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Me(di)a Culpa?: The ''Missing White Woman Syndrome'' and Media Self-Critique

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This textual analysis explores media self-critique in response to news coverage of missing women. The study finds evidence of intermedia agenda setting and news repair. Critiques emphasize race, and racism is identified as the primary cause of the Missing White Woman Syndrome. But class, age, and appearance are not investigated in any depth, and more subtle aspects of the phenomenon go unexplored. Findings indicate that critiques themselves may face the constraints and influences true of any news work.

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$$y = \text{Family Income} \times (\text{Abductee Cuteness} \div \text{Skin Color})^2 + \text{Length of Abduction} \times \text{Media Savvy of Grieving Parents}^3$$

(where y = minutes of coverage).

(Jon Stewart, 2004, p. 155)

The tendency for news media to confer importance and urgency upon the disappearance of some girls and women but not others has garnered notice, and not just from Jon Stewart. Saturation coverage of Laci Peterson, Elizabeth Smart, and Natalee Holloway, and a host of others like them, has reached such an all-time high that there is now a name commonly assigned to this phenomenon: The Missing White Woman Syndrome or MWWS. Its coinage is attributed to Gwen Ifill of PBS, and the term references the media's fascination with missing women who are white, young, pretty, and often from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, and media's simultaneous apparent lack of regard for those who do not fit this description.

It was the summer of 2005 that sparked the public outcry over the extraordinary selection of some missing persons over others, which had been noted in the mass communications literature the previous year (Liebler, 2004). National media appeared obsessed with the disappearance of Natalee Holloway, an 18-year-old blonde young woman from Birmingham, Alabama, who disappeared while visiting Aruba on a senior trip. Cable news channels ran the story continuously—indeed, a search of

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the LexisNexis database reveals 1,880 print and broadcast stories from May 30, the date of Holloway's disappearance, to Labor Day that same year. In sharp contrast was the lack of coverage of Latoyia Figueroa, a 24-year-old Latina, pregnant with her second child, who disappeared in Philadelphia on July 18, 2005. It took until 9 days later for CNN to pick up the story; this was after local blogger Richard Blair (allspinzone.com) drew attention to Figueroa's disappearance by writing a scathing critique of the media's inattention and sending it to Nancy Grace of CNN.

By no means was Latoyia Figueroa the first woman of color to be symbolically annihilated by the media. Saturation coverage of Laci Peterson's California disappearance was in sharp contrast to that of 24-year-old Evelyn Hernandez, a pregnant El Salvadoran immigrant who disappeared with her 4-year-old son in San Francisco. Bay Area and national media largely ignored Hernandez; her decapitated body later washed up on the shores of the Bay, but her son was never found.

Yet it was not until 2005 that the juxtaposed cases of Holloway and Figueroa, following on the heels of ''runaway bride'' Jennifer Wilbanks, brought the MWWS to the national spotlight. Critiques raged in cyberspace, accusing news media of sloppy reporting at best, and racist pandering at worst. What is particularly interesting, however, is that members of the news media themselves weighed in online, on air, and in print, offering stories and commentary on the MWWS. Contributors came from a wide variety of media outlets, some mass market and others clearly situated as alternatives to the ''mainstream.''

The current study examines this media self-critique, questioning the construction of gender, class, and race within these critiques, as well as the degree to which the MWWS practice is truly problematized and challenged. News paradigm theory (Bennett, Gressett, & Halton, 1985) suggests that such critiques are mechanisms of professional journalistic control, maintaining and reinforcing current standards and practices. Bennett et al. call attention to this ''news reconstruction process,'' and urge scholars to attend to problematic news, such as the MWWS, more fully. Haas (2006, p. 351) points out that relatively little research has addressed media self-criticism, and suggests that ''genuine news media self-criticism . . . would require journalists to reflect on how their own and others' reporting is shaped, if not constrained, by the commercial interests of news media owners and advertisers, organizational pressures and work routines, and various news gathering and reporting conventions.''

This study, therefore, explores these issues within the context of coverage of missing women. This venue offers a particularly significant domain in which to examine media self-critique, as it provides a potentially rich forum for discussion of media influences upon news and diversity issues such as race and class privilege. Moreover, this study offers an opportunity to investigate media self-critique across a variety of media forms.

Background literature

Three decades ago, researchers (Gerbner, 1978; Tuchman, Daniels, & Benet, 1978) noted that mass media symbolically annihilate less powerful members of society, a

phenomenon that would appear to explain patterns in coverage of missing people. Carter and Steiner (2004, p. 13) describe the symbolic annihilation of women: ''The media function . . . by either effectively erasing women's presence, by fundamentally denying them their humanity, trivializing or mocking them, or by reducing them to a single 'feminine' characteristic, even if that characteristic could be regarded as 'positive'. . .''

Similarly, in many regards the MWWS is merely symptomatic of news media practices that have, for years, constructed people of color as ''the other.'' In discussing coverage in Canada, Fieras (1994) argues that news coverage has persistently framed minorities as stereotypes, invisible, tokens, and social problems. U.S. communications research has found these same tendencies repeatedly (e.g., Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gandy, 1998). Heider (2000) suggests that incognizant racism—the tendency for majority reporters to ignore minority issues because they are not on their radar screens—may be at least partly responsible, but other reasons suggest themselves as well: Minorities are devalued in U.S. society whether it be in the criminal justice, education, or media system.

Researchers report similar findings when it comes to class (cf. Heider, 2004), and women crime victims are no exception. For example, Meyers (1994) textually analyzes coverage of an Atlanta woman murdered by her husband and finds Wanda Walters was symbolically reduced to ''white trash'' (p. 60). More recently, Meyers (2004) uses Black feminist theory in her discourse analysis of Freaknik to examine news coverage of violence against Black women. She argues ''the convergence of gender, race and class oppressions minimizes the seriousness of the violence and portrays its victims primarily as stereotypic Jezebels'' (p. 96).

Liebler's (2004) case study of two missing college students highlights disparities in the nature and amount of coverage, which she attributes to both class and race. The relatively privileged White girl garnered considerably more local media attention than did her Black counterpart, in part because her media-savvy parents orchestrated media events. Coverage emphasized the African American girl's working class background, and for both of the girls reports implied that they may have been culpable in their own disappearances. Liebler concludes that media coverage of missing girls and women appears destined to reinforce social hierarchies. Researchers (Jiwani & Young, 2006, p. 912) reach similar conclusions in Canada, where missing and murdered women are marginalized in news coverage due to their Aboriginality and sex worker status: ''. . .society demarcates those who deserve our attention, and thus our sympathy and intervention, and those who remain marginalized, outside the pale of the civilized, normative order.''

It is thus clear that news reports of women crime victims, including those of missing women, are problematic on a number of fronts. However, it is important to note that the focus of the current study is on the subsequent critique, not on the initial coverage. The question remains, therefore, whether media self-critique of this reporting is an effective means of illuminating these troublesome news practices.

As suggested by Haas (2006), scholarly work on media self-analysis or critique has been limited. Yet this gap in the literature cannot be explained by a lack of data: Fengler (2003) argues that one can no longer claim that a ''conspiracy of silence'' exists among media professionals as the past decade has brought an ''explosion'' of media self-criticism, with the creation of ''media beats,'' ''media critics,'' ''media writers,'' and ''media columnists.'' Indeed, the notion of monitoring news accuracy to keep one's readers happy is not new, according to the Organization of News Ombudsmen (www.newsombudsmen.org/): A paper in Japan first started a committee to handle reader complaints in 1922, and the tradition continues at news organizations around the world. Although the duties of ombudsmen or ''readers' representatives'' are often centered on handling reader complaints, contemporary media critics extend this role by engaging in evaluative review of media performance across media outlets that does not necessarily include their own. Fengler finds through in-depth interviews that, although media critics have the potential to be rich sources of media regulation, many appear more comfortable criticizing politicians and big business than fellow journalists, media managers, and owners. If this is the case, one might expect to find recurring parameters constraining media self-critiques.

There is limited discussion of *why* news organizations engage in media criticism. Haas (2006) draws the distinction between ''media criticism'' and ''media self-criticism,'' and suggests a number of possibilities for why news organizations may allow the latter, most notably assuaging public concerns and upholding commercial interests. Haas points out also that self-criticism is rare and calls for future research in this area.

Several case studies have explored critiques within the context of news repair or paradigm repair: the tendency for journalists to control the news by bringing errant news media back into the fold of the dominant hegemonic means of conducting news work. Bennett et al. (1985, p. 55) provide this conceptualization:

> If a news paradigm exists, then, like all paradigms, it will be confronted with the occasional problem of how to handle anomalous or troublesome cases that fall partly within the defining logic of the paradigm, yet fail to conform to other defining characteristics of the paradigm. Such anomalies. . .threaten to expose the limits and biases of a paradigm by suggesting that important properties of the real world have been excluded from the representational system.

Berkowitz (2000) reaches a similar conclusion in his analysis of the Princess Diana 'what-a-story,' writing that ''. . . . when an occurrence emerges that breaks from the everyday and leads toward paradigm scrutiny, journalists engage in the enactment of other rituals to reassert the validity of their paradigm both to society and to themselves'' (p. 140). More recently, Eko and Berkowtiz (2009) examine news paradigms in France via their analysis of *Le Monde's* coverage of ''the Mohammed cartoons affair,'' and conclude ''the paradigm exists . . . to defend the status quo that allows the craft to exist and function'' (p. 199). Hindman (2005) discusses news repair in the context of *The New York Times* and Jayson Blair, finding that the *Times*

not only worked to restore its own image and that of journalism as a whole, but also took responsibility for what had transpired and made changes in the newsroom. Hindman suggests that the *Times*' response indicates paradigm change.

McCoy (2001) and Robinson (2006) both suggest that the Internet, and blogs in particular, may change the news landscape and the standards to which traditional news organizations are held. McCoy finds that news repair included re-establishing the authority of traditional media over new media, whereas Robinson (p. 81) concludes "the world of postmodern journalism is tapping at the door of the mainstream press embodied in a blog." According to Ruggerio (2004, p. 102), however, "concerted effort by journalists to repair the dominant news paradigm against incursion by the Internet, while stronger a decade ago, has weakened over time."

Based on the foregoing literature, this study poses the following research questions:

> How do media critiques construct the Missing White Woman Syndrome, and what roles do race, class, age, and appearance have in these explanations?
>
> According to media critiques, who or what is responsible for the MWWS?
>
> To what degree do critiques engage in news repair?

Method

Textual analysis was conducted on a purposive sample of stories and critiques published or aired by media organizations from 2004 to 2006. The central theme of a story or critique needed to be the MWWS in order for it to be included. The sample encompassed mass-market and ethnic media outlets, but did not include blogs unless journalists at news organizations had generated them (j-blogs). This is an important and necessary distinction, as the focus here is on traditional media outlets and not on citizen bloggers. News copy was obtained either through Google or the LexisNexis database using "Missing White Wom(a)n" as the search term, and all stories that met the above criteria were included. In all, the analysis includes 31 media artifacts including an editorial cartoon, op-ed pieces, j-blogs, and news stories. By far, the majority of stories and critiques were published in 2005 (Figure 1), and critiques were most likely to be found in newspapers (Table 1).

The analysis was generally focused on the nature of the coverage; the degree to which journalists acknowledged that the MWWS exists; the explanations provided for the phenomenon and who provided them; and constructions of gender, class, and race within critiques. Each article was reviewed multiple times with these general research foci in mind, but the analysis was largely inductive, providing ample opportunity for other aspects of the coverage to emerge. This approach was consistent with the strategies used in grounded theory: "The researcher does not approach reality as a tabula rasa—[s/he] must have a perspective [to] see relevant data and abstract significant categories" (Glaser & Strauus, 1967). The analysis below is structured around the main themes found in the coverage.

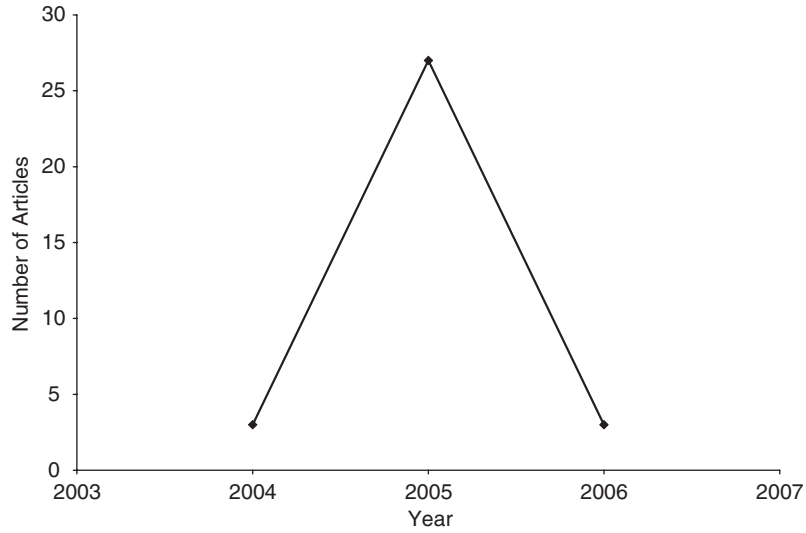

Figure 1 Number of Articles Published by Year.

Table 1 Number of Articles per Medium

Medium	*N*
Newspaper	15
Internet—Television news[a]	5
Internet—Online newspapers[b]	4
J-blogs/Online chats	2
Television	2
Radio	2
Magazine	1

[a]"Internet—Television news" refers to articles posted on major network or cable news websites, such as cbsnews.com. [b]"Internet—Online newspapers" refers to articles posted on websites devoted to news, such as blackpressusa.com.

Quick! Repair that news!

Generally speaking, intermedia agenda setting, news repair, and finger pointing characterize the coverage. There is considerable overlap in what is actually said or written, in part because writers often relied upon the same sources and each other in constructing their critiques. They simultaneously pointed the finger at media other than themselves while trying to "fix" the problem.

The coverage media begins with two critiques in late summer 2004, one in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* and the other on ABC.com, yet it appears that few other media pay attention. One year later tells a different story. In the wake of the coverage of "runaway bride" Jennifer Wilbanks, in May, 2005, NPR's *News and Notes With*

Ed Gordon runs a commentary by Deborah Mathis, a syndicated columnist and professor at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. Four days later, the *Chicago Tribune* publishes a commentary by Douglas MacKinnon, former press secretary to U.S. Senator Robert Dole. Both commentaries refer to Wilbanks, and question the large amount of coverage about her disappearance.

It appears, however, to be Eugene Robinson's column in the *Washington Post* on June 10, 2005, that really grabs the attention of other media. Headlined "(White) Women We Love," Robinson writes a scathing indictment in which he questions who gets media coverage and why (discussed below). Robinson satirically refers to news coverage of "Damsels in Distress" as one of our era's major themes, along with such topics as terrorism and globalization. Other writers pick up the term "damsel," most notably George Curry of the *Washington Informer* who titles his column, "White Damsels in Distress."

Robinson apparently strikes a nerve: According to the *Washington Post*, his column elicits more than 600 letters and he follows with an online chat on June 14.

Following Robinson's lead, several other media outlets run similar critiques. A month later, the blogosphere truly enters the picture when, despite Robinson's article, the disappearance of Latoyia Figueroa goes unnoticed in the mass-market press and Richard Blair of allspinzone.com condemns the media's lack of attention. Prompted by such online critics, many more critiques follow. It is therefore in June and July of 2005 that we witness a cluster of critiques, seemingly a result of intermedia agenda setting (Figure 2).

Further evidence of intermedia agenda setting is found in the content of the critiques. For example, Mark Memmott of *USA Today* begins his June 15th piece with the disappearance of Tamika Huston, an African American who had received little

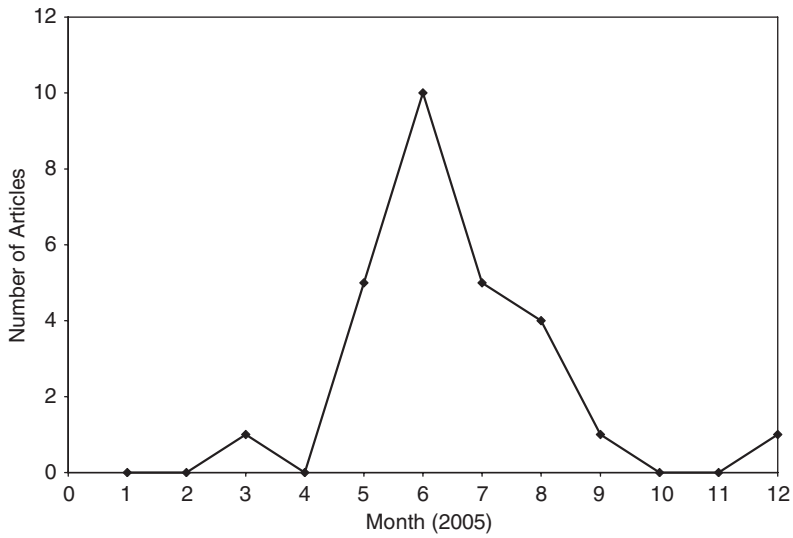

Figure 2 Number of Articles Published by Month in 2005.

to no coverage. In his June 17 column, Howard Kurtz writes, ''Here's the *USA Today* piece by Mark Memmott that got me thinking anew about this. . .'' He then quotes the article's profile of Huston at length, followed by Eugene Robinson's description of a damsel. A month later, Kurtz has Robinson on as a guest on CNN's *Reliable Sources*.

The symbolic annihilation of Huston's case is particularly interesting because her aunt worked in public relations, and knew her way around the media but still was unsuccessful in attracting media attention. Huston's case is referenced repeatedly, as though she is the only non-White person missing. Similarly, once Richard Blair of allspinzone.com champions Figueroa's case, she is frequently referenced as well. Better late than never—perhaps.

Intermedia agenda setting is also evidenced with the sources cited in the critiques. The most frequently appearing is Eugene Robinson, who is sourced in five of the articles. Similarly, Tom Rosenstiel, Director of the Washington-based Project for Excellence in Journalism, and Mark Effron, vice president of news at MSNBC TV, each are quoted in four of the critiques.

Once Robinson attracts so much attention with his column, it is incumbent upon other media to respond. However, it does not serve the economic interests of the industry for dominant news values to be truly questioned. In fact, the MWWS is not so unique—as pointed out earlier, it is merely a blatant example of everyday news processes that systematically privilege some members of society over others. It was therefore necessary for media to control the damage by reappropriating the issue under different cover. One can sense the collective handwringing in the flurry to air or publish a story that would frame the debate and contain the damage. On CNN's *Reliable Sources* (July 31, 2005), Robinson overtly broaches (and mildly criticizes) what appears to be news and paradigm repair: ''So this (coverage of Latoyia Figueroa) is the beginning of a change, or this is what in the NBA would be called a makeup call, and we'll go back to the way things were. I'm not sure.''

BET's website provides a counterhegemonic interpretation with a web minisurvey that asks respondents why the news media began to cover the disappearance of Latoyia Figueroa. One possible survey response: ''They're just covering this story to appease the Black community.''

Unlike Hindman's (2005) study on the Jayson Blair case and *The New York Times*, the media analyzed here do not attribute self-blame. Accounts refer to ''media'' in the third person, as though they, themselves, are not part of the problem. Examples include headlines referencing ''media obsession'' from the *Oakland Tribune* and ''Media skews missing cases. . .'' in *The Decatur* (Tenn.) *Daily News*. Writers point their fingers at their competitors, and this tendency is most apparent in the case of print media taking cable news to task for its saturation coverage. This tendency, which may explain the above headlines, was evident in Mark Mammott's article: ''One question is whether the national media, especially cable networks, give too much attention to stories about missing young white women as opposed to cases involving minorities and men.''

Another example is Cynthia Tucker of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (August 28, 2005), who takes cable news to task. After praising Bob Costas for refusing to host an hour-long *Larry King Live* discussion about Natalee Holloway, she points out that CNN went with a different host: ''And CNN's viewers were subjected to yet another report on a case with no developments, few ramifications for anyone beyond Holloway's loved ones and friends, and indeed, no real mystery.'' She goes on to criticize FOX News and Greta Van Sustern for their saturation coverage.

Members of the ethnic media also failed to critique themselves. Rather, they pointed to the flaws of the majority press. For example, BlackPressUSA.com cited the lack of ''national news coverage,'' and George Curry in *The Washington Informer* criticized ''the White-owned news media.'' Given that White women are not a high coverage priority for most ethnic media, self-critique would have been misplaced and its absence is not surprising.

Anatomy of a syndrome

Most of the media critiques made some effort to define or explain the MWWS, though they did not necessarily use this label. The degree to which the phenomenon was problematized varied. Columns or blogs tended to argue most vociferously against the coverage and assign blame, whereas news stories often provided a ''balanced'' view with network officials arguing that no systematic bias exists.

Perhaps the most hard-hitting attack comes from Eugene Robinson, of the *Washington Post,* in his initial June 10, 2005, column. He names the ''damsel elite'' and their characteristics:

> . . . . the damsels have much in common besides being female. . .A damsel must be white. This requirement is nonnegotiable. It helps if her frame is of dimension that breathless cable television reporters can credibly describe as ''petite,'' and it also helps if she's the kind of woman who wouldn't really mind being called ''petite,'' a woman with a great deal of princess in her personality. She must be attractive—also nonnegotiable.

In describing a damsel, Robinson emphasizes race and appearance. Notably missing is class, unless one considers the term ''princess'' such a reference. He is one of the few, however, who discusses appearance in any detail.

Unlike Robinson, other journalists of color took the opportunity to not only criticize the coverage but also to emphasize the women who were ignored by the media. Fahizah Alim, a *Sacramento Bee* staff writer, is one such journalist. She begins her June 28, 2005, story profiling Evelyn Hernandez, Ardena Carter, and Tamika Huston, devoting a paragraph to each. Her fourth paragraph states simply, ''The disappearances of these three women—all minorities—received spotty local media coverage. None ever made the national news.'' *Essence* magazine ran a spread on eight missing African American women, including a photograph and description of each. Such text helps to humanize these women by pulling them out of obscurity, but

there is no evidence here that such coverage would have ensued without the MWWS critique. The latter may have prompted the ethnic press to reconsider its coverage of missing people.

Other critiques also began to profile missing persons who had up to that point received no coverage. These included White men, Black men, and Black women, and were frequently accompanied by FBI statistics revealing how many people disappear each year. This content aided in the efforts to repair the news by attempting to show that these media really did value and care about all missing people. Interestingly, the binary of Black and White permeated many such critiques—Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics were mentioned much less frequently.

This emphasis on race over other indicators of the MWWS such as class, age, or appearance (recall that the women who garner coverage typically fall within the beauty ideals of White middle-class America) was common. Headlines are indicative of this tendency, with 25 of them mentioning race. For example, "Racial Profiling?" (Howard Kurtz in the *Washington Post*, June 17, 2005); "White women missing? Not on cable news" (*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, August 28, 2005); "Missing white female alert. Why won't the media cover missing minority women?" (*Chicago Tribune*, May 8, 2005); "Race Bias in Media Coverage of Missing Women?" (CNN Showbiz Tonight, March 17, 2006). Not only is race privileged over other attributes here, several of the headlines literally question whether the coverage presents a problem at all.

Kristal Brent Zook, of Columbia University, is quoted in the June 16, 2005, *Decatur* (Tenn) *Daily News* challenging this emphasis on race: "Who's appealing? Who's sexy? . . . It has a lot to do with class and sexuality and ageism, not just race." Ironically, the story's headline, which once again questions whether there is a problem, reduces it to race: "Media skews missing cases of minorities?" Zook is not alone in her recognition that class, age, and gender are also important considerations. The other striking example is an editorial cartoon appearing in the *Scranton Times-Tribune* (June 13, 2005). It shows an African American reporter at the door of his editor's office. The White editor is at his desk reading a newspaper with the front page headline, "HORRORS! Another White blonde teen girl is missing!"

Reporter: Boss—Got a great missing girl story for tomorrow.
Editor: Is she blonde?
Reporter: Er. . .No.
Editor: Teenage?
Reporter: Uh. . . .
Editor: White?
Reporter: . . .
Editor: Put it inside the Local Section.

For the most part, however, the critiques indicate that race remains the most important signifier—this practice is reified by the label Missing *White* Woman

Syndrome. It is noteworthy, however, that many critiques did not use this terminology, yet emphasized race nonetheless.

Just as the original coverage symbolically annihilated many missing persons, the construction of gender in these critiques frequently dehumanizes and diminishes the girls and women who did receive coverage. Eugene Robinson begins this trend when he introduces the label "damsel," and the term "Damsels in Distress." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, damsel was originally used to connote a "young unmarried lady of noble birth," although today the label includes those of other social classes as well. Often found in medieval romances, damsels are helpless, not particularly intelligent, and in need of rescue by knights in shining armor. Damsels in distress are evidenced contemporarily in other forms of popular culture, such as victims in video games in which they are likely thrown over a shoulder and carried off (e.g., Dietz, 1998). Regardless of the venue in which they are located, damsels are rarely (if ever) the source of respect. The term is therefore simultaneously sexist, patriarchal, and disempowering. So while most of the critiques rightly highlight news biases, the strategy of some is to do so by caricaturizing the women or girls who the media covered.

Damsel is not the only demeaning term used to describe the missing (and/or dead) White women. MSNBC quotes Tom Rosenstiel, of the Project for Excellence in Journalism: "To be blunt, ***blond white chicks*** who go missing get covered and poor, black, Hispanic or other people of color who go missing do not get covered." In the same piece, Zook, of Columbia University, refers to "The ***virginal, pure blond princess***. . ." (emphasis added). Both quotes appear in other critiques as well. Such gendered language is consistent with other descriptions of women in the news, such as "runaway bride," which is also used repeatedly in the critiques.

The blame game: It's not my fault

The critiques offered a variety of reasons for the MWWS, several of which paralleled the influences on news discussed in media sociology literature (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). These include individual-, organizational-, and societal-level factors.

One of the most oft-cited reasons was the nature of the journalistic workforce. Many critiques suggested that increased diversity would lead to a greater awareness and broader definition of newsworthiness. The *Sacramento Bee*'s lengthy story on June 25, 2005, was characteristic, providing examples of missed stories, and ASNE and RTNDA workforce statistics. *The New York Times* (August 7, 2005) even quoted former president Bill Clinton at the annual convention of the National Association of Black Journalists, who said individual experiences affect news decisions. In the *Bee* story, Dori Maynard, of the Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, put it this way: ". . .because these decision makers are predominately white and middle-or-upper-middle-class, these young white women are people they can identify with. They think, 'It could be my wife, my daughter or sister.' "

Many of the critiques seem to blame what Heider (2000) calls incognizant racism—the fact that majority reporters fail to pick up on events and issues outside

their own experiences. Take for example the Mathis commentary (mentioned above): ''It doesn't take a conspiracy to put a Tamika Huston on the back burner. It's not necessarily that TV producers or hosts meet and decide not to cover the mystery of Tamika's fate. ***It's that it never occurs to them to cover it"*** (emphasis added). Rowland Martin of the *Chicago Defender* and WBON Radio, appearing on CNN's *Showbiz Tonight* on March 17, 2006, put it this way: ''I think part of the problem is, frankly, you have mostly bookers in television, producers who are white and it's a comfort zone. That's what you know, that is what you expect and so, you don't leave the comfort zone to think about other types of stories.'' And George Curry in *The Washington Informer*, ''. . .we're seeing some White's editors viewing the world through their own limited prisms.'' Several sources referred to the notion of an ''unconscious bias,'' which seemed to free media workers of responsibility.

Critiques also pointed to newsgathering routines or news values as culpable in producing what Howard Kurtz on CNN called ''runaway'' coverage (a take-off of the ''runaway bride'' label assigned to Jennifer Wilbanks). Several critiques suggested slow news days, a possible cause most typically suggested by network executives. Others pointed to the traditional news value of ''unusualness.'' Mark Effron, vice president of news at MSNBC, appears in several critiques defending the amount of coverage: ''. . .it's like saying '99 percent of the nations in the world are not at war so why are you focusing on war?' But Iraq is an extraordinary event involving Americans. What makes news is the unexpected.''

Some critiques took a grimmer view of how unusualness affected the coverage. Quoted in the *Sacramento Bee*, Dori Maynard of the Maynard Institute suggests that majority audiences do not consider it unusual for something bad to happen to a minority. ''If (minorities) come up missing, the assumption is that some pathology is involved,'' she states. This linkage is consistent with research showing that news media often portray African Americans in relation to crime.

In the age of reality TV and the increased blurring of news and entertainment, it is not surprising that critiques pointed to the nature of news itself. Such is the case in the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* in its early critique on August 15, 2004: ''Cases like Peterson's and Lori Hacking's fit perfectly into a news diet increasingly built on tasty little tapas—gossipy snippets that are easy to digest and cost little in thought. . . So what if we lose the ability to distinguish what matters from what doesn't? We may not be informed. But at least we'll be titillated.'' One wonders, of course, who ''we'' is—seemingly the majority White, middle-class audience.

Similarly, quoted in the *Sacramento Bee*, Karen Dunlap, president of the Poynter Institute, likens the coverage to a soap opera. ''The best character for the soap opera is one the public will identify with, and that makes it less likely that the character will be a person of color.''

Others also reference the ''drama'' of the missing White woman linking the story to race. Most explicit was Eugene Robinson writing in the *Washington Post*: ''It's the meta narrative of something seen as precious and delicate being snatched away, defiled, destroyed by evil forces that lurk in the shadows just outside the bedroom

window. It's whiteness under siege. It's innocence and optimism crushed by cruel reality. It's a flower smashed by a rock.'' And later in the online chat: ''There is the sense of the 'lady fair' being threatened by dark forces—and I mean dark in the literal sense.''

Here, Robinson clearly refers to the fears of the White viewer, contextualizing the coverage in broader cultural narratives. Cynthia Tucker of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* similarly writes about the construction of the ''other'': ''And it may go back to our primitive beginnings, to an instinct for identifying the 'other' as dangerous.''

Racism is also linked with market forces that privilege some over others. ''Reporters and editors defend their choices by saying they are responding to the market, giving the viewers what they want. It's reminiscent of the store owners who said they didn't have a problem accommodating Negro customers, it was their white customers who didn't want Negroes in the store,'' writes Brenda Payton, in an *Oakland Tribune* editorial. Cynthia Tucker says that the ''fine science of marketing research'' will probably prove FOX News right: Saturation coverage attracts viewers, while Douglas MacKinnon in the *Chicago Tribune* writes of ratings and quotes an anonymous cable network source: ''We showcase missing, young, white attractive women because our research shows we get more viewers. It's about beating the competition and ad dollars.''

This marginalization of minorities was also discussed in critiques that argued that media devalue the lives of some members of society. In the *American Chronicle* (December 16, 2005), writer Rasheen Akron Allen concludes, ''. . .the news media's actions show an overall negative view and borderline disdain for the lives of minorities.'' Peter Roy Clark of the Poynter Institute, quoted online by ABC News, situates the MWWS historically:

> And some old racist views of crime still influence subconsciously the decisions we make. There was a time in American life that in big newspapers in big cities, the terrible distinction was made between good murders and bad murders. The bad murder was the poor gang member killed in the projects. The good murder of the rich white socialite, or the murder of the debutante perhaps killed by her ex-boyfriend.

Conclusion

This study has explored the extent to which media critique provides an effective forum for exploring the influences on whom and what becomes news, or whether such reports and columns merely provide window dressing to rationalize weak and/or racist reporting. Haas (2006) suggests that effective media criticism will include consideration of commercial interests and organizational pressures, as well as journalistic routines and norms. He also states that criticism should be directed both at oneself and others. Although self-criticism is absent here, critiques did, in the aggregate, cover the factors Haas suggests. Few writers discussed all of them, but

many did not shy away from hard-hitting analyses. The data indicate that minority journalists or news organizations produced the most comprehensive critiques. This finding is not surprising as Whites are less likely than nonWhites to recognize White privilege, here manifested in the MWWS.

Critiques originated with newspapers more than any other medium, and they were most likely to blame cable news for the MWWS. Cable news provided an easy target, given its around-the clock-coverage of the Holloway, Peterson, Wilbanks, and other cases. But all types of news organizations, newspapers included, had failed to cover cases such as those of Evelyn Hernandez and Latoyia Figueroa. They, too, should have been held responsible for the MWWS.

One possible reason newspapers were not taken to task was that critics did not look in the mirror, failing to reflect upon the performance of their own news organizations. Haas (2006) suggests that genuine self-criticism is rare, and this finding is further consistent with past research (Fengler, 2003, p. 353) that finds that news critics are loath to engage in self-critique ''for fear of upsetting their employer and their business practices.'' This lack of self-critique promises little for transformative change. It may be that, in the competitive arena of contemporary media, media critique serves primarily as a means of promoting one's own self interests—look how bad the other guys are, and in comparison, we are doing okay.

As for paradigm change, disparities in coverage remain and continue to be noted. For example, BlackPressUSA.com ran a story in April, 2009, titled, ''Double Standard: Missing Black Women Still Get Less Media Than Whites.'' Similarly, The Tamika Huston Foundation for the Missing (TamikaHuston.org) cites the following on its homepage: ''The Foundation, dedicated to the memory of Tamika Antonette Huston, particularly seeks to draw attention to the thousands of open missing person cases across the United States that fail to garner local, regional, or national media attention—an important component which often aids in the search of missing persons.'' Indeed, the Internet has become a venue for widespread criticism from minority groups, feminists, and other social activists, but most of these discussions take place outside of mainstream media circles.

Clearly, for a true paradigm change to occur, news needs to transform in order to more fully embrace members of all segments of society. Phenomena of which the MWWS is symbolic continue to manifest in daily news coverage that engages in symbolic annihilation, marginalization, demonization, and trivialization (Artz & Murphy, 2000). Notably, these practices are not unique to U.S. news coverage, as indicated by studies such as Jiwani and Young's (2006) and Gilchrist's (2008) analyses of Canadian Aboriginal missing women.

This study analyzed news media-generated copy only. Yet even within this context it is apparent that the Internet had influence. Television news was more likely to put a critique online than on air, indicating that cyberspace may be perceived as a safer place to engage in media criticism. J-blogs and online chats were used minimally, but offered the opportunity for audience engagement. Further exploration of the role of the audience in media self-critique is warranted, as it is not the focus here. Also,

one wonders whether many of these critiques would have been produced at all if online media and communities had not prompted the discussion, so the relationship between the Internet and media critique generation should be examined further.

Interestingly, according to these critiques, the factors leading to the MWWS are congruent with individual, organizational, and extramedia influences discussed in the mass communications scholarly literature. Critiques pointed to racism at all of these levels as responsible for the MWWS, an encouraging sign given past research on media coverage of race. Again, however, it would be more impressive had these issues been discussed in terms of one's own news organization. Perhaps not possible in a news story, but columnists could certainly tackle such issues.

The construction of gender is troubling here, with columnists and sources taking jabs at the women who *had* received media attention—a new take on "blame the victim." While past research has identified news media's tendency to report women as culpable in their own victim status (Liebler, 2004; Meyers, 2004), it is particularly striking that some critics seemed to view the coverage as a zero-sum game. As a result, some of the subtleties and complexities surrounding the MWWS went unexplored, as class, age, and appearance received only passing reference as adjectives to describe what types of women attract media attention.

As Andrew Hacker (1995, p. 3) writes in *Two Nations. Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal*, race has remained "an American obsession since the first Europeans sighted 'savages' on these shores." In such a cultural context, it is perhaps unsurprising that media critiques focus on race and fail to address the intersectionality of missing women's identities: News organizations are more likely to respond to allegations of racism, whereas less identifiable dimensions of difference such as class go unnoted. bell hooks (1995) argues that American mass media are well entrenched in sending a message of White supremacy; if this is the case, allegations of racism must be explained away so that the dominant news paradigm remains intact.

This study suggests that the evolution of media to allow for more critical forums has allowed for critiques that might not have appeared in the past. But these critiques themselves seemingly face the constraints and influences true of any news work and have not yet evolved to include the less obvious aspects of the phenomena they examine. Moreover, the present analysis indicates that mass-market media organizations may engage in critique in order to appropriate the criticism that has surfaced outside their boundaries, in an effort to dilute it. For example, in the Latoyia Figueroa case cited above, it was only when such criticism surfaced in the blogosphere that news media outlets paid heed. As the Internet increasingly becomes a mobilizing tool, it would appear that traditional definitions of newsworthiness reflective of a dominant paradigm will be further challenged—whether it be in the United States or elsewhere. Those who are invested in maintaining the validity of their paradigm to both themselves and the public (Berkowitz, 2000) will need to rationalize and contain problematic allegations. In an environment in which news media are struggling to keep their audiences, the question then becomes whether we will witness a paradigm shift, or simply more efforts at paradigm repair.

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¿Me(di)a Culpa?: El Síndrome de la “Mujer Blanca Desaparecida’’ y la Auto-Crítica de los Medios

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Resumen

Este análisis textual explora la auto-crítica de los medios en respuesta a la cobertura de noticias de las mujeres desaparecidas. Este estudio encuentra evidencia del establecimiento de la agenda entre los medios y las noticias de reparación. Las críticas enfatizan la raza, y el racismo es identificado como la primera causa del Síndrome de la Mujer Blanca Desaparecida. Pero la clase, la edad, y la apariencia no son investigadas en profundidad alguna, y los aspectos más sutiles del fenómeno no son explorados. Los hallazgos indican que las críticas mismas pueden confrontar las limitaciones y las influencias verdaderas de cualquier trabajo de noticias.

媒体（我）的过失？：“白人女性失踪综合症”与媒体的自我批判

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【摘要：】

该文本分析探讨媒体在应对失踪的女性报道中的自我批判。该研究为媒体间的议程设置与新闻修复提供了论据。自我批评注重强调种族，因为种族主义是“白人女性失踪综合症”的首要原因。但是阶级、年龄和外貌并未被深入调查，并且“白人女性失踪综合症”这一现象更多微妙的方面并未被充分挖掘。研究结果表明，与任何新闻工作一样，自我批评本身也会受到制约和面临影响。

***Me(di)a culpa* ? Le « syndrome de la femme blanche disparue » et l'autocritique médiatique**

Carol M. Liebler

Cette analyse textuelle explore l'autocritique médiatique en réaction à la couverture journalistique des disparitions de femmes. L'étude révèle des occurrences de mise à l'ordre du jour intermédia et de réparation journalistique. Les critiques soulignent l'ethnicité tandis que le racisme est identifié comme étant la cause principale du syndrome de la femme blanche disparue (plus connu sous son nom anglais, *Missing White Woman Syndrome*). Mais la classe sociale, l'âge et l'apparence ne sont pas investigués et des aspects plus subtils du phénomène restent inexplorés. Les résultats indiquent que les critiquent peuvent eux-mêmes et elles-mêmes faire face aux contraintes et aux influences de n'importe quel travail journalistique.

Me(di)a culpa?: „Das „Vermisste Weiße Frau Syndrom“ und mediale Selbstkritik

Carol M. Liebler

Diese Textanalyse untersucht mediale Selbstkritik als Antwort auf die Nachrichtenberichterstattung über vermisste Frauen. Die Studie findet Hinweise auf intermediales Agenda-Setting und Normalisierung der Nachrichten (News Repair). Kritiker heben besonders den Aspekt Rasse hervor und identifizieren Rassismus als wichtigsten Grund für das „Vermisste Weiße Frau Syndrom“. Klasse, Alter und Aussehen werden allerdings nur oberflächlich betrachtet, subtilere Aspekte dieses Phänomens werden ganz ausgeblendet. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Kritiker selbst mit den Grenzen und Einflüssen, die auf alle Nachrichtennetzwerke zutreffen, konfrontiert sind.

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Me(di)a culpa?: The ‘‘Missing White Woman Syndrome’’ and Media Self-Critique

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요약

본 텍스트 분석은 실종여성의 뉴스보도에 대한 반응으로서 미디어 자기 비판을 탐구했다. 본 연구는 상호미디어 아젠다세팅과 뉴스 보완의 증거를 발견했다. 비판들은 인종, 그리고 인종주의는 실종백인여성증후군의 주요 원인으로서 동일시 되었다. 그러나 계급, 나이, 그리고 용모는 더이상 깊게 연구되지 않았으며, 이러한 현상의 더 미묘한 측면들이 더이상 연구되지는 않았다.발견들은 비판들 자신들이 어떤 뉴스 작업의 제한과 영향에 직면할 수도 있다는 것을 보여주고 있다.