Parachuting into crises:

Applying postcolonial theory to analyze national, regional, and local media coverage

of civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri

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INTRODUCTION

When incidents deemed worthy of national attention occur, news organizations from outside of the affected region send journalists in to the area, with which they likely are unfamiliar, to cover the story. That reporting — dubbed parachute journalism — can influence national discussion about the events and overshadow local reporting, the latter of which often offers more context than does journalism produced by outsiders. Such "parachute journalism" has been called problematic because of the lack of context it offers, although others have heralded the reporting as a means to add fresh perspectives to a situation. Using the lens of postcolonial theory, this study explores parachute journalism through a textual analysis of regional and national coverage of the civil unrest that transpired in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014 as compared to coverage by smaller, local news outlets that had routinely reported on the communities affected by the turmoil.

Before the police shooting of unarmed 18-year-old Michael Brown in August 2014, Ferguson was a relatively unknown suburb of St. Louis with a population of about 20,000. In fact, online interest in the St. Louis suburb had been inconsequential for at least a decade prior, according to an Internet traffic report generated via Google Trends (2015). A long-time Ferguson resident also noted that news media were largely unfamiliar with the culture of the northern St. Louis suburb (Wenger, 2014). In a letter to the largest regional newspaper, *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* that resident, Nancy K. Wenger (2014), wrote, "The media has seldom visited our town, except to run a camera crew down tornado-strewn streets twice in the past three years." After the

shooting, Ferguson quickly became known around the world, and the incident sparked a nationwide discussion on policing tactics, institutional racism, and the perception of young African-American men in American society.

Specifically, Brown's death became a focal point of the Black Lives Matter movement, which contends that persistent racism exists in American police tactics, as well as in other social systems (Altman, 2014). The movement originally stemmed from the acquittal of George Zimmerman after he killed an unarmed black teenager, Trayvon Martin, and gained wider recognition following Brown's death, largely thanks to social media (Jackson and Welles, 2015). Because of that international attention, however, Brown and the police officer who shot him, Darren Wilson, arguably have been reduced to symbols — one a symbol of the civil rights movement among African Americans, the other a symbol of racism in predominantly white police forces (Touré, 2014). The name "Ferguson" itself became a rallying cry for those in the movement and home base for the mourners, activists, and news crews who arrived from around the world.

Despite the quick influx of outsiders, the first few days of discussion on Twitter about Brown's death and the subsequent unrest largely was driven by African-American residents of the greater St. Louis area, according to an analysis of "#Ferguson" by communication scholars Sarah Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles (2015). In terms of the number of retweets and mentions, local media, too, were among the top Twitter users engaging in conversation about "#Ferguson" from August 9, 2014, through August 15, 2014, those scholars found. Then, the "parachute

journalists" from national media began to overpower some of the local voices, offering commentary that lacked local knowledge, as Wenger (2014) wrote in her letter to *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. At least one Ferguson resident tried to combat the lack of understanding by working with out-of-town media. During the first weeks of demonstrations in Ferguson, Christopher Phillips, a 33-year-old freelance cinematographer, coached journalists who were unfamiliar with the area, "just telling them how to talk to residents," he told *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Miller, 2014).

A number of the outside reporters in Ferguson were the targets of harsh criticism from journalist Ryan Schuessler (2014). In a blog post explaining why he no longer would be reporting from Ferguson (he had been covering the unrest for Al Jazeera America at the time), Schuessler wrote that local residents initially thanked him for bringing attention to the city's problems. As more parachute journalists arrived in Ferguson — he estimated there were hundreds by August 21, 2014 — residents became cold toward him. Schuessler partially blamed the residents' frustration on what he considered to be journalists' insensitive behavior. He wrote that those insensitive actions included TV crews laughing near the site of Brown's death while residents mourned nearby, cameramen yelling at residents to move from their camera shots, and one reporter calling the situation a "networking opportunity" and later asking for a picture with CNN's Anderson Cooper (Schuessler, 2014).

The St. Louis American, a weekly publication targeted toward African Americans in the region, published some of the harshest criticism of the parachute journalists. Regional news media also chimed in on the negative criticism of out-of-

town journalists and their coverage. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* published a column

by an editor about the worldwide media coverage of Ferguson. In it, the editor wrote

that the chaos was isolated to a small part of the community and involved a relatively

small number of local residents, but as "a local story erupted … the frightening images

distorted how local residents perceive their community" (Bailon, 2014). St. Louis TV

station KMOV-TV feared its reports would lead to a distorted image of the community

as well, so it deliberately avoided "live play-by play of disturbances" in an attempt to

not inflame the unrest, news director Brian Thouvenot told *The Washington Post*

(Farhi, 2014). "This is our community, too," the news director said (Farhi, 2014).

Images and stories of looting, unrest, and violence were common topics

covered by seemingly all of the publications that reported on Ferguson. Though some

decried that negative attention, one *St. Louis American* columnist extended a

worldwide thanks to those "who kept an eye on us for more than two weeks strong"

(Shante, 2014). She specifically complimented local print, broadcast, and radio

coverage of the unrest, though she gave the "highest praise" to all of the journalists

who had dedicated their time to covering the situation. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

also gave a nod to outsiders' reporting on Ferguson through its compilation of a list of

articles published on other news sites, such as *The New York Times, The Washington

Post* and *Time* (O'Malley, 2014).

Those reports varied in the angles, tone, and even facts they conveyed, but

some information seemed to be accepted as true by most media outlets. They agreed

that 18-year-old Michael Brown was walking in the middle of West Florissant Avenue

in Ferguson, Missouri, with 22-year-old Dorian Johnson at about noon on August 9, 2014. The young men, both black, were stopped by a white police officer, who later was identified as Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson. A confrontation ensued among the men, although accounts vary as to what actually happened. What is confirmed is that Brown was killed after being shot multiple times by Wilson. It was later revealed that minutes before Brown and Johnson came into contact with Wilson, the two young men had stolen about $50 worth of cigarillos — some media called them "cigars" — from a convenience store. Surveillance video footage showed Brown allegedly shoving the store clerk on the way out. Though the police were called about the incident in the convenience store, it was unclear whether Wilson made the connection that Brown and Johnson were the suspects in the alleged robbery when he confronted them on the street and, after a struggle, shot and killed Brown.

What followed were weeks of protests and allegations of widespread police brutality toward black men. Those protests were well-documented thanks to a media frenzy that attracted hundreds of reporters from around the world to set up mobile work stations in the streets of Ferguson. Many of those journalists had never heard nor set foot in Ferguson prior to August 2014, yet they broadcasted updates of the unrest and stories from the city to their respective audiences with a rhetoric of authority and supposed local knowledge. They were quintessential "parachute journalists."

LITERATURE REVIEW

'Parachute journalism' as a theoretical concept

"Parachute journalism" refers to a situation in which journalists flock to the site of a major news event in a location that typically receives little if any news coverage beyond that provided by local media. The concept mainly has been applied to foreign correspondents, but the term also can apply to situations in which journalists from large, national-level media cover events in smaller communities within their home countries. Journalism scholar Justin D. Martin (2011) defined a parachute journalist as: "a reporter who drops into a country for a relatively short period of time, files a story or a handful of dispatches, then leaves." Parachute journalism has been happening as long as reporters have been able to travel quickly (Erickson and Hamilton, 2007). When done well, it offers thoughtful context about places with which readers are unfamiliar, media scholar Sharyn Wizda (1997) wrote. When done poorly, which Wizda argued happens too often, "they turn into one-dimensional 'parachute pieces' that capture only the most popular or newsworthy clichés about a town" (p. 42). Parachute journalism has been described as only skimming the surface of stories, exaggerating stereotypes, and offering overly narrow perspectives about the communities they visit (Ricchiardi, 2006; Wizda, 1997; Spurr, 1993).

Despite its drawbacks, parachute journalism also can contribute to the diversity of voices in news coverage. Communication scholar Mark Burgess (2012) argued that for outlets with a non-global audience, a journalist with a similar outside perspective to the audience's viewpoint provides a clearer explanation of foreign events for the

target readers. He argued that is the case even when local reporting can offer historical context and more fully explain the culture's complexities in ways outsiders cannot. Some news outlets, such as *The Washington Post*, view international reporting as something that should be dictated more by expertise than by location, media scholars Emily Erickson and John Maxwell Hamilton (2007) wrote. That means the reporter with the most robust knowledge of democratic theory, for example, would cover issues of democracy throughout the globe (Erickson and Maxwell Hamilton, 2007). Knowledge of a subject, however, does not always equate to the ability to provide context.

Failing to provide context can be detrimental to the larger understanding of a situation, journalist Anjan Sundaram (2014) wrote. In the mid-2000s, Sundaram was one of a handful of foreign reporters living and working in the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo. Unlike his competitors who stayed in $300-per-night hotels, Sundaram lived among the Congolese, sharing their meals, hiding with them in times of trouble, and getting to know their children. In an opinion piece published in *The New York Times*, he criticized the reporters whom he considered to be neglecting to report on anything but big political news from such countries. He wrote, "The telltale sign of such mythical, distant reporting is a distinct assuredness. … Such narratives can be easy to digest. But they tell us only a portion of the story" (Sundaram, 2014).

Parachute journalists may not report on topics other than big political news or natural disasters in areas like the Democratic Republic of the Congo because of a supposed lack of interest in such stories. The two biggest impediments to foreign news

bureaus and sending reporters far from the office are money and interest, according to Roy Gutman, who was *Newsday*'s European bureau chief in the 1990s (Enda, 2011). Editors often are not interested in routine news coverage in foreign countries (Enda, 2011). So war and extreme social and political unrest in "places where the story is obvious" are what most often attract journalists to visit a foreign country, Gutman said (Enda, 2011).

Any coverage abroad comes at a cost. It costs hundreds of thousands of dollars per year to maintain a far-flung bureau, and includes the cost of correspondents' travel expenses, office rent, and employee compensation, Gutman said (Enda, 2011). Erickson and Maxwell Hamilton (2007) argued that because of the cost of maintaining numerous bureaus, "the prudent approach" is to send reporters to locations only when there is a story there, as opposed to having a constant on-the-ground presence (p. 135). Any loss in foreign news coverage is "egregious," Gutman said, and is causing journalists to sacrifice knowledge of the place, its people, and its pulse (p. 23). Sundaram argued that journalists can keep the cost of reporting abroad reasonable — something as simple as making inexpensive living arrangements could be all that is needed to keep journalists immersed in the foreign cultures they cover.

The decline in foreign news bureaus means parachute journalists are handed the responsibility of determining which stories to cover without significant knowledge of the place. After speaking to numerous foreign reporters, Erickson and Maxwell Hamilton (2006) concluded that parachute journalists never could quite replace permanently stationed reporters. "It is of considerable concern that a newspaper like

USA Today, which not only purports to be a national newspaper but also sells itself

overseas as an international newspaper, has so few foreign reporters stationed abroad,"

the scholars wrote (p. 44). So when tasked with selecting which stories are

newsworthy, reporters look for something dramatic, media scholar Simon Cottle

(2013) argued. Rather than cover the regular activities of government, consistent

social issues, or developments of local culture, parachute journalists tend to cover

large, tumultuous events, such as "disasters that can produce dramatic scenes of rescue

and images of human endurance and heroism" (Cottle, 2013, p. 236).

Communication scholar Barbie Zelizer (1992) called disasters and similar

news events "critical incidents," or events through which a society "assesses its own

significance" (p. 67). Zelizer analyzed CNN's coverage of the Gulf War in the early

1990s to explain the role of journalism in critical incidents. CNN's coverage was

heavily influenced by the technology that allowed reporters to broadcast from the

battlefield in a continuous stream of live coverage. Reporters seemingly could bring

the war to viewers, allowing viewers to make connections with a part of the world

with which they were unfamiliar. However, because of the nature of parachute

journalism in war zones, journalists were confined to the same secured areas and

attended the same public-information sessions. Consequently, much of the coverage of

the Gulf War was focused on the journalists themselves, and the "emphasis on

television news sometimes turned non-newsworthy events into news, largely because

television technology was there to report them" (Zelizer, 1992, p. 70). As such,

parachute journalists covering the Gulf War likely focused more on the journalistic

goal of "getting the story" than on connecting audiences with complex aspects of critical incidents.

Journalism is often lauded for its role of creating connections for audiences, interpreting events for them, and providing information quickly (Weaver et al., 2007). During World War II, well-known journalist Edward R. Murrow arguably engaged in "parachute journalism" when he reported live from London rooftops during and after bombing raids by Nazi Germany. Writer Archibald MacLeish described Murrow's rooftop radio reports as one reason Americans eventually decided to enter the war. "[Murrow] burned the city of London in our houses and we felt the flames that burned it. [He] laid the dead of London at our doors," MacLeish said (cited in Seib, 2007, p. 151). Murrow was on the front lines, which contributed to him becoming Americans' most trusted reporter for war updates (American Masters, 2007), and because he was portrayed to be in the action, Murrow wielded what Cottle (2013) called "a claim to authority" (p. 234). Murrow's audience, mainly the American public, could not easily verify his claims, nor did Americans receive much information about day-to-day life within London or in other parts of England that were not under direct attack. That meant Murrow was the public's main source of information about the war. News organizations looking for that claim to authority send reporters to cover incidents from the center of the conflict, even if the events are far from the places journalists normally cover and even if the conflict is relatively isolated.

Increased global interdependence thanks to technology has muted some of the shock journalists may encounter when arriving to a new location, according to media

scholars David D. Perlmutter and Maxwell Hamilton (2007), as some context can be gathered online before landing. For accurate reporting, context — knowledge of the background leading to an event — is key, according to journalism scholar Sherry Ricchiardi (2006). It is something the Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics (2014) demands journalists "take special care" in providing. In the society's casebook of professional conduct for news media, it also calls on journalists to keep from imposing their cultural values on others, to "give voice to the voiceless," and to avoid stereotyping — all ethical considerations many parachute journalists allegedly have defied in their work (Brown et al., 2011; Ricchiardi, 2006; Mitchell and Lundstrom, 2002). In an article written for Poynter by media ethicists Marjie Lundstrom and Bill Mitchell (2002), the authors argued that the use of stereotypes and clichés compromises a news organization's credibility and fosters "geographic bias." The authors argued that such ethical dilemmas arise most often when journalism is done by those unfamiliar with the area rather than by local journalists.

Ethical problems, however, can arise if journalists are personally too close with the people and places they cover regularly (Brown et al., 2011). The Society of Professional Journalists' professional conduct codebook addresses the ethical complications for local journalists covering a story to which they are personally attached (Brown et al., 2011). If, for example, a journalist is covering the destruction of his or her hometown, there is a personal stake in the reporting. Parachute journalists lack that connection, and subsequently the ethical dilemma of how to cover stories to which they are closely tied. That may, however, diminish parachute journalists'

feelings of accountability toward the people and the places on which they report, yet another ethical dilemma.

Ricchiardi (2006) argued that reporters with a localized knowledge almost always will have a leg up on parachute journalists, even if those outside journalists are free from the ethical question of being too close to a story. Ricchiardi studied how Western media scrambled to send reporters to the Middle East when violence broke out between Israel and Hezbollah in the mid-2000s. In the scramble to cover the dramatic conflict in the Middle East, outside reporters failed to comprehend the historical context that led to the violence, the journalism scholar argued. Ricchiardi concluded that the parachute journalists' reporting lacked depth, due in part to the clichéd and superficial descriptions the journalists wove through their stories.

Cries against cliché-filled stories also followed the reporting done by parachute journalists who landed in Kingman, Arizona, in the mid-1990s (Wizda, 1997). Kingman is where Timothy McVeigh plotted the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City. After the bombing, the people of Kingman became victims of what Wizda (1997) called over-generalized and "one-dimensional 'parachute pieces' that capture only the most popular or newsworthy clichés about a town" (p. 42). Multiple out-of-town journalists jumped into Kingman and quickly decided to describe the town as a gun-toting haven — an easy first impression to gather, though locals deemed the description unfair. One reporter considered soft news features about the town to be "a collection of clichés," leaving Kingman characterized as a tavern-filled, military town (p. 43). Similarly, numerous towns throughout the United States have "been

targeted in the name of news" when critical incidents cause their names to come up,

Wizda wrote (p. 42). Another example is the tiny mining town of Sago, West Virginia.

In January 2006, a coal mine accident in Sago incorrectly was reported to be a

"miracle" after a rescuer miscommunicated that of the 13 men trapped in a mine

collapse, all but one had been found alive, when in fact only one survived (Kitch,

2007). The accident made international headlines, and parachute journalists crafted a

narrative of Sago that presented it as a middle-class, family-centric rural town nestled

in the Appalachian Mountains. Journalism scholar Carolyn Kitch (2007) argued that

local coverage of the accident offered "closer attention to every facet of the story" and

poked holes in the national media's storyline of the "good, simple, mountain folks" (p.

125). For example, local news outlets reported on the rates of domestic violence in

coal-mining communities instead of contributing to the idealistic view of Sago as a

quaint town. Kitch found that much of the national media coverage emphasized the

working-class values of West Virginia residents — who were portrayed as "others" in

comparison to the national audience who was presumed to be more modern. National

media turned Sago's real story of disaster and struggle into a misleading tale of

national unity, hope, and nostalgia for simpler times (Kitch, 2007).

  In other cases, national reporting has told a different story than local media

altogether. Parachute-journalism coverage of Hurricane Katrina is one example. The

unusually large and powerful storm struck the coasts of Louisiana, Mississippi, and

Alabama in August 2005, and particularly devastated economically struggling black

neighborhoods in the New Orleans area. Journalists, both those who parachuted in and

those who were from the area, were unprepared for the intensity of the hurricane, according to a study by Guido H. Stempel III (2010). In New Orleans, where the majority of the hurricane coverage was focused during the first 24 hours of the storm, non-local journalists congregated in central locations that were on higher ground (specifically, the tourism-focused downtown area), so they saw a different New Orleans than local reporters who lived and/or worked in the less affluent, residential neighborhoods that were destroyed by flooding. Some New Orleans journalists said national coverage of the hurricane, overall, did what was expected of it: It provided a broader perspective with fewer nuances than local reporting meant for a local audience did. Local reporters had a responsibility to inform residents of where to go for help, which neighborhoods had been impacted, and whether locals should leave the city, Chris Slaughter, news director of WWL-TV in New Orleans, told Stempel. National media did not share that same level of responsibility to the local residents, Slaughter said.

Both local and non-local journalists, however, share an obligation to check their privilege when reporting, according English scholar David Spurr (1993). Spurr argued that journalism that romanticizes "other" places without depth in the reporting contributes to the "colonization of the other," meaning it defines the place and its people in terms of the writer's own cultural biases as opposed to the culture of the locals. That happens, Spurr argued, because there is a lack of diversity in the voices that most often dominate media. When out-of-town journalists arrive to cover a story, they have the "privilege" of being a journalist, Spurr wrote. "The privilege of

inspecting, of examining, of looking at, by its nature excludes the journalist from the human reality constituted as the object of observation" (Spurr, p. 13). Journalists, consequently, need to evaluate their word choices, acknowledge and address their point of observation, explore their interests and those of their audiences, and actively engage with a diverse spectrum of voices. Spurr added that journalists often have the privilege of leaving struggling communities, while those they are covering do not.

Media coverage of civil unrest in the United States

For decades, big-media journalists from throughout the United States have parachuted in to cover unrest that has followed the deaths of African-American males at the hands of white police and vigilantes. It occurred in the 1950s when 14-year-old Emmett Till was lynched and killed in Mississippi after allegedly flirting with a white woman, and again in 1980 when Arthur McDuffie was killed in Miami, Florida, by four white police officers. A decade later, media descended on Los Angeles, California, where race riots broke out after Los Angeles police officers beat black taxi driver Rodney King and it was caught on tape. And it happened again in 2014 when 18-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Those critical incidents, and the subsequent reporting, also have received attention from researchers.

Media scholar Tiffany Dyan Kuniko Monroy and sociologist Daniel J. Myers (2004) analyzed media coverage of race-related unrest after the release of the Kerner Commission report, which was written by a government commission following the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and made recommendations on how to avoid violent

outbreaks in the future. The commission found that people who lived in poorer neighborhoods, "ghetto residents," viewed news coverage of the Civil Rights Movement to have been told from the perspective of a "White man's world" (p. 140). In their study into how the media reported on racial unrest after the commission's report was released, the scholars argued that it was unclear whether mass media responded directly to the report's criticisms. They did find that there were fewer "scare headlines" — overly dramatic headlines that do not accurately portray a story — than were used in the 1960s. In coverage of the unrest following the death of Arthur McDuffie and the beating of Rodney King, the inclusion of black voices in reporting proved to be a substantial problem, the scholars argued. Non-local media in particular turned to predominantly white government officials as sources rather than finding knowledgeable sources from the black communities. When local and non-local reporters did speak to black sources, the reports often indirectly or explicitly made note of the sources' race, something the Kerner Commission warned against, arguing that such reporting can construct a black-versus-white narrative that oversimplifies the situation.

To combat white-centric reporting, news media outlets have been created to provide channels through which African Americans' voices can be heard and documented. Starting in the 1820s, the black press became a way for African Americans to connect with one another, and it offered a means "to contest white racism" (Levine, 2001, p. 27). The black press has promoted upward mobility within African-American communities and has disseminated news and commentary relevant

to those communities (Levine, 2001). For example, when Emmett Till's mother insisted on an open casket at her son's funeral, *Jet* magazine, a weekly national magazine focused on urban African-American culture, published photos of Till's mutilated body (Monroy and Myers, 2004). Till's death became a catalyst for the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in the following decade, due in part to the horror the imagery invoked among white residents of northern urban centers (Monroy and Myers, 2004). Monroy and Myers (2004) argued that movements such as the 1960s Civil Rights Movement "would not exist in the public mind" without such media coverage (p. 137).

A later critical incident of racial violence revealed different focuses in coverage among local and non-local media outlets. When out-of-town journalists went to Miami, Florida, in 1980 to cover the unrest following Arthur McDuffie's death, the farther away they were from, the more those journalists focused on violence, according to media scholars Mitchell Shapiro and Wenmouth Williams Jr. (1984). Their study analyzed content published from May 18, 1980, to May 23, 1980, by four newspapers — *The Miami Herald*, *The Sun Sentinel*, *The Tallahassee Democrat,* and *The New York Times* — and found that *The Miami Herald*, the most local of the selected publications, focused less on the violence than the other publications did, including two other Florida newspapers. The researchers concluded that when reporting on civil unrest, out-of-town media emphasized the violent aspects of the story "because it is easy to cover," while more local coverage moved past those aspects and shifted focus to angles such as the aftermath of the violence (p. 63).

The difference between local and non-local reporting was observed again about a decade later on the other side of the United States. National media portrayed Rodney King, who was beaten by Los Angeles police officers in 1991, not as a victim of police brutality but as an animalistic "cultural other," journalism scholar William L. Solomon (2004) argued (p. 32). He concluded that *Washington Post* and *New York Times* coverage of the trial of the officers who beat King showed deference toward the legal system and existing power structures within it by offering deferential portrayals of the police officers' defense. The scholar argued that the news outlets were cautious in their reporting and downplayed the severity of King's beating. Meanwhile, the reporting constructed King as "not necessarily of a different culture altogether but possessing sufficient alterity to be a marginal figure in society" (p. 32). In other words, King did not quite fit into the mold of what those in power thought he should. Solomon argued that mainstream U.S. news media etched subtle racism throughout their reporting, continuing an "empire" of "colonialistic ideals" based on subduing the other (p. 34). In King's case, that meant being dehumanized by references to his economic status, his criminal record, and his physical strength, and subtly being blamed for his beating through stories that questioned his innocence.

With a history of allegedly race-motivated killings, the United States also has a history of media that cover the critical, racially charged incidents that follow. Reporting differs, however, based on which audience journalists are reporting for — one that is close to the unrest or one that is farther away. Following the death of Arthur McDuffie and the beating of Rodney King, non-local media focused more on

violence, the aggressors' race, and governmental officials' input on the unrest than the local media did (Monroy and Myers, 2004). That same study found that when there were black perspectives in the coverage, white sources typically overpowered their statements. When unrest ensued after the police killing of Michael Brown, media again published differing angles on the same story, in part based on for whom they were writing.

Parachuting to Ferguson, Missouri

Media coverage of the first month of unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, has been described as too favorable toward police, too biased against police, and downright harmful to the community (Mendoza, 2014; O'Reilly, 2014; Freivogel, 2014). Parachute journalists, in particular, created what one reporter called "a spectacle" as they swarmed the St. Louis suburb following the police shooting of 18-year-old Brown on August 9, 2014 (Schuessler, 2014). Ryan L. Schuessler (2014), who was reporting on the unrest for Al Jazeera America, said national news correspondents glossed over the "context and depth" of the situation in Ferguson by instead focusing on the police's use of tear gas and rubber bullets. Some journalists made the story about themselves and that they were in the heat of the unrest, and in the process they created a situation that Schuessler argued harmed Ferguson, a community he felt needed to heal without the ubiquitous presence of cameras.

The cameras also may have interfered with peacemaking efforts. On August 20, 2014, a police officer's voice boomed through a loudspeaker with a request: "Media, can you get out of our way? We're trying to do our job" (Rothman, 2014).

Meanwhile, some argued that journalists were failing to do their own jobs properly. The coverage of the unrest made Bill O'Reilly of Fox News' *O'Reilly Factor* so "furious" he cut his vacation short to return to work and report on Ferguson himself (O'Reilly, 2014). In a segment titled "The truth about Ferguson," O'Reilly (2014) called "liberal media" coverage of the unrest one-sided and anti-police. Additional Fox News reporters contended that other news media were making the situation in Ferguson more volatile by reporting on the unrest, and they questioned the "hundreds of thousands of nonstop hours of coverage" (Wemple, 2014a).

Beyond arguing about the amount of coverage, questions were raised about the quality of the reporting coming out of Ferguson. Rothman (2014) argued that journalists unfairly traded in their correspondent caps for those of arbiters, pointing to the example of CNN anchor Don Lemon joining the front lines of Black Lives Matter protesters. Rothman contended that reporters were overcompensating for racial historical wrongs and tried to fight against a white-centric status quo, something they did "with unholy glee" (Rothman, 2014). A St. Louis County resident wrote a letter to *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*'s arguing that the publication's half-page editorial published just days after Brown's death prematurely jumped to a guilty verdict (Murray, 2014). The resident wrote that the editorial was full of "venom and self-righteous indignation against the police officer involved … drawing a most damning conclusion" before a proper investigation had been conducted.

Journalism scholar William H. Freivogel (2014) wrote, "It's difficult as a journalist to feel proud of everything that the press has done in Ferguson." The media

even became their own story when *Washington Post* reporter Wesley Lowery was arrested following an altercation with police in a McDonald's, and he was one of at least a dozen journalists who had run-ins with law enforcement in the first week of unrest (Lowery, 2014). That made for what Rothman (2014) considered to be "unashamedly and unabashedly biased" reporting. Journalists' interactions with law enforcement were compared to Brown's, and the arrested journalists portrayed themselves as victims and became "national celebrities" (Rothman, 2014). The journalists' arrests received too much attention, according to Chris King, managing editor of *The St. Louis American*, the local African American-focused publication (Geisler, 2014). King, who knew Ferguson, had a much different and more collegial experience with local law enforcement than out-of-towners did (Williams, 2014). For example, when King received word that an outside agitator was starting trouble on the ninth night of unrest, he texted a St. Louis police officer with the information, King told *The New Yorker* (Williams, 2014).

King had a local journalist's perspective, something the *Columbia Journalism Review* argued benefited journalists' coverage of the unrest (Lee, 2014). The review called more local news outlets, such as *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *The Riverfront Times,* the places to turn for "the most complete portrait of Brown, the protests, and the city." In order to gain more local knowledge, *The Huffington Post*, a national online publication, used crowdfunding to pay a two-year "Ferguson Fellow," Mariah Stewart, to foster relationships with local residents and leaders, something parachute journalists usually cannot do (Grim, 2015). Stewart, who recently had graduated from

a Missouri college when the unrest began, was stationed in Ferguson starting in the weeks following Brown's death. Her two-year stint as the Ferguson Fellow was slated to end in summer 2016. Her work allowed *The Huffington Post* to continue to report from Ferguson long after most national outlets had left.

When most outside journalists had moved on from on-the-ground Ferguson reporting, St. Louis-based journalists met to reflect on the news coverage. At a December 2014 Missouri/Kansas AP Publishers & Editors Meeting, those reporters said the number of outsiders who went to cover the story shocked them, and in particular pointed out the large number of non-black journalists who came to report from Ferguson, something the local journalists argued diminished the community's trust in the reporting. Residents felt less confident in the events being reported accurately, the journalists said, because outside reporters who did not look like people from the community were the ones telling their stories (Diuguid, 2014). Yet it was those national reporters, *The St. Louis American's* managing editor argued, that forced local journalism to "step up its game" and provide more thoughtful coverage than they otherwise might have (Geisler, 2014).

Some of the reporting, nevertheless, painted the picture of a community that many locals did not recognize, according to Freivogel (2014). Ferguson was portrayed as a racially segregated community filled with angry black mobs, which Freivogel contested by saying that the suburb was one of the most integrated in Missouri. In comparison to mainstream coverage of other race-related topics, however, stories about Ferguson's unrest were overdone, according to a number of communication

scholars quoted in *The MintPress News* (Mendoza, 2014). Those scholars called the Ferguson story a case of "episodic coverage" (Mendoza, 2014). Freivogel concluded that parachute journalists missed parts of the larger, institutional deficiencies and long-standing cultural problems in Ferguson that had to do with more than just Brown's death. "Parachute journalism" was a hot topic in the discussion of media's coverage of Ferguson, with many out-of-town journalists being the specific targets of criticism. Reporters from the region, too, were viewed in a less-than-favorable light, being criticized for allegedly taking sides in the unrest and unfairly separating the community along racial lines.

The racially charged nature of the unrest leads many scholars to analyze the media coverage through the framework of race theory. Although such inquiry is appropriate, it does not deal with other, broader aspects of parachute journalism that were discussed earlier. This study uses a broader theoretical frame, that of postcolonial theory, to analyze the texts about Ferguson that were produced by local, regional, and national reporters.

POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

Despite a history of inequality, the African-American experience has not been studied extensively through the lens of postcolonial theory, leaving what black studies scholar Tim Lake (2007) considered to be a gap in the literature. Postcolonial theory examines the dominating cultural legacies of colonialism and imperialism, which are felt not only by those in the originally occupied territories, but also by those, such as African Americans, who have been displaced and subjugated by colonialistic practices. When they were taken to the American colonies as slaves, Africans were stripped of their ethnic identities and had their cultures devalued and denigrated, laying the foundation for centuries of racial discrimination and race-based hostility in America (Stuckey, 2013). Through his study of that discrimination and America's history of racial tension, Lake (2007) concluded that the black experience in the United States should be consider with an acknowledgment of colonialistic influences.

Scholars primarily have used postcolonial theory to study the effects of European imperialism and colonialism on other parts of the world, places where the colonized people were "othered" by the colonizers (Willette, 2013). Nursing scholar Mary K. Canales (2000) defined "other" as those we perceive to be different than ourselves. Canales looked at how "othering" affects healthcare practices, concluding that nurses who categorized themselves as more similar in race, gender, or sexuality to their patients and colleagues were able to better connect with them. She also studied how "exclusionary othering," using labels as a means to dominate or subordinate someone else, negatively affected the work environment for health care professionals

in the late 1990s and early 2000s. That hierarchical thought process affects many cultural relationships, and dates back to well before European countries and, later, the United States, began to overpower and colonize other peoples. Psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (1963) pioneered the use of postcolonial theory by studying the psychological effects of colonialism on indigenous peoples, which caused him to conclude that colonialism leads to dehumanization. Cultural critic Edward Said (1978) dubbed the dehumanized group "Oriental" ("Eastern") and the oppressors "Occidental" ("Western"), thus naming what he considered to be a binary system of colonialism stemming from an us-versus-them mentality.

That mentality persists in communities that have endured inequality and subjugation, particularly over numerous generations. Lake (2007) argued that continued discussion about how "Black America" should respond to supremacist "White America" shows that at least some African Americans consider themselves colonized and deemed the "other" (p. 80). People in the United States still are divided and ranked by color, thanks in part to the "oppressive nature of modern western discourse" that is rooted in white supremacy (Lake, p. 81). That oppression is about more than the difference between black and white cultures, and Lake argued that it should be more thoroughly explored through the framework of postcolonial theory.

In terms of journalism studies, the theory has been used to analyze media coverage of former colonies by reporters from the colonizing countries, particularly from Great Britain. For example, media scholar Ruth Sanz Sabido (2015) used postcolonial theory to examine the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in

British media, as Palestine was a British colony until 1948, when the territory became the Jewish state of Israel. The study analyzed the media texts in relation to Britain's role as a colonial power in the conflict. Sabido concluded that the lack of historical context included in reporting on the more recent violence was representative of the colonial power's attempt to skirt responsibility for past involvement in the area. The scholar consequently argued that reporting must be read with an acknowledgment of the socio-political conditions of when and where such media texts are produced, as well as with a consciousness of how historical context influences modern day conflicts. As noted above, context is crucial to parachute journalism, and a lack of context may contribute to the "othering" of a certain group, Sabido argued. In this case, postcolonial theory brought to light how British media "othered" Palestinians and neglected Palestinian voices throughout the news reporting.

One British media outlet in particular was examined from the lens of its coverage of Zimbabwe in the early 2000s. *The Guardian's* deputy comment editor told media scholar Wendy Willems (2005) that the news outlet was interested in the country because Zimbabwe had a large minority white population of English descent (Zimbabwe was the British colony of Rhodesia until 1965). Willems argued that reporting done by British media — most of the outlets were white-owned — created a white-versus-black dichotomy and, consequently, continued colonial attitudes. Another study focused on a former British colony in Africa, Kenya, specifically its capital city of Nairobi. That study found that Western values dominated Reuters' newsroom conduct in Nairobi, thousands of miles away from Reuters' headquarters in

London (Bunce, 2010). Even as the news organization began hiring more journalists from the country, instead of foreign reporters, journalism scholar Mel Bunce (2010) found that "traditional" Western values continued to dictate the culture of Reuters' newsroom (p. 527). Reporters from Kenya had more influence on the reporting than prior due to the decline in foreign news bureaus, but their cultural principles still took a backseat to the principles of their Western colleagues.

Colonialistic attitudes can result in cultural disconnect, something this study examines through applying the framework of postcolonial theory to analyze coverage of Ferguson, Missouri. Postcolonial theory here is applied metaphorically, by viewing parachute journalists from elite media companies as colonizers. When those journalists land at critical incidents throughout the United States, they may arrive with a sense of superiority and entitlement when compared to local journalists, despite their being detached from the local cultures and lacking contextual understanding of the area in which they are trying to cover. That dominant hegemonic position from which they report leads to an "othering" of the local cultures, including the smaller, more local news outlets that also cover the events. This study examines how parachute-journalists' coverage compared to local media reporting of the critical incident in Ferguson. The study first evaluates evidence of colonialistic rhetoric in both news and opinion pieces about Ferguson, and then considers specific discussions of the issue of "parachute journalism" by journalists, scholars, and residents of the Ferguson community.

METHOD

This study is concerned with narratives written by news outlets about the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, in the month after Michael Brown was killed. It uses the textual analysis, which is rooted in cultural anthropology's epistemological questioning and has been used by for more than 30 years (Fürsich, 2009). In *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide,* communication scholar Alan McKee (2003) describes the research method as a data-gathering process used by academics to reasonably determine the most likely interpretations — cultural and ideological — of texts.

Textual analyses aim to show "which cultural sensibilities prevail that allow for such a text at this specific point in time" (Fürsich, 2009, p. 247). Researchers, thus, rely on sense-making practices and clues to analyze the texts (McKee, 2003). Text-only analyses of media content are most informative when there is a combination of contextual analyses and "meticulous" reading of the content, according to communication scholar Elfriede Fürsich (2009, p. 248). Fürsich argued that journalism defines objectivity and truthfulness for societies, and that the narrative qualities of media texts lend themselves to interpretation. Those resulting texts — independent of authors' intents — can be understood as something readers interpret using combinations of semiotics, themes, and ideological interpretations based on gender, race, and class, to name a few possible perspectives. In order to gather a basic contextual knowledge of the texts, McKee proposed looking at a variety of content from media outlets, considering their genres, and analyzing the environment in which a text was disseminated. He also recommended researchers pursue a post-structuralist

approach, which emphasizes the many possible, and simultaneously accurate, interpretations of texts when reading content.

Critics of textual analyses, such as communication scholar Greg Philo (2007), have questioned the method's ability to represent the texts accurately, to determine their significance, and to consider the audience's responses to them. Such criticism contends that the method can lack depth and produce incomplete findings as a result of its shortcomings. Philo proposed using formalized interviews with journalists and audiences about the production, content, and reception of news texts in order to add to the scholar's contextual knowledge of them. Fürsich (2009), however, argued against that technique, suggesting that the "narrative structure, symbolic arrangements and ideological potential of media content" are lost in projects with a wider scope (p. 239). Nevertheless, Fürsich wrote that the unscientific and subjective method does not necessarily produce the most likely interpretation of a text nor does it offer a preferred method of reading content. Instead, researchers, whom Fürsich called "cultural intermediaries," use the method to offer *possible* interpretations of the content, which are dictated by the texts, not preconceived notions, and based in contextual knowledge about the media outlets (p. 245). McKee contended that, if done rigorously, a textual analysis is an effective method for researchers to gather information about the way people make sense of the world.

Informed by Fürsich's and McKee's approaches to textual analysis, this study began by gathering news and opinion articles about the unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, that were published in four media outlets: *The Washington Post*, *The St. Louis Post-*

Dispatch, *The St. Louis American*, and *The Riverfront Times*. News and opinion
articles related to the unrest, as determined by a search of "Ferguson" on each
publication's website, were saved as PDFs with their URLs and recorded for citations
as needed. The four publications were selected in order to look at coverage of
Ferguson from three levels of proximity: one national newspaper, considered an
example of "parachute journalism"; two local newspapers, one an alternative weekly
and the other an African-American weekly; and the fourth a regional "metro" daily,
which blends aspects of national and local media coverage.

      The Washington Post, one of the United States' largest daily newspapers (with
a daily circulation of more than 470,000), was chosen because of its status as an elite,
national newspaper. It sent a reporter to Ferguson about 48 hours after Brown was
killed, and a search of the outlet's coverage of Ferguson suggests it maintained
varying degrees of an on-the-ground presence there until August 31, 2014. Articles
were gathered from www.washingtonpost.com by using the search term "Ferguson."
According to a search of *The Washington Post*'s archives since 2005, no articles had
been published by the *Post* about Ferguson, Missouri, prior to Brown's death.

      The St. Louis Post-Dispatch was selected because of its status as the largest
newspaper in the St. Louis area, with a daily circulation of more than 130,000. It had
published only sporadic articles about Ferguson prior to August 2014, mainly about
high school sports and specific crimes. Starting from the day after Brown's death, the
regional paper published daily updates from the scenes of marches, protests,
confrontations, and looting. Through the advanced search function on

www.stltoday.com, articles related to the Ferguson unrest published from August 9, 2014, through September 7, 2014, were gathered. The end date was chosen because it was one week after *Washington Post* reporters published their last Ferguson-dateline story about the initial unrest and likely were pulled from the St. Louis region.

The Riverfront Times, an alternative, entertainment-focused publication in St. Louis, had not covered many events in Ferguson prior to Brown's death. The paper's first story about Brown was a profile about him and his family, published the day after he was killed. The publication was chosen due to its status as an alternative local news source in the St. Louis area. Articles from August 9, 2014, through September 7, 2014, were compiled using the advanced search option of the site's archive on www.riverfronttimes.com.

The St. Louis American, an African American-focused newspaper with an advocacy mission, began publishing news about unrest in Ferguson the day of Brown's death. Using the advanced search function on www.stlamerican.com, articles were collected from August 9, 2014, through September 7, 2014. The outlet frequently had covered the suburb prior to Brown's death, with many articles about Ferguson schools, crime, and government found in the archives. Due to the race-focused nature of the unrest, *The St. Louis American* was selected to offer insight into how news produced for an African-American community covered the racially charged unrest.

After the articles were gathered, they were all read once as a way to become familiar with the texts, and the texts were counted and sorted into "news/features" and "opinion" categories, strictly for descriptive purposes. On the second reading,

recurring themes and key differences among the texts were noted. Texts were then re-read to verify or reject the preliminary themes, and to be more carefully analyzed for evidence that would illustrate the results of "parachute journalism" as well as criticism of the practice. Then a more careful reading was done using the framework of postcolonial theory to consider evidence of colonialist language in the texts.

The texts were gathered in summer and fall 2015 over a four-month period. A fuller description of the number of items gathered from each newspaper appears below. The first readings of those texts occurred over about 10 weeks in fall 2015, providing what cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1975) referred to as an "initial soak." In addition to familiarizing myself with the texts, I also used the first readings to tabulate the total number of articles from each news outlet, and to tabulate the number of news/feature articles and the number of opinion articles. Those tabulations are provided at the end of this section. Notes about preliminary impressions were jotted down during the initial soak, as well.

The second readings were used to further identify potential themes for analysis. Those readings took place over approximately eight weeks in fall 2015 and winter 2016. Several possible themes were identified, including the juxtaposition of black versus white communities, the lack of female voices in coverage, the relation to the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, the discussion of black culture, and the commentary about parachute journalists. After the second reading, I considered several possible theoretical frameworks that could better guide the analysis. Although a number of theories related to race and gender would have been appropriate, this

study was focused on parachute journalism. Parachute journalism is often discussed in the literature with the language of "invasion," which led to the idea of using postcolonial theory to guide the analysis. As explained in the literature review, that theory has been applied to the study of foreign journalism in particular, and as such, I decided to expand that theory to analyze domestic journalism done by out-of-town journalists for this study. I reconsidered the possible themes that had been identified during the first and second readings in terms of that framework before beginning the third reading.

The third reading was conducted over about six weeks in winter and spring 2016 and further explored those themes. Through that reading, I homed in on the following themes for the analysis: black culture and discussion about parachute journalists. Those themes were selected because they most closely fit within the framework of postcolonial theory. Special attention was paid to any explicit references in the texts about the news media, either local or "outsider." Additionally, special attention was given to articles in which the writers provided first-hand observations or described their individual experiences in Ferguson. Discussion of black culture — clothing, music, stereotypes — was identified as well. Additional readings of the texts were done on an as-needed basis.

Body of texts

The Washington Post published 432 articles about the Ferguson unrest from August 9, 2014, through August 31, 2014. Of the articles, 299 were "news/feature"

pieces and 133 were opinion. Through the week after Brown's death, the news outlet published 116 news/feature articles and 37 opinion pieces.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch published 506 articles related to the Ferguson unrest from August 9, 2014, through September 7, 2014. In total, 302 of the articles were news/feature stories, and 204 were opinion. Of those more than 500 articles, 102 news/feature pieces were published in the week following Brown's death, in addition to 42 opinion pieces during that time frame.

From August 9, 2014, through September 7, 2014, 112 *Riverfront Times* articles were published about the unrest in Ferguson. In total, 107 news/feature articles were analyzed for the study, in addition to five opinion pieces. One opinion piece was published in the week after Brown's death, as well as 43 news/feature articles.

A search on *The St. Louis American*'s website found that 167 articles were published about the unrest in Ferguson from August 9, 2014, through September 7, 2014. That included 110 news/feature articles and 57 opinion pieces, consisting mainly of columns. Through August 16, 2014, one week after Brown's death, *The St. Louis American* published 37 news/feature articles and 12 opinion pieces.

Overall, there were 399 opinion articles and 818 news/feature articles analyzed in this study, a total of 1,217 individual texts.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The texts were read through the lens of postcolonial theory, specifically trying to gauge how people from the affected communities would have interpreted them, something I tried to do by studying the cultures and context in which the texts were disseminated. As described in the "Method" section above, I decided to focus the analysis on two particular themes: the characterization of "black culture" in the texts, and the discussion about "parachute journalism" in those same texts. Those themes are further explored through postcolonial theory below.

Colonizing a culture

"Black culture" was a theme found frequently throughout the texts. The ways in which the news organizations discussed the culture of Ferguson included explicit references to clothing and rap music. The discussion about that culture varied by local, regional, and national media. In particular, national and regional reporting differed from local coverage when deciding whether to mention protesters' clothing and how to frame Michael Brown's relationship with rap music. That media rhetoric matters, Touré (2014) wrote in an opinion piece for *The Washington Post*, because "in an information war, the news media is deployed as a weapon, our collective mind becomes a battlefield, and biases are land mines waiting to explode."

Clothing

Clothing styles can be indicators of culture, and the clothing worn by news subjects in images media choose to publish can influence audience perceptions about those cultures. A study done in the early 1990s by Robert M. Entman (1992) about

Chicago television newscasts' representation of alleged criminals found that black

suspects were significantly more likely than white suspects to be shown in their street

clothes or jail clothing. Meanwhile, white suspects were more likely to be shown

wearing coats and ties, or "casual sportswear" (p. 351). Entman concluded that the

images of black suspects showed them as "shabbily-clad," and may have contributed

to whites feeling a "greater threat" from blacks (p. 351). He argued that those images

of black suspects contributed to a subtler strain of racism, one that places blame on the

individual through broadcasting less favorable images of black people than of whites,

who more often were official sources in stories. When black leaders were shown in

news broadcasts, Entman found that they often used mannerisms, language, and dress

associated with the white middle-class. The news coverage was white-centric, or at

least less harmful to white cultures than to black cultures, Entman found.

Colonization occurs through an attempt to erase native mannerisms, such as

language and attire. Art scholar Victoria L. Rovine (2009) looked at colonization from

the perspective of the French bringing clothing styles to the people in Africa during

that timeframe, and she found that the French brought European-style clothing in an

attempt to "civilize" African people (p. 59). A century later, those same patterns and

styles the French had tried to replace were in fact appropriated into Western fashion

and shown on European runways. That is due to the fashion industry's link to the

romanticized "other," Rovine argued, rather than an expression of social justice.

Fashion in Ferguson, Missouri, was a subtle theme found throughout *The St.*

Louis Post-Dispatch's coverage. Though the clothing descriptions were not the main

focus of articles, they were present in broader narratives about the people in the streets. It is something the regional publication noted more often than the other outlets did. For example, a *Post-Dispatch* report from the fourth night of unrest mentioned a "huge man in a muscle t-shirt, jeans and a Ralph Lauren cap" who was heard insulting police officers (Staff Reports, 2014a), and another article from two weeks later made note of an activist who was encouraging young men to take off the bandanas covering their faces (Giegerich, 2014). In many cases, people in the streets covered their faces to protect themselves from tear gas and smoke, but the activist argued that by having their faces covered, protesters were antagonizing police. Covered faces were a common sight for *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* photographer David Carson during the second night of unrest in August (Hunn, 2014). The crowds, filled with people who had shirts wrapped around their mouths and noses, were on one end of a Ferguson street while "hundreds" of police stood on the other. When retelling his tale of being in the middle of the two groups to *Post-Dispatch* reporter David Hunn (2014), Carson included descriptions of clothing he saw protesters wearing, mainly jeans and white T-shirts, and the most specific descriptions were of the alleged looters Carson claimed to have encountered. That included a shirtless man in camouflage pants, holding a white T-shirt over his face, and a man dressed in jeans and a white T-shirt with a black shirt over his mouth. In addition to his written retelling of what he witnessed, the photographer captured numerous images of the looting, many of which showed black men in ransacked stores throughout Ferguson.

The media's use of unflattering images inspired a social-media campaign, labeled under the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown. The hashtag spread through social media in the days following Brown's death and questioned how African Americans are portrayed in the media. Of the four media outlets studied, only the national and the regional outlets reported on the campaign, while the two local papers did not. African-American Twitter users posted pictures of themselves on social media, juxtaposing images of them at their best — such as at graduation — with images that showed them at parties, smoking, or throwing peace signs (McDonald, 2014). The hashtag asked which pictures media would use if the black teenagers were killed: those that could make them seem like troubled, misbehaving youths, or those that would highlight their accomplishments, *Washington Post* reporter Soraya Nadia McDonald (2014) wrote. #IfTheyGunnedMeDown called on media to look past young adults' clothing and to not use pictures on social media as evidence of "black thuggery," which could diminish their supposed innocence and instead frame them as people "who had it coming," McDonald wrote.

One of the most widely spread images of Michael Brown came from surveillance footage from the day he was killed that police released six days later. It showed the 18-year-old in a convenience store pushing the store's clerk after allegedly stealing cigarillos worth about $50 (Garrison, 2014). All four media outlets reported on the incident and showed the images of Brown, and *The Riverfront Times* explicitly wrote under the video screenshot that what the teenager was wearing during the robbery and at the time of his death appeared to be the same (Garrison, 2014). *The*

Washington Post was the only publication to mention what Brown was wearing when he was killed — a T-shirt, cargo shorts, and flip-flops — before the surveillance footage was released (Lowery and Berman, 2014). Neither *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* nor *The St. Louis American* reported on what Brown was wearing at the time of his death in the subsequent month of news coverage.

That might be because what he was wearing was nothing out of the ordinary. Clothing and dress are an easy means of social identification and categorization for those within and outside of social groups, according to anthropologist Norris Brock Johnson (1982). Johnson studied students' clothing in a rural Midwestern elementary school in the early 1980s and researched how it stratified the children. He looked at which students wore more working-class clothing, such as jeans, work boots, and T-shirts, and who wore dressier outfits, such as skirts, dress shirts, and dress pants. The study found that the older students dressed more alike than the younger ones, something Johnson attributed to the more prevalent stratification of students within higher grade levels. Stratification continues into adulthood, Johnson wrote, and strengthens group identities.

In their coverage of the Ferguson unrest, *The Washington Post* and *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* made notably more references to clothing than *The Riverfront Times* and *The St. Louis American* did, and only the national and regional outlets reported on the hashtag criticism of which pictures media show when young black people die. As previously mentioned, research in the 1990s concluded that black suspects accused of crimes were more likely than white suspects to be shown "poorly

dressed," meaning in jeans, T-shirts, or jail clothes, on Chicago television newscasts (Entman, 1992). Those images, Entman concluded, may have led white viewers to see black suspects as more of a threat than white suspects. Though descriptions of clothing can be an added detail in news coverage, it is interesting to note that the regional and national news outlets added those details to explain the people in the streets more frequently than the local media that left out those descriptors, perhaps because the clothing worn by Brown and by protesters was common in the community and not newsworthy.

Rap music and stereotypes

One storyline that was included in each of the four outlets' coverage was rap music and those who produce it. For example, when famous rappers such as Nelly, J. Cole, and Common went to Ferguson, they made headlines, as did Michael Brown-inspired hip-hop lyrics that circulated on social media and "flowed through the St. Louis streets," as one *Washington Post* article put it (Thompson, 2014). When discussing Brown's pursuit of a rap career, however, the tune of how rappers are portrayed changes in the different outlets.

Rap music has a history of being repressed by the white majority (Shank, 1996). For example, when the band Body Count released a track titled "Cop Killer," police forces and politicians from throughout the country protested. American studies scholar Barry Shank (1996) attributed the uneasiness to the song's widespread appeal that crossed racial boundaries, linking "together the identities of urban black males with the desires and demands of suburban whites" (p. 145). The song exposed the

historical and cultural racial oppression felt by black communities, and its message reached white communities, making the "white unconscious" uneasy, Shank argued. The historically black music had reached a white audience with a message that decried racism.

For a number of young black men, rap is a crucial aspect of who they are. In her dissertation, music theory scholar Alyssa S. Woods (2009) explored how rap contributed to individual identities and larger stereotypes — particularly of black men. She argued that rap music is key for identity construction, though it also forms some of the most racist stereotypes of black men portrayed in the media. Those images, Woods concluded, show black men as "oversexed and dangerous" (p. 227). Yet people of all ages, demographics, gender, and ethnicities continue to listen to rap. For white listeners, that may be because of a fascination with black culture or "the hood," according to Woods, although a lot of rap music is aimed at criticizing and objecting to white hegemony.

Hip-hop, of which rap is a subset, produces some texts that are colored by "idyllic impulses," or an idealistic feel, while also tackling spirituality, race, and gender, wrote ethnic studies scholar Reiland Rabaka (2011, p. 209). Hip-hop offers a forum to share one's dreams and tales of oppression, and often is rooted in revolutionary and nationalistic mentalities that undermine the core of colonization — a "subaltern" position, or an argument from a lower social status. Rabaka argued that poorer African Americans in particular are culturally colonized due to their economic statues, and rap, "which is unequivocally rooted in and rose out of African American

popular culture," is a means of resistance for them (p. 53). Hip-hop is part of a black-created culture that fears assimilation into the white mainstream, scholar Mickey Hess (2005) wrote in a study of white rappers. Hess argued that white rappers looking to be accepted in the genre had to grapple with their racial identity as a minority within the genre, though it still yielded to white privilege. White listeners of rap also may be seen as out of place and can be considered to be "eavesdropping," Hess found, though lyrics sometimes directly addressed white people, often with criticism (p. 386). Rabaka argued that when whites do view black-targeted entertainment, such as rap music, they often do not comprehend the underlying racial implications of the work, which often critique white supremacy, and instead regard it more for its entertainment rather than cultural value.

Hip-hop scholar Brij David Lunine (2000) concluded that African Americans have reworked the art, language, and traditions of the white-centric culture of the United States into their own. Through his examination the hip-hop group The Coup, Lunine found that the genre has emerged in the postcolonial framework as a means for the colonized to form their own cultural identity. Rap thus offers a community-forming bond among African Americans. For Michael Brown and many other young black men, rap also offered an outlet for artistic expression and a potential professional goal of being an artist (Lussenhop, 2014a).

The Riverfront Times' first story about Brown's death cited his aspirations for becoming a famous rapper as evidence he was on the right track (Lussenhop, 2014a). The publication, an alternative news outlet with a focus on entertainment, food, and

events, went beyond the details of the fatal police shooting and painted a portrait of a shy "gentle giant" who loved music — rap music to be specific. The 18-year-old kept a glass salsa jar filled with ideas for rap lyrics written in loopy letters on scraps of paper. "My city why people so petty/I rised from Dead/now you can't look me in my eyes," one read. *The Riverfront Times'* coverage of Brown's funeral nearly three weeks after he was killed included his obituary printed on the service's program, which read, "He loved to Rap about life and was so good at it that he was asked to write a song for a friend" (Lussenhop, 2014b).

Another piece about rap music demonstrates how even well-intended commentary from white people can be offensive to African Americans. To honor Brown's memory, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* columnist Bill McClellan (2014b), who was a frequent commentator about the unrest in Ferguson, suggested the city erect a nightclub on West Florissant Avenue. He proposed it have live hip-hop, jazz, and blues shows — "one foot in ghetto culture, one foot in mainstream culture" — and be aimed at the "poorer and darker" side of Ferguson. Though McClellan pitched the nightclub as a positive alternative to rioting, a St. Louis County resident wrote a letter to *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* arguing that his idea, which she called an "insensitive generalization," was an example of a white man making assumptions about a community based on race (Waterman, 2014). She wrote that such assumptions are "dangerous" and contribute to the negative stereotypes of black men in particular.

In the texts, it is clear that the construction of the "black culture" narrative involved hyper-critical attention to any aspect of Brown's life that might play up the

"gangster" stereotypes often applied to rap music. Cries against unfair stereotypes were also found in *Washington Post* writer Alyssa Rosenberg's (2014a) response to a *New York Times* profile of Brown in which he was described as "no angel" (Eligon, 2014). Rosenberg critiqued how Brown's interest in rap was portrayed, in particular. In the profile, *New York Times* reporter John Eligon (2014) wrote that Brown recently had taken up rapping, "producing lyrics that were by turns contemplative and vulgar." Brown's teenage dabbling in drugs and alcohol and getting into a "scuffle with a neighbor" were mentioned directly before and after the sentence about rapping in a paragraph detailing his "problems," even though such behaviors are common among teenagers of all races and socio-economic strata. Rosenberg argued that the placement made an assumed link between rap music and criminal behavior, and unfairly depicted rapping as one of Brown's flaws.

The *Washington Post* also reported on Brown's love of music, particularly his admiration toward rappers Drake and Kendrick Lamar and his own plans for a rap career. The *Post* reported that the teenager put work into rapping and emphasized that he also had a "Plan B," attending technical school (Lowery and Fears, 2014). Reporting differs, however, on what Brown was going to pursue there. All four publications analyzed in the study reported that Brown was slated to start school just two days after he was killed, but only *The Riverfront Times* wrote that he would be studying music and sound engineering (Lussenhop, 2014a). *The Washington Post* reported that Brown would be starting school to learn to fix furnaces and air condition systems (Lowery and Frankel, 2014). The obituary printed on Brown's funeral service

program did not say what he planned on studying at Vatterott College, just that he was scheduled to begin classes two days after his death (Lussenhop, 2014b).

The brief mention of Brown's post-secondary education plans seemed to subtly dismiss the value of his primary goal to become a rap musician. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* columnist Jasmine Banks (2014) wrote that Brown's educational goals should not matter — his death still should be considered tragic regardless of his educational and career goals. She argued that a "thugs deserve to die" narrative has influenced people of color so much so that they feel compelled to prove their worth — in Brown's case, by referring to his enrollment in a trade school. *Washington Post* freelance columnist Joshua Alston (2014) wrote that Brown's trade-school plans were proof that his mother, Lesley McSpadden, had been doing what she was supposed to as a parent — keep her teenage son on a track that led to post-secondary education. His enrollment in trade school was critical to understanding Brown's character, Alston wrote, and without that, the teenager loses humanity and agency.

Rap music was a main component of Michael Brown's identity, as it is for many young black men. Rap also has been key in crafting a black identity for many urban African-American communities across the United States, just as other types of music are key to crafting cultural identities for other groups ("barrio" music for Hispanics, "bluegrass" for white Appalachians, "zydeco" for French creoles in Louisiana, etc.). Rabaka (2011) wrote that hip-hop music often is rooted in revolutionary and nationalistic mentalities that build up communities against oppressive conditions. Some of the texts in this study suggested that the music was

unfairly demonized and linked to criminal behavior, such as a piece by *Washington Post* writer Alyssa Rosenberg (2014a). That was seen in *The New York Times* feature contested in the *Post* by Rosenberg, and more subtly in the descriptions about the teenager's interest in the genre. Except for Rosenberg's column, *The Washington Post's* coverage overall featured Brown's interest in rap more as a hobby, while *The Riverfront Times* portrayed it as a career goal (Lussenhop, 2014a).

The varying descriptions of Brown found throughout the publications show the conflicted story of how black culture is portrayed throughout media. Maulana Karenga (2014), a guest columnist for *The St. Louis American*, argued that a history of black oppression in the United States has led to black victims being blamed for their own deaths, because they are not deemed equal to their white counterparts. *The St. Louis American*'s Chris King (2014a) wrote that police releasing the surveillance video of Brown allegedly stealing cigarillos on the day he was killed was part of an attempt to blame Brown for his death, or at least to tarnish his image. When writing in *The Washington Post,* Rosenberg (2014a) argued that negative framing of Brown's interest in rap music did the same.

Throughout the texts from the regional and national outlets, the emphasis on clothing descriptions and Brown's affinity for rap music contributed to the "othering" of not only Brown himself, but also to the overall black cultures of Ferguson. Local media and Ferguson residents responded to, and pushed back against, such reports from regional and national outlets. The addition of protesters' clothing may have been an attempt for journalists from regional and national outlets to show they physically

were in Ferguson and consequently to establish their authority in reporting. But even

seemingly well-intended references to "black culture" drew angry criticism from those

who were most familiar with the communities of Ferguson. The tensions between

outside journalists and those engrained in the local culture was apparent, and in many

ways compares to backlash from indigenous peoples against outside influences from

colonizing cultures.

Critique of parachute journalists

Critical incidents, colloquially known as "bad news," attract parachute

journalists who arrive with "holier-than-thou" attitudes to cover towns with which

they have no ties (Vaden, 2006, p. 72). In Jock Lauterer's (2006) book on community

journalism, a weekly publication's editor said it takes three years to know a place and

emphasized that in the short time parachute journalists are in a town, they cannot grasp

the community's history and culture. Additionally, parachute journalists often have an

elite and arrogant attitude (Vaden, 2006). As explored above through specific

examples of parachute journalism, that attitude of superiority can reflect colonial

attitudes and contribute to the "othering" of local cultures (Sabido, 2015). In the case

of black America, a white-centric mainstream media has created a similar dynamic in

some communities into which they have parachuted.

In Ferguson, Missouri, it was the local publication focused on African-

American news, *The St. Louis American*, that most strongly pushed back against the

parachute journalists who arrived following Brown's death. All four publications in

this study, however, made multiple references to the swarms of journalists who arrived

in Ferguson and the thousands of news articles and opinion pieces those reporters

produced. One *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editor wrote about the national and

international reporters who were "descending on our doorstep" (Bailon, 2014), and in

a letter to the regional publication a Ferguson resident said the descent of journalists

created a "media spectacle" (Kosmal, 2014). *Washington Post* columnist Joel

Achenbach (2014) called Ferguson "a national destination," where journalists both

wrote about and became part of the story. That spectacle of reporters flocked to sites

of unrest where sometimes journalists outnumbered protesters. Those journalists

produced content that some deemed too anti-police, while others complained that the

coverage lacked local voices. Overall, there was a common refrain of criticism toward

the national media that arrived in Ferguson more so than toward local and regional

media.

Critiquing coverage

Sources, columnists, and letters-to-the-editor ("LTE") writers shared mostly

negative opinions about the parachute journalists who reported on the unrest in

Ferguson. As noted earlier, parachute journalism can produce coverage that lacks

accuracy, context, and diverse perspectives (Kitch, 2007; Wizda, 1997; Spurr, 1993;

Monroy and Myers, 2004). Though the nonspecific term "media" was the target of

some criticism, the only explicit criticism that targeted the local publications was

found in *The St. Louis American*. In fact, *The St. Louis American*'s staff wrote some of

the harshest criticism of all other media, contending that the other outlets were late to

covering topics the *American* had covered for "decades" (Political Eye, 2014a). The

African-American newspaper argued that up until Brown's death, other media had failed to report on alleged police brutality in St. Louis. *St. Louis American* Political Eye (2014a) reporters wrote, "Our peers in the local media like to act as if we make this stuff up, week after week, but suddenly they were competing with the nation's major metro dailies to tell our stories." *The St. Louis American* hoped that after "countless" editorials urging leaders to improve St. Louis' African-American communities that the region being in "the world's spotlight" would make officials finally listen to its pleas (Editorial, 2014b).

 Washington Post reporter Mark Berman (2014b) wrote that it was looting and unrest that caused that media spotlight to focus on Ferguson. That tension and subsequent violence was a topic covered in all of the outlets, though some local outlets published concerns about that leading the narratives. In *The St. Louis American*'s first editorial about Brown's death, the writers expressed their concerns about "public attention" focusing on "an angry community boiling over" as opposed to the shooting itself (Editorial, 2014a). *Riverfront Times* reporter Lindsay Toler (2014b) argued that the number of stories about the violence, looting, and SWAT tanks overtook the story of Brown's grieving family and his death. It was what *St. Louis American* writer Mike Claiborne (2014) feared: media coverage causing an "overkill of the wrong subjects." *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that some Ferguson business owners worried that the images of looting and rioting in their city that was disseminated in the media would lead to higher insurance rates and lower real estate values (Gallagher, 2014). *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* columnist Bill McClellan (2014a) expressed particular concern

about national media focusing on Ferguson's violence, emphasizing that the unrest was only present on a couple of blocks and that the worldwide attention on it made residents "nervous" that the violence would continue even longer. The shift in focus to coverage of the violence, *The St. Louis American* wrote, was led by those who "do not have the best interest of our community at heart" (Editorial, 2014a).

Some argued that parachute journalists also failed to convey the voices of the community. A member of a volunteer peacekeeper group in Ferguson told *The St. Louis American* that national media painted protesters as "gangsters, thugs, rioters [and] looters" and failed to capture the military tactics police used on citizens (Sistrunk, 2014). *Riverfront Times* reporter Daniel Hill (2014) reported that one woman who was protesting argued that in their coverage of the demonstrations, the media were not giving enough attention to how police were treating protesters, which she agued included "walking all over our rights" through their militarized tactics. She told Hill that he and other reporters were "not welcome" in Ferguson as a result of what she considered to be unfair coverage. In a letter to *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, a resident of a Chicago suburb argued that overall there had been a lack of Ferguson residents' quoted in media coverage (Nawrocki, 2014). Another *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* letter writer argued that national media had failed to cover the peaceful actions, such as cleanup efforts, of local residents (Geare, 2014), and a Ferguson resident wrote to *The Post-Dispatch* expressing similar concerns about national media focusing on only a "miniscule area" of the city (Sorensen, 2014). For example, one 13-year-old Ferguson resident who lived near where Brown was killed told *The*

Washington Post different media had interviewed him near that area three times in the two weeks after Brown's death (Larimer and Kindy, 2014).

Besides a lack of local voices, the other big critique of media coverage found throughout the publications was that stories were unfairly negative toward police. Multiple people told *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that the media had painted a one-sided, anti-police story about what happened to Brown (Gillerman, 2014). Similar sentiments were echoed by attendees who spoke to the *Post-Dispatch* at a later rally supporting police officer Darren Wilson (Barker, 2014). In a letter to *The Washington Post*, a former employee of the Department of Homeland Security wrote that the publication, and others, were "dropping the ball" in their coverage of Ferguson (Cohen, 2014). The letter writer called *The Washington Post*'s reporting about police officer Wilson "outrageous," and argued that media were inflaming "an already volatile" situation. *Washington Post* writer Andrew Gelman (2014) looked at the potentially problematic implications of using clichés to describe police shootings, focusing specifically on the shooting of Brown. Gelman argued that the "thoughtless style of writing" could lead to false statements — he did not offer specific examples from coverage of the shooting in Ferguson — yet journalists often utilize those clichéd phrases.

Though there were varying views about which side of the story reporters were missing, there was a common theme of particularly criticizing what out-of-town journalists were writing. As noted above, *The St. Louis American* offered some of the fiercest commentary about outsiders and gave only backhanded praise for *The St.*

Louis Post-Dispatch's reporting on the lack of African-American representation in St. Louis County police departments (Editorial, 2014c). *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editor Gilbert Bailon (2014) praised his publication's work as "the most comprehensive coverage, offering depth, context and continuous timeliness," though *The St. Louis American* editorial writers argued that the *Post-Dispatch*'s coverage of race-related topics was "belated." One of the biggest concerns expressed throughout the texts, though, was that those media outlets were painting an unfair, unbalanced, and incomplete picture of Ferguson.

Becoming the story

Not only did media contribute to what one author of a letter to *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* called "sensationalized" news (Richards, 2014), but they also contributed to one another being part of the Ferguson story. *Washington Post* reporter Wesley Lowery retold his story of being detained by police from a phone in the police station to another *Post* reporter, Mark Berman (2014a). Lowery and other reporters were working in a McDonald's on August 13, 2014, when a handful of police officers, some dressed in riot gear, entered the restaurant. Police ordered the journalists to leave, at which point Lowery began filming the scene with his phone in one hand while packing up his stuff with the other. Police told him to leave through one door, then told him to go to another. Lowery's bag fell off his shoulder in the confusion, and police then allegedly said "let's take him." The reporter was slammed against a soda machine and put in plastic handcuffs. Police took Lowery, along with *Huffington Post* reporter Ryan Reilly, to a holding cell in the Ferguson police station, but released the

journalists about a half hour later after learning Lowery and Reilly were media professionals.

Washington Post writer Alyssa Rosenberg (2014b) called journalists' making headlines an "unusual position" and one that should be avoided as much as possible. When it does happen, though, she argued it can offer more insight into the larger story from which journalists are reporting. *Riverfront Times* reporter Lindsay Toler (2014a) commented on the media's presence writing, "With the eyes of the world upon them, members the international press corps covering Ferguson have become their own story, sometimes because they're treated roughly and sometimes because it seems they're heightening, not just recording, the tension." Dozens of reporters had run-ins with law enforcement, which each publication reported on, though national reporters, such as *The Washington Post*'s Wesley Lowery, were mentioned more frequently by the publication with whom they worked than local reporters were. National journalists' very presence also was newsworthy for the local media. For example, *The St. Louis American* wrote about CNN's Anderson Cooper walking near the memorial for Brown near where he was killed, calling Cooper one of the "remaining national holdouts" (King, 2014b). Cooper still was covering the story August 24, 2014.

It was journalists' interactions with police, though, that most frequently brought journalists into the coverage. *The Washington Post* published a story about journalists from *Sports Illustrated* and *Financial Times* being detained days after *Washington Post* reporter Wesley Lowery was (Phillip, 2014), and the publication also wrote about a police officer allegedly threatening a cameraman (Peterson, 2014). *The*

Washington Post mentioned Lowery's arrest almost every other time it reported on media having run-ins with law enforcement. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, too, reported that a protester smashed a television crew's camera after demanding that it be turned off (Staff Reports, 2014b), and it reported an incident with a police officer allegedly cursing at a media person and threatening to kill him (Patrick, 2014).

Not all deemed the coverage of journalists' run-ins with law enforcement necessary. One *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* letter writer called the newspaper selfish for reporting on how journalists were treated in the streets (Specker, 2014). "You're out of step with St. Louis, as usual," the letter stated. Another *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* letter writer argued that journalists deserve to be arrested when they "make a sham of common sense and the truth," which was written in response to the media's tension with police orders that called for them to leave certain areas (Maguire, 2014).

The assigned media areas were partially in response to the sheer number of media personnel, and the space they consumed with their equipment. The media added a new dynamic to Ferguson and led to a plethora of criticism about the journalists who arrived and the work they produced while there. Journalists undoubtedly were the victims of tear gas, chaos in the crowds, and hostility from police and protesters. In some cases, journalists' arrests sparked more outrage than those of protesters and caused political leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama, to comment (Waldman, 2014). Yet, as with other national stories set in locations that are not frequently covered by larger outlets, parachute journalists arrived in Ferguson to cover a story local journalists could have covered on their own (Ehrich, 2014).

Discussion of the role of parachute journalists

Columnist Eugene Robinson (2014) wrote in *The Washington Post* that

"ambitious journalists" would be eager to write about black America as a result of the

attention on Brown's death. They were. The only explicit compliment of all media

found in the corpus of texts came from *St. Louis American* columnist Delores Shante

(2014), who thanked all media for bringing attention to Ferguson. Her praise was

overshadowed by dozens of critiques of media, including from a Ferguson pastor who

lamented in a column published in *The Washington Post* that the local residents could

have dealt with the problems on their own, without meddling from outside authorities

and media (Ehrich, 2014).

Despite complaints about national coverage of Ferguson, *St. Louis Post-*

Dispatch columnist Bill McClellan (2014a) did not blame the national reporters for

poor coverage. He instead questioned their very presence in Ferguson, saying that

"their job is to cover significant stories, and by gosh, they will do their best to make

things significant" — that is, exaggerate their own importance. One Ferguson protester

told *The Washington Post* that he wanted justice — not more news cameras (Lowery,

Markon and Berman, 2014). *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that the Missouri

Highway Patrol captain believed crowds "were performing for the media" (Hampel,

2014), and *The Riverfront Times* reported that the captain asked media to stop

"glamorizing" the violence and warned of the dangers for reporters on the scene

(Toler, 2014a).

As *The Washington Post*'s media reporter put it, there was no "textbook" on

how to report on a situation like what ensued in Ferguson (Farhi, 2014). He called the several hundred reporters in the city an "invading media army" that consisted of reporters with little experience covering a riot — most had not been born when urban race riots occurred in the United States in the 1960s, and therefore had no personal experience with such unrest. Two days after Brown was killed, *Washington Post* writer Emily Badger (2014) painted the scene of a segregated St. Louis suburb that "erupted" and attempted to pin down why it happened. In the last paragraph of the story she wrote that she "had no special insight into the community of Ferguson itself" and gave a nod to *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* columnist Aisha Sultan's piece about white flight. Yet Badger still wrote an entire article without "special insight" into Ferguson.

Parachute journalism undoubtedly offered "big-picture" pieces about what was occurring in Ferguson, but the coverage analyzed for this study did not present a clear refrain as to what role parachute journalists played in Ferguson. The texts instead crafted a narrative in which both police and local residents viewed the media swarms as a hindrance to peacekeeping efforts. Local and regional journalists offered a number of critiques of outside journalists' very presence, as well as complaints about those outsiders' lack of understanding about Ferguson's cultures. Some local media resented the influx of out-of-town journalists who filled the region that the local journalists had covered for years. Nevertheless, parachute journalists arrived, as they have with many other critical incidents, and dominated the coverage.

What the texts illustrate is that the mark some parachute journalists' left on Ferguson's coverage was one that subtly disparaged local culture. That is seen through

the quiet descriptions of protesters' clothing and in the ways in which stories framed

Brown's interest in rap music (Hunn, 2014; Rosenberg, 2014a). It is felt in the

coverage that some argued lacked local voices and misrepresented a mainly peaceful

city by focusing on the isolated pockets of violence (Nawrocki, 2014; McClellan,

2014a). While there allegedly was a lack of local voices, journalists were their own

sources of information about what was happening on the streets and, and some readily

made their own experiences part of the story (Berman, 2014a; Hunn, 2014). Parachute

journalists consequently exacerbated the conflict in Ferguson, undermined

peacemaking efforts by locals, and hindered the ability of local news media to do their

jobs for the people most directly affected by the unrest.

DISCUSSION

This study uses postcolonial theory to analyze national, regional, and local coverage of the 2014 civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri. Through a textual analysis of 1,217 news and opinion articles, this study revealed differences in the coverage of black cultures in Ferguson among national/regional news outlets and local news outlets. The analysis showed the critique of parachute journalism and the postcolonial tendencies of out-of-town journalists who came to cover critical incidents in communities that do not get much regional or national media attention. Out-of-town journalists usually do not know nearly as much about such communities as local reporters do, which often results in coverage that does not accurately portray the complexities of affected communities. Yet parachute journalism done by elite media organizations reach wider audiences than reporting done by smaller outlets, and such journalism is often what brings news stories, like Michael Brown's death, to the attention of national and international audiences. The inherent flaws in such reporting, however, often mean those audiences are provided with superficial and stereotypical stories that can be outright inaccurate. Meanwhile, local media that are familiar with the communities often critique the inaccurate coverage, though such criticism rarely reaches the same global audiences or the elite media they target. As such, parachute journalists need to minimize harm to the communities they cover by changing their tactics to not only gather and report information on their own, but also to aggregate and share reports from local media outlets and pursue long-term reporting options to retain the services of local freelance journalists (such as *The Huffington Post*'s

"Ferguson Fellow").

In Ferguson, the "national" emphasis of parachute journalism diminished the uniqueness of Ferguson's history and culture. Take the rhetoric of "this could have happened here" that was found throughout all of the publications, though the location of "here" became farther away the larger the news outlet. In *The Washington Post* and *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, that "here" was any number of cities in the United States (DePillis, 2014; Gauen, 2014). Yet, as *Washington Post* columnist Ed Rogers (2014) argued, there is an innate political bias in using Brown's death — one particular police killing in one specific place — to represent a larger, national problem, even if somewhat similar police killings of unarmed young black men are taking place elsewhere. Such exemplification minimizes the specifics of the individual case and creates a dialogue often dictated by stereotypical descriptions and broad mischaracterizations. Rarely does such dialogue do much to help the affected community develop its own solutions — in fact, the dialogue actually might obstruct such efforts.

Negative stereotypes also can be reaffirmed when elite media outlets use national-level statistics to try to "explain" what happened in the affected community. For example, when the larger news outlets were discussing Ferguson itself — a narrative marked by the tale of white flight, high crime rates, and a disproportionately white police force — national statistics were sprinkled throughout their coverage, but there was an obvious dearth of data specific to Ferguson. Consider the *Washington Post* article titled "Americans don't like protests. But protests may work anyway." The

column, written by political science professor Robert Shapiro (2014), is entirely based on polling information about what "Americans" (no specificity as to who is encompassed in that term) think of "Ferguson." There was no mention of a more focused poll asking the people of Ferguson (or, at least, of the greater St. Louis region) their thoughts on "Ferguson." Additionally, some of those statistical generalizations were followed by demands for broad, systemic solutions, but such demands often do not consider the practical limitations of the affected communities or consider their specific needs. Police shootings incite a particular fear because the shooting is done by the very people who are supposed to protect those communities. After decades of highly publicized (though statistically rare) police shootings of unarmed black men, many people, especially African Americans, have been left disillusioned and angry with the U.S. police system as a whole (Dvorak, 2014). For the most part, journalists from larger media placed more emphasis on broad goals (increasing the racial diversity of police forces nationwide) than on concrete, community-specific goals (getting Ferguson residents to vote in local elections and thus drive community policing policies). In an effort to make a "big picture" argument, such coverage lacked local practicalities and long-term sustainability and seemed like an exploitation of the local tragedy.

National and international media coverage made Ferguson known around the world, even though it was done by reporters who did not know the intricacies of the culture like local reporters did. Those out-of-town journalists arrived in Ferguson with ample resources that are typically not available to smaller, local media outlets, and the

outside journalists were sent to cover that one story of unrest, while local reporters had to juggle everyday coverage of the community in addition to the "big story" in their backyard. This study found that *The Washington Post*, which for about three weeks had at least one of its own reporters on the ground, published about four times as many articles about Ferguson as each local outlet did in the same time frame. Authors of dozens of those articles were written by people who had little or no direct contact with the affected communities. More *Washington Post* articles analyzed in this study were written by journalists who were not, and likely had never been, in Ferguson than by reporters who were on the ground. Such reporters lacked the "claim to authority" reporters on the ground had (Cottle, 2013).

Those problems with parachute journalism, and journalism done by those in an office, challenge the very notion of "elite media." Media scholar Hillel Nossek (2004) defined "elite media" as those outlets held up as "the finest models" of journalism, meaning those that follow the accepted standards of Western elite journalism (p. 353). Despite their "elite" status, parachute journalists from such media outlets create a dichotomy in communities similar to that of the colonized and the colonizer. As the national reporters "invade" a community and, to varying degrees, set the agenda for how and when the news is covered, they may provide misleading information thanks to attitudes of superiority. Such attitudes assume parachute journalists, who lack first-hand knowledge of the area, are needed to report the news to national and international audiences themselves, thus undermining and overpowering the context-rich coverage of local news outlets.

Instead of sending parachute journalists who are unfamiliar with the context and complexities of a story to cover critical incidents, elite media outlets could use their brands to seek out and bring attention to credible journalism done by those with local knowledge. That was a tactic *The New York Times* pursued for its very early coverage of the 2016 terrorist attacks in Brussels, Belgium: more specifically it relied on local news reports and information shared on social media to break the news (Hiltner and Lehman, 2016). *Times*' reporters who were fluent in French monitored the local news outlets and aggregated updates from their reports to the *Times*' website, according to a breakdown of the news outlet's first 12 hours of reporting (Hiltner and Lehman, 2016). The *Times* also sent its own reporters to the scene within an hour of the first explosion (coincidentally *Times* reporters were in Brussels covering another story, so they were nearby), yet that elite news outlet was comfortable relying on local news reports for its initial coverage. *The New York Times* could have continued that model of coverage and dispatched its reporters to cover larger-picture aspects of the aftermath, such as what it meant for aviation. For example, not even an hour after the first explosion, the *Times*' aviation reporter was making calls about the Brussels Airport and airport security in general. The *Times* could offer wider perspectives on the topics of aviation and terrorism, for example, but the more nuanced, community-specific reporting was best left for the local reporters who knew the context needed to file accurate stories from the scene of the critical incident.

Coverage from non-local media still has value — the elite media's coverage of Ferguson has contributed to the greater attention given to the "Black Lives Matter"

movement and its role in national politics, local cultures, and pop culture.

Additionally, stories from national elite media organizations reached much wider

audiences than even regional media stories did. (According to their circulation

numbers listed above, *The Washington Post*'s daily print circulation is more than three

times larger than that of *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* which is the largest regional

paper in the St. Louis metropolitan area, and the *Post* reaches a national audience

while the *Post-Dispatch*'s is regional.) National media could use their broad reach not

to overpower local media, but rather to share their more nuanced, accurate, and

culturally sensitive content.

When national media insist on covering a specific incident with their own

reporters, and perhaps do not trust local media outlets to do so, they could follow a

model similar to *The Huffington Post*'s "Ferguson Fellowship." The national online

outlet hired a young African American from the St. Louis area to spend two years

working in Ferguson, fostering relationships with locals and continuing coverage long

after most national outlets stopped doing so. Though not a perfect solution, and one

that favors work selected by the metaphorical "colonial power," such a compromise

would offer a less destructive alternative to parachute journalism. It would be an

attempt to diminish the harms of parachute journalism, mainly a lack of local

knowledge, while employing the benefits of journalism by elite media.

National media also could rely more upon local citizen journalists to provide

context and a human element to reporting, journalism scholar Dannika Lewis (2010)

argued. Lewis referenced bloggers, but that definition can be expanded to include

social media users who act as citizen journalists during critical incidents. For example, many Ferguson residents used Twitter to broadcast reports from the streets, offering a platform for non-traditional media sources and citizen journalists to join the conversation as the events unfolded, communication scholars Sarah Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles (2015) found. They argued that local social media users propelled the story into the national spotlight, although once the unrest became a national news story, the mainstream news media became more influential commentators than everyday Twitter users. A *Washington Post* reporter wrote that Twitter changed the way professional journalists did their jobs in Ferguson by offering them other ways to learn about and document events as they occurred (Fung, 2014).

Yet the basic characteristics of parachute journalism — dropping into an unfamiliar location for a short amount of time — hold true even in the age of social media. That can lead to superficial and at times sensationalistic stories, as seen in parachute journalism coverage of Ferguson. It also can privilege, as sources, high-ranking officials and renowned experts who offer detached, top-down ideas to the people of Ferguson. For example, *The Washington Post* published many more stories about the response to the unrest from high-profile politicians than local media did (Bump, 2014). Media ethicist Kelly McBride (2013) wrote that when national media decide to cover a local story, they are looking for a "national" angle. That can be problematic as deciding what is a "national angle" means considering whether the story accurately informs a larger public debate or (perhaps more often) whether the story has enough shock value to drive website traffic and social-media feeds.

That fits with *The Washington Post*'s standards and ethics, which call for stories about "the national interest" ("The Washington Post Standards and Ethics"). On the other hand, *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*'s mission is rooted in covering the greater St. Louis area, and thus the newspaper focused much more on issues as they affected communities in that region (Bailon, 2014b). *The St. Louis American* had the narrowest audience, and the one that was most affected by the incident and the unrest that followed. The media outlet targets African-American communities in the St. Louis region and used its advocacy mission to focus on the peculiarities and history of Ferguson's problems and the need for local, grassroots solutions from Ferguson itself.

This study attempted to analyze national, regional, and local coverage of the Ferguson unrest through the lens of postcolonial theory to see if colonialist attitudes were evident in the texts. Throughout the coverage, discussion about how "it could have happened anywhere" and the dearth in dialogue about short- and long-term solutions for the Ferguson community demonstrated the detached qualities of some of the reporting, even from those who presumably knew the area better than parachute journalists did. Nevertheless, elite media, and their coverage, wielded a broad cultural power that local media did not. At the same time, there was an assumption of inadequacy aimed toward lesser-known, local media, even if the local media were providing thorough reporting and thoughtful local perspectives that were missing in the mainstream reports. Society's privileging of powerful, elite media will likely lead parachute journalists to continue to land in unknown destinations for relatively short periods of time and to dominate the reporting of critical incidents, even if there are

capable and trustworthy local reporters covering the same events, and perhaps covering those events better than the elite outsiders. Instead of "invading" such areas, national media should use their visibility to spread the context-rich local reporting done by local outlets, and cultivate a more cooperative, community-sensitive approach to covering critical incidents.

Limitations and future research

One could argue that for this study, I am a "parachute researcher." I have never experienced racism first-hand, nor have I felt economic hardships, thus the perspectives brought to this study are rooted in different life experiences than many residents of Ferguson. To compensate, I gathered and read information about the community and the broader problems of economic depression and racism in America, largely by changing the news I consumed. That started by following people who were directly involved in the unrest and the local reporters who covered it on Twitter, and that included the likes of Johnetta Elzie, a citizen journalist who provided live updates from the ground in Ferguson, and *The Huffington Post*'s "Ferguson Fellow" Mariah Stewart. The dozens of accounts I followed changed the dialogue on my Twitter newsfeed and led me to read stories about black communities and hear opinions from those fighting for the rights of such communities. I also frequently checked in on what the local and regional outlets analyzed in this study were publishing to help familiarize myself with the news media. I also set up Google Alerts for the term "Ferguson," meaning every time a story about Ferguson was published, the link was sent to my email. That kept Ferguson at the forefront of my mind for about a year, causing

discussion about the city, the "Black Lives Matter" movement, and black communities in the United States to be integrated into my daily routine.

Despite careful study of the texts, the outlets that published them, and the context in which they were published, my interpretations represent only a fraction of the possible interpretations. Textual analysis is, ultimately, limited by the interpretations of the researcher. Additionally, the analysis can only be applied to the issues surrounding parachute journalism in Ferguson in 2014, and offers no predictions about future reporting of even nearly identical incidents, nor can it offer generalizations about coverage of Ferguson as a whole, because only four outlets were analyzed. This study also did not specifically separate opinion writing from news and features, although an argument could be made that audience members in Ferguson were unlikely to make such distinctions, either.

Future research could explore the work from the hundreds of journalists that arrived in Ferguson and could add foreign news coverage as another level of analysis. Specific authors who covered Ferguson as either news writers or commentators could be studied through the work they produced and by interviewing those journalists themselves to hear insight they may have, years removed, from their coverage. Furthermore, the sources that those stories quoted could be examined quantitatively as a means of determining who news organizations allowed to tell the story. A further analysis of the ways in which those sources were quoted — directly and in their own words, or indirectly through paraphrasing — could explore how sources were framed in the stories.

Nevertheless, I am confident this study opens up opportunities for such research, as it shows that there are differences in reporting done by journalists from news outlets with national, regional, and local audiences and that those variances have postcolonial implications. The study also reveals reporting that lacks context and local knowledge often elicits strong, negative responses from those within and outside of the communities that are the focus of coverage. Understanding such responses may help rework the practice of parachute journalism. Local journalists able to provide context-rich reporting can pave the way for national media reporters to offer audiences less harmful and more accurate stories written by those who know the culture which is being covered.

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