objects, events, cultural identities, and other abstract concepts. Such representations may be in speech or writing as well as still or moving pictures. Media representation of minorities is not always seen in a positive light; therefore, representation of African Americans in particular propagates somewhat controversial and misconstrued images of what African American represent. According to Potter, research on the portrayal of African Americans in prime-time television from 1955 to 1986 found that only 6% of the characters were African Americans, while 89% of the TV population was white. Among these African-American characters, 19% lacked a high school diploma, and 47% were low in economic status.

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INTRODUCTION

In a review of the research, Heath and Gilbert (1996) found that the relationship between media presentations and crime is dependent on characteristics of the message and the audience. Presentation of large amounts of local crime news engenders increased fear among the larger public, (Brillion, 1987; Sheley and Aaskins, 1981) while the presentation of large amounts of non-local crime news has the opposite effect by making the local viewers feel safe in comparison to other areas (Liska and Baccaglini, 1990). In addition, chiricos et al (2000) found that local and national news are related to fear of crime. The effect of local news on fear of crime is stronger for residents in higher crime areas and those who experience victimization.

Most scholars are intrigued with studying television portrayals and the preconceived stereotypes people have toward minorities. These stereotypes are related to a number of political and social issues such as historical events (civil rights), economic status (citizens on welfare vs. citizens not on welfare), educational levels (academic achievements, people with or without college and graduate degrees), employment (unemployment rate) Specifically, research that focuses on racial attitudes has examined how African Americans are portrayed on television. Scholars have conducted both quantitative and qualitative studies to analyze the various effects that result from television portrayals of African Americans. Television often portrays African Americans in unfavorable positions in comparison to Caucasians. Typically these unfavorable depictions reinforce stereotypical images of African Americans. Research indicates that television portrayals can influence people’s attitudes toward one another. Every day, people use different forms of communication media to seek information. Initially, when a person uses a communication medium to find information, he or she may or may not be aware of how that particular medium can influence one’s attitudes toward the world.

Though the various forms of communication media messages are highly informative, they also possess the power to be influential over people’s attitudes toward one another. This power of influence has ignited the ever-growing research in relationships between media portrayals and attitudes toward different ethnic groups. Since local news media may be the primary source of learning for many adults, it plays a vital role in policy debates regarding civil rights, the public’s general knowledge regarding minority communities,
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