

AFRO-AMERICAN IN POST-TRUTH ERA: THE STUDY OF THE NEWS ABOUT GEORGE FLOYD INCIDENT

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Abstract

Riots incited by George Floyd's incident are proof that racism still exists in the US. Afro-Americans are still largely viewed as the descendants of slaves and following the completion of the “a fool and a crude person” stigma. This paper focuses on the tensions between Black and White Americans displayed by the news regarding George Floyd's incident and other racism-related incidents. The writer analyzes the tensions in the view of post-truth theory where the existence of racism is often denied by the Americans; the knowledge that racism exists, but they are not comfortable talking about it. A multimodality approach is used in the sense that both text and image in the news are analyzed. The writer identifies and locates relevant information, analyzes the evidence, and then develops and discusses the findings. From the analysis, the writer found that the news indeed presents the embodiment of racism in the U.S. contemporary society.

Keywords – Afro-Americans, racism, George Floyd, Post-truth

Introduction

The incident of Black people killing happened again on May 25, 2020. The incident involved George Floyd, a 46-year-old man who was suspected to pass \$20 counterfeit at a grocery store in Minneapolis. Floyd, then, was arrested by a police officer named Derek Chauvin. In the video that became viral at social media, for more than eight minutes Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck. Chauvin's action led to Floyd's death. After the incident, four officers who were present at the incident were fired and Chauvin was charged with different degrees of murder and manslaughter.

The incident was allegedly said as an act of racism. The definition of racism is

closely related to the definition of race. At root, racism is “an ideology of racial domination” (Wilson, 1999, p. 14). Here, Wilson states that racism happens when people in one group think that they are more superior in terms of biology and culture than other groups of people, and they treat those who are deemed inferior badly.

“Race”, according to the social scientists is a social construct. The biological differences like in skin color are crucial when they are related to the social structure in the society, although in reality, the differences do not affect the people's ability and behavior. The misleading understanding of race can be traced back to history. In the beginning, race as a term

July, 16 2020

was used to talk about people with different ethnicity or people with different national identity. For years, a race became associated with biological differences or natural differences. At the time of Western colonialism and slavery, the idea of race was used to justify some people to exploit, dominate, and do violent actions toward people who are considered as nonwhite. George Floyd's incident proves that racism and stereotype are still rooted up to this day.

Methodology

I chose to use qualitative content analysis because, as suggested by Leeuwen and Jewitt (2007), qualitative content analysis is the most basic way to study the media's meaning. It also allows a general statement to be drawn about aspects of representation in a way that the public can understand. According to Krippendorf (2004), qualitative content analysis is done by reading text, images, and symbolic matters systematically. Content analysis is done by doing a close reading of a small segment of a text. After that the text is interpreted and rewritten into a new narrative that is analytical or critical.

In doing my analysis, as suggested by Altheide (2013), I studied news on the website as documents to get the meaning of the culture, the process and the objects involved, and the symbol and the meaning that create the social reality of a society and its members. Altheide says that documents can help to understand the symbolic meaning in relation to the context and to know the creation of the process and its influence on the reading. Using qualitative content analysis, the interpretation was done to the theme, and the image is conducted by analyzing different types, formats, and techniques of the information.

Finding and Discussion

The news I cited in the following discussion represents how a post-truth idea where the truth or fact is not important, only what is believed by people. The following news is the story of Cariol Horne who was fired because she tried to stop a white officer who was forcing violence on a black person. Washington Post News on June 13, 2020 (Sondel & Knowles, 2020) published a story about police duty to intervene. Cariol Horne who worked for the Buffalo police department shared a story that in 2006 she saw a white police officer choked a black man who was arrested and handcuffed. She stepped in to stop the violence because she felt that it is her duty as a police officer to intervene a case where a colleague was seen as practicing excessive force to an arrestee or even abusing them. The action she did is written in a mandated policy as "a duty to intervene". The policy was attached to the officer who is from a different law enforcement agency as well. Horne said that when she saw the black man being choked, she asked the officer to stop. She even yanked the arms of the officer away. Later, Horne said that she was accused of jumping on the officer who was in the middle of controlling the suspect. Because there was no videotaped evidence, Horne's story could not be verified. Unfortunately, other officers who happened to be at the crime scene did not back up the story during the investigation. As a result, Horne was fired. We can conclude that this incident is counted as a post-truth because the officers just believed one side of story, they did not listen to Horne's side of her story. In the modern era nowadays, we cannot easily filter the hoax and real news. Hoax news contains a post-truth element in it.

The definition of "post-truth in the Oxford English Dictionary is "relating to or

July, 16 2020

denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal beliefs.” Post-truth is a concept (Green, 1995; Besserman, 1998) that is developed as a result of the public anxiety about claims related to public truth and the authority to make a public truth-teller legitimate. But, the term post-truth can be used to mislead information because of two reasons. The first reason is the concept contains two different forms that are related to one idea, the truth. The two different ideas are honesty, and factuality, and knowledge, the belief that has already been justified. The second reason is post-truth like post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-feminism, is regarded as a time after, a time beyond, or a time without truth.

A post-truth is actually a condition that is as simple as an act to justify something for truth claims, but a constant suspicion that view the truth-tellers as dishonest. Post-truth on the area of socio-politics is seen as a crisis of trust toward authorities; that the authorities are considered dishonest as they supply false knowledge and deception. The lack of authority and systematic deception can be a major contribution to the feeling of distrust (Stoker, 2017, pp. 35– 36). To summarize, post-truth deals with the contrast between false knowledge and truth, between the distrust toward the public authority truth-tellers and the trust toward truth-tellers in micro-scale, and between factual and falsehoods (Harding, 2008).

In Horne’s case, even after in 2009, the white officer whom Horne intervened was prosecuted and went to prison because he rammed four handcuffed teenagers of African descent into a police car at once, until last month, Horne still fought for her redemption and a pension (Sondel

& Knowles, 2020). She still has to convince others that she did the right action at that time, even after the country sees for itself that no police officer intervened when Floyd said that he could not breathe before he died. The fact that Cariol Horne is black puts her in an unfortunate position.

The African Americans keep on re-evaluating their identity in their struggles to be equal (history.com, n.d; Hollis, 2020; James, 1991). They used the term “colored” to replace the term “black and negro, the Spanish word for black” which is associated with slavery. However, the term “Negro” was used widely when they migrate to work for the factory in the North. The term “Afro-American” was used by the activist of civil rights to show that they were proud of their ancestors who came from Africa. Later, the term “black” is widely used and more popular as a revolution and power symbols. The term "black blood" or black ancestry replaces the term "Negro blood". The term "black" is used more than "Negro" in the United States when the black power movement reached its peak at the end of the 1960s. The term "black" is used to refer to persons who have black African lineage, the unmixed descendent of African populations. Up to now, those terms can still be seen in numerous organizations. In the late 1980s, Jesse Jackson put forward the term “African American” which he thought reasonably has a historical base, unlike other baseless expression. As a result, the two terms, black and African American, are used widely in the 21st century.

Horne tells the truth but she is not believed by people because the idea that black people are bad and commonly associated with criminal acts is so alive in the community. A black person trying to save

July, 16 2020

other black is just a case of trickling water to the sea; it is useless, it will not bring any effect at all. Looking back to the story when “none backed her story during an independent arbitration” shows the fact that “none” came forward to support her story implies that even other black officers did not stand by her.

The story in the news (Sondel & Knowles, 2020) continues on to write about the other officers who were present at the time of Horne’s incident were charged for helping the killing. Furthermore, the police departments released policies that highlight the obligation to stop the violence done by a colleague, the “duty to intervene.” After Floyd’s incident, Minneapolis started to enforce this policy in court. However, even though there are policies that oblige other officers to intervene, people who have worked in the law enforcement departments say that the policies cannot change the loyalty culture that has lived so long in those departments. The loyalty culture is so intense that the officers who abuse power will not be checked and reported. The intense loyalty and deference to fellow officers are another proof that in the community, it is not the truth which is most significance but the values the community maintain to exist. Loyalty is a positive word. It brings with it the attachment, the beauty of forever supporting someone, and be supported by someone. However, when loyalty means turn a blind eye toward injustice then a loyalty goes wrong.

Another example is presented in the same news (Sondel & Knowles, 2020) that before Floyd’s incident, Minneapolis police had rules stating that an officer can only use force when they cannot do any other way and that an officer should step in when their colleague abuse the power. Minneapolis released the rules after an

officer was involved in a shooting incident in 2015 and drew protests from the citizens. But even those guidelines did not help George Floyd.

The video of Floyd’s incident showed that one officer handcuffed Floyd with his face down in the street, two other officers restrained Floyd and one other officer prevented the intervention from those who watched. Sondel & Knowles (2020) writes that “For the last three of those minutes Floyd was motionless and had no pulse, but officers made no attempt to revive him. Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd's neck as arriving emergency medical technicians attempted to treat him.”

The result of Floyd’s autopsy shows that Floyd’s death is classified as a homicide caused by cardiopulmonary arrest. The autopsy done by Michael Baden for Floyd's family found that “the "evidence is consistent with mechanical asphyxia as the cause" of death, with neck compression restricting blood flow to the brain, and back compression restricting breathing. Some experts have theorized positional asphyxia” (Sondel & Knowles, 2020).

The day after Floyd’s death, on May 26, 2020, waves of protests took place in Minneapolis and other countries in the world. The protesters questioned the use of force, often excessive force, against suspects who were of African descent. They also questioned police accountability. The protest which began in Minneapolis was followed by other cities, up to 400 cities throughout the U.S, and other countries. Riots followed the protests with police cars being burned so that tear gas was released to disperse the crowds. The protests were getting bigger in the following days amidst the global pandemic of COVID-19.

July, 16 2020

The protests and also the emerging evidence of police brutality videotaped by people showed that it is indeed difficult to reform the law enforcement departments. According to Sondel and Knowles (2020), Horne has tried to pass Cariol's Law since 2016 that contains the statements that encourage and protect intervening officers. The draft that was written with attorneys' help has been passed at the local level and state level. After Floyd's killing, she joined in the protests every day. It is expected that the officers will be more accountable (with the help of body cameras) and be less biased to nonwhite people. Although Horne's attempts to get a justice have not been successful, some others who charged colleagues who abuse the power won their case. These people stated that before they won their case, they suffered through a retaliation from their colleagues for breaching a "code of silence." The "punishment" for those who break the code of silence, those who want to speak of the truth, is a way to present that truth is not there to rely on anymore. The brotherhood is more important, no matter how wrong the members are.

Going back to the news on George Floyd's incident, Skelley (2020) showed the survey that the majority of Americans see Floyd's death as wrong. This survey also shows that many Americans also wanted the officers who were present at the scene of the crime were held responsible. The survey, furthermore, shows that the Americans could understand the protesters' frustration and also their anger and that racial inequalities were practiced in enforcing the law. But the survey shows that not all Americans agreed with the protests were a good way to voice the problems of racial inequalities.

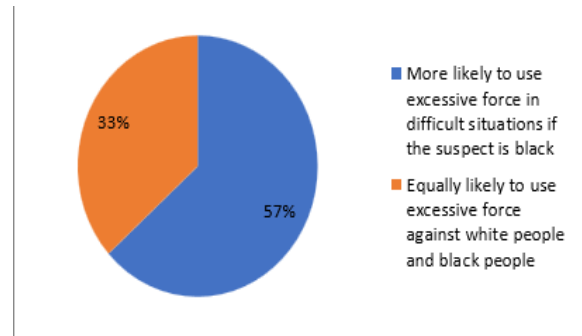


Figure 1. Monmouth University Survey.

Skelley (2020) presents a survey done by Monmouth University which shows that most Americans thought that "policing is biased against African Americans." Although 57 percent said that in difficult situations the police tended to do excessive force when they deal with a black suspect, 33 percent still believed that police treated white suspects and black suspects differently. This survey may not show the real practice of policing, although, after Floyd's incident, people are pulled into believing that black is indeed discriminated by the police.

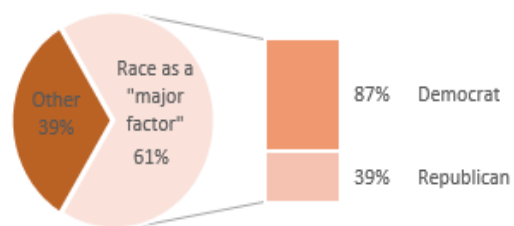


Figure 2. Yahoo News/YouGov survey.

In line with the majority of Americans' idea that black people are discriminated by police, 61 percent of Americans said that race was the reason for killing Floyd (Yahoo News/YouGov survey in Skelley, 2020). Interestingly, a big difference in opinion came from the different partisans of the American political party. 87 percent of Democrats

July, 16 2020

said that race was a major reason while only 39 percent of the Republicans said the same. The percentage shows that the truth cannot be decided easily. When people believed in one policy, their opinion can be biased.

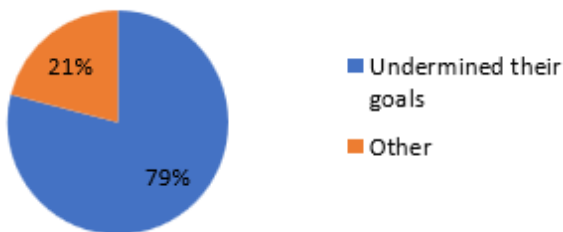


Figure 10. Reuters/Ipsos survey.

Moreover, Reuters/Ipsos survey cited by Skelley (2020) shows that 72 percent of the Americans did not approve to respond to Floyd's death with violent protests. The respondents were concerned about the damage caused by the protests (79 percent). Morning Consult's survey (Skelley, 2020) also found that when the protests were about and done by the black people, Americans were not really supportive. The fact shows that the truth about the Americans' treatment toward black people is still in big question because black people are usually portrayed as stereotypically good or on the other hand, stereotypically bad.

Conclusions

The stereotypes and stigma that cause racism still lingered fresh in the air. Not many people realized it, but the minority get the impact. For example, the Black people. Black as a skin color means the color of mid to dark brown. Eventually, not all black people have dark skin; in certain countries, often the term "black" is used to describe persons who have darker skin compared to other people. In America, the term "black" refers to people

with African Black ancestry.

The analysis shows that despite their long existence in the history of the United States and with all the stories that the black people are given a fair opportunity and an equal treatment, the story of Cariol Horne and the incident of George Floyd show the fact that in the U.S. the black people are still racially suspected as fraud and criminal.

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July, 16 2020

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