

Racial controversy after hurricane katrina

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An article by Tania Ralli, which was published in September 2005 issue of the Times Magazine, has brought to light an issue of great controversy. Two captioned photographs of the aftermath of hurricane Katrina have been responsible for unleashing a raging controversy over media bias and racism. Each of the two photos had been captured by different photographers working for two different agencies. A photo by Dave Martin of the Associated Press and captioned by the photographer himself shows a black man wading through chest deep water while tugging at a floating bag and a case of soda, the captions states that “ the man has looted”.

A similar photo by Chris Graythen of Agency France Presse shows a white couple wading in chest deep water while lugging at bags of food and a case of soda, the caption underneath states that they have been “ finding food”. The two photos were featured independently on Yahoo News, the controversy started when the pictures were put side by side on a single page by a user of the photo sharing website flickr. com, the page attracted a lot of attention and many bloggers linked the page to their blogs. One of the blogs featured the following comment “ It is not looting if you are white”.

The captions of the photographs have actually been responsible for infuriating the masses; the caption reflects the tendency of some people to associate criminal and unethical activities with people of color. The controversy over the issue is justified because media bias is evident. In aftermath of natural disaster it is natural for people to find items of necessity therefore the captions under the photograph showing a Black man carrying items of necessity is a clear indication of racial bias.

Mr. Stokes the spokes person of the Associated Press, the agency which was responsible for distribution of the photograph of the black man has said that Associated Press had parameters in place to distinguish between looting and carrying. Mr. Stokes stated that if the photographer sees a person enter a business and emerge with food and other items then it is called looting otherwise it is carrying. Mr. Stokes further added that Dave Martin the photographer who was responsible for capturing the picture had seen the man enter the grocery store, hence the caption was justified.

However it may be argued that if Mr. Martin really saw the black man enter the grocery store then why did he not capture pictures of the man entering and then emerging from the grocery store. (Ralli. 2005) According to the New York Times article by Tania Ralli some people have argued that racial bias cannot be attributed to the two photographs since the photographs have been taken by different photographers belonging to distinct agencies. However racial bias is visible in the comment of Dave Martins photograph, the choice of words which was not supported by circumstantial evidence is a clear indication that the photographer had harbored ill feelings for the black community.

The controversy over the pictures has also highlighted the general attitude of white Americans towards the African-American society. Balkaran has stated that the media continuess played a vital role in the way white Americans perceive of the African-American, this is because of the extensive media focus on durg abuse and gang violence among the African-American

community. Balkaran accuses the media of fostering a distorted image of the Black community. (Balkaran. 1999)

According to Stephen Balkaran media has focused so extensively on negative aspects of the Black American community, that it can be held responsible for prevailing poverty and unemployment in the Black community. Balkaran accuses the media for portraying facts in a manner that protects the white community at the same time holding the African Americans responsible for all ill doings. Balkaran cites the example of 1992 Los Angeles riots, the media had condemned the Blacks to be solely responsible for the upheaval and the media had deliberately suppressed some facts in order to protect the white community.

Of all the people who were arrested only 38% were black while the overwhelming 60% of looters and rioters comprised of the Hispanics and White Americans. Balkaran states that the media has played a vital role in demeaning the Black community, the image of the Black as portrayed by media has encouraged highly negative perception of the African-American community in the minds of white Americans, the fact that it has become customary for police officers to question black youth in any criminal event showcases the underlying negative perception of the black community that prevails in the mind of white Americans.

The negative stereotype image of the African-Americans has been exploited number of times; the case of Susan Smith is an excellent example of this fact. Susan a South Carolina women had accused a black man of kidnapping her two children's but it was later found through investigation that Susan

had murdered the kids herself and blamed it on a Black man. A similar case of Charles Stewart later became headline news, Charles had murdered his wife and blamed a Black Man for the murder (Balkaran. 999).

Balkaran has further accused the media of turning a blind eye to events of racism, he states that media never reports the exploitation and the hardships that the African Americans endure and only those events are deemed news worthy which effect the white Americans, he further states that almost all the media reporters and journalist are white so they only give importance to events which concern the white audience.

Lynn Newton in his blog on Thinkers Network criticizes the media for fostering racism related violence; according to Lynn the media has stereotyped the Black man as a criminal for ease of showing sensational stories of death and destruction because when it comes to media nothing sells better than death and destruction. The medias portrayal of the black man has generated a wide spread fear and anxiety among white Americans which is reflected in their attitude and behavior towards black Americans.

Lynn demonstrates these facts by citing examples of a white lady who leaves her seat in the bus when a black man sits besides her, or a white lady who switches sides when she sees a black man walking down the street from the opposite end. In his blog Lynn has accused the media of tampering with the actual news story to give it a desired effect. Lynn has described how the facts of an actual news story are skewed in order to impart a desired spin.

Thus there are numerous examples of media bias with regards to racism and it would be justified to accuse the Associate Press photographer Dave Martin for his evidently racist comment on the picture of the Black Man that he captured in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. Although USA is a liberal country, liberality is not reflected in the daily news and for that matter in the mindset of white Americans.