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Newspaper Portrayals of the Lynching of African Americans Between 1880 and 1960: How they were Covered and Why it is Still Important.

There are many parts of our nation's history that we often find easier to ignore rather than to face. Although it is a relatively young country, the United States' history is brimming with stomach turning events that, despite their heinous nature, have come to make our society what it is today. One piece of this appalling history is the "Age of Lynching."¹ Between 1882-1968, 4,742 people were lynched in the United States, 73% of them being African American.² The violence and gruesomeness of this era have been vividly depicted in the media since their origin. In this paper I will demonstrate how the print media helped to mould and encourage the cruel and racist attitudes already swelling in the United States; as well as why it is still important that we understand the effect the media has, particularly on young people, at this time. The effect of the media on the public in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is indicative of how the media could cause undue violence today.

The decades between 1880 and 1960 are often referred to as the "Age of Lynching" because of the awareness of lynching in American society and not necessarily because of the number of lynchings during that time. The occurrence of lynchings was a prominent descriptor of American culture during these years.³ Ashraf H.A. Rushdy claims that lynching became

¹ Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, "The Age of Lynching," in *American Lynching*, ed. Ashraf H.A. Rushdy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 72.

² Richard M. Perloff, "The Press and Lynchings of African Americans.," *Journal of Black Studies* 30 no. 3 (2000): 315.

³ Rushdy, "The Age of Lynching," 72-73.

popular during these years due in part to newspapers making them feel like such a normal part of everyday life.⁴ Another Scholar, Richard M. Perloff, says that the newspapers played a major part in moulding the minds of Americans when it came to the topic of lynching.⁵

Perloff goes on to explain how the media played such a large role in shaping the public's opinion on lynching. To do this he uses primary sources, giving examples of how newspapers that covered lynchings often carried tones that insinuated the guilt of the victim, if they didn't outright call the victim a "desperado" or another negative term.⁶ These papers also often used tones and verbiage that was more sympathetic when referring to lynch mobs.⁷ These things combined helped to give the already racist public the notion that the violence towards African Americans was justified and should even be encouraged,⁸ and although some papers occasionally ran articles denouncing lynchings, these were not taken seriously because of their rarity and inconsistency.⁹ Perloff also says the newspapers that printed articles and editorials justifying and promoting this racially motivated violence did so often because of the attitude of the editor of the paper.¹⁰ According to Lisa A. White, many white, southern editors claimed that lynchings were a societal necessity, and that they were a natural response to the "brutality" of the African American.¹¹ In addition to the personal biases of editors and journalists, economic factors, mainly the desire to sell more papers, played a role in the attitudes expressed in the papers as well. The highly racist American South was an environment in which these kinds of papers

⁴ Rushdy, "The Age of Lynching," 73.

⁵ Perloff, "The Press and Lynchings of African Americans.," 316.

⁶ Perloff, "The Press and Lynchings of African American.," 320.

⁷ Perloff, "The Press and Lynchings of African American.," 320.

⁸ Perloff, "The Press and Lynchings of African American.," 321.

⁹ Perloff, "The Press and Lynchings of African American.," 323.

¹⁰ Perloff, "The Press and Lynchings of African American.," 321.

¹¹ Lisa A. White, "The Curve Lynchings: Violence, Politics, Economics, and Race Rhetoric in 1890s Memphis," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 64 no. 1 (2005): 49.

would generate good revenue.¹² The papers helped to sensationalize lynchings and therefore they aided in upholding “a social order that was dependent on the systematic oppression of the Blacks by Whites.”¹³

The way that newspapers covered lynchings is representative of the social climate of the Southern United States at the time as well. Journalists rarely spared gory details, and they often trumped up false crimes to make the violence more justifiable. Victims of lynchings were often accused of crimes against white women,¹⁴ and in the racist atmosphere of the southern United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this was more than enough justification for most readers. Jean M. Lutes uses the example of the lynching of an African American postmaster named Fraser B. Baker. She provides clips of a newspaper article that described how he was brutally murdered and how his three-year-old daughter was shot and killed while in her mother’s arms, the same shot also injuring her mother.¹⁵ No motive is provided for the unspeakable violence perpetrated against this family. In another example, the victim, Henry Smith, is described as a “beast” by the reporter, and Lutes says that this kind of description is uncommon.¹⁶ Lutes says that the reporters who wrote these kinds of articles about lynchings, often attended and witnessed them first hand.¹⁷ Another example of the press being used to incite discriminatory attitudes towards African Americans is described by Robert M. Zecker. He argues that the graphic accounts of the lynchings of African Americans were put into the immigrant

¹² Perloff, “The Press and Lynchings of African American,.” 322.

¹³ Perloff, “The Press and Lynchings of African American,.” 323.

¹⁴ White, “The Curve Lynchings,” 51.

¹⁵ Jean M. Lutes, “Lynching Coverage and the American Reporter-Novelist,” *American Literary History* 19 no. 2 (2007): 458.

¹⁶ Lutes, “Lynching Coverage and the American Reporter-Novelist,” 459.

¹⁷ Lutes, “Lynching Coverage and the American Reporter-Novelist,” 460.

population's newspapers in order to create a feeling of racism amongst these populations. He uses the Polish immigrant population as an example.¹⁸

While "The Age of Lynching" is an important part of history for Americans to be aware of, the media coverage of its brutality is equally important as it relates to the coverage of violence in the media today. The way southerners were encouraged to act violently towards African Americans is indicative of how young people can be encouraged to act violently when they are repetitively exposed to violence in the media today. Patti Valkenburg and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski discuss the media coverage of violent crimes and copycat crimes and how they have been connected for centuries, citing the "Jack the Ripper" crimes in London in the 1880s, which were followed by several similar, smaller scale acts.¹⁹ The majority of Valkenburg and Piotrowski's research focuses on the effects of media violence on direct aggressive behavior in young people.²⁰ They look at the process of observational learning, especially the way that violence in the media is portrayed. "Media often portray physical aggression as the only way to resolve problems between people: the "good" guys feel little hesitation about hurting or killing the bad guys, and they are often richly rewarded for their behavior. By depicting aggressive behavior in combination with rewards, social cognitive theory argues that children are more likely to imitate the aggressive behavior they have seen."²¹

As evidenced in both the research of Valkenburg and Piotrowski, it is important for Americans to look at the influence of the press during the "Age of Lynching" and understand

¹⁸ Zecker, Robert M., "“Let Each Reader Judge”: Lynching, Race, and Immigrant Newspapers,” *American Ethnic History* 29 no. 1 (2009): 33.

¹⁹ Patti M. Valkenburg and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski, "Media and Violence," in *Plugged In: How Media Attract and Affect Youth*, ed. Patti M. Valkenburg and Jessica Taylor Piotrowski (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 97.

²⁰ Valkenburg and Piotrowski, "Media and Violence," 99.

²¹ Valkenburg and Piotrowski, "Media and Violence," 106-107.

that the media portrayal of violent acts can have a direct effect on young people's actions and perceptions. Their minds can be shaped by the images and stories they see in the news causing them to become desensitized to violence, or even make them more prone to perpetrating violent acts.

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