

Race And Gender in Electronic Media

Content, Context, Culture

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Chapter 10

Understanding How the Internet and Social Media Accelerate Racial Stereotyping and Social Division

The Socially Mediated Stereotyping Model

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UNDERSTANDING HOW THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA ACCELERATE RACIAL STEREOTYPING AND SOCIAL DIVISION

The Socially Mediated Stereotyping Model

Travis L. Dixon

Over the last two decades, communication scholars have provided mounting evidence for two key observations. First, the news media present a distorted representation of the world regarding crime and race (Dixon & Linz, 2000a; Dixon & Williams, 2015; Entman, 1992; Romer, Jamieson, & de Coteau, 1998; Sorenson, Manz, & Berk, 1998). Second, consumption of these distorted images can reinforce stereotypical notions of various racial groups, especially African Americans (Dixon, 2006a, 2008a; Oliver & Fonash, 2002; Oliver, Jackson, Moses, & Dangerfield, 2004). However, the overwhelming majority of this research has studied the content and effects of traditional media such as television and newspapers. Little work has systematically examined the extent to which the Internet and social media may also reinforce racial prejudice.

The current chapter calls for scholars to focus attention on the changing distribution system of news, and proposes a model to help guide our thinking about the effects of stereotypical content in socially mediated contexts. I review the key content studies and what they have contributed to this area. Then, I discuss the effects of these distorted news portrayals. I discuss how the Internet has changed the nature of news consumption and why this has significant practical and theoretical implications. I also present some data suggesting that Internet news consumption, especially via social media, might propagate stereotypical thinking. I then review

the historical theoretical approaches to studying the impact of news stereotypes and propose a theoretical synthesis. Following this synthesis, I present the Socially Mediated Stereotyping Model (SMSM) that better equips researchers to assess the effects of stereotyping in a digital media context.

The Rise of the Black Perpetrator and the White Hero or Victim

A significant amount of research in the 1990s and early 2000s assessed news, race, and crime on local TV news (Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b; Entman, 1992, 1994; Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998, 2000; Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, & Wright, 1996; Romer et al., 1998; Sorenson et al., 1998). My research team examined this topic from a number of angles (Dixon & Azocar, 2006; Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b). We focused on local television news in Los Angeles and employed intergroup comparisons (two racial groups compared on an attribute/role). We utilized inter-role comparisons whereby a single racial group (e.g., Blacks) is compared across two attributes (e.g., criminal versus officer). Finally, we undertook inter-reality comparisons, in which we contrasted the racial distributions of various roles on television news (e.g., perpetrators) to the racial distribution contained in official reports (e.g., arrest records).

The intergroup comparisons revealed that both Blacks and Latinos were more likely than Whites to appear as perpetrators. The inter-role comparisons showed that Blacks and Latinos were more likely to appear as suspects when compared to officers, but that the opposite was true of Whites. Finally, our inter-reality comparisons found that Blacks were overrepresented as perpetrators, Whites were overrepresented as victims and officers, and Latinos were underrepresented across all crime roles (Dixon & Azocar, 2006; Dixon & Linz, 2000a, 2000b).

During the 1980s and 90s our results consistently suggested that news portrayals distorted social reality, especially regarding Blacks. Certain contextual aspects of race and crime portrayals made these distortions worse, whereas others made them better. For instance, local news shows appeared to reinforce the notion of Black and Brown defendants being particularly scary and incorrigible as evidenced by racialized prejudicial pretrial depictions (Dixon & Linz, 2002). Prejudicial information—news about a crime defendant that might bias a jury against the suspect—was twice as likely to appear in a local TV news story involving a White victim and Black defendant. Prejudicial pre-trial information was three times more likely to appear in a story with a Latino defendant and a White victim.

This last finding was one of the first times that we saw Latinos emerging in a more stereotypical depiction when compared to Blacks; we have

replicated this pattern in other types of news programs. For example, our analysis of crime news, terrorism, and undocumented immigration on network and cable newscasts (e.g., ABC news, CNN) found that Blacks were underrepresented as perpetrators and victims when making inter-reality comparisons with crime reports (Dixon & Williams, 2015).

However, when we focused on immigration and terrorism, the pattern changed. Suspects identified as immigrants in these news stories were grossly overrepresented as having Latino heritage. Moreover, Latinos were significantly more likely to appear as undocumented immigrants in the news than would be expected based on official data. We also found that Muslims were significantly overrepresented as terrorists on news programs when compared with FBI statistics on U.S. terrorism (Dixon & Williams, 2015).

Meanwhile, Whites portrayed in crime stories continue to be overrepresented in sympathetic roles such as victim or officer (Dixon, 2015; Dixon, Azocar, & Casas, 2003; Romer et al., 1998). The consistent White victimization findings and the 1990s Black perpetration findings served as the justification for a series of effects studies conducted over the first decade of the 2000s. Given that content analyses demonstrate the association of people of color with criminality and Whites with victimization and law enforcement, watching television news might have two specific psychological effects. First, it may create a cognitive association between mental conceptions of Blacks and perpetration. Second, it might reinforce a schema of Whites as occupying the role of officers and victims.

The Effects of Traditional News Exposure on Seeing Black Perpetrators and White Officers

Over the course of the first 10 years of the new millennium, many of us turned to the question of what effects such biased portrayals may have on news consumers (Dixon, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008c; Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Oliver & Fonash, 2002; Oliver et al., 2004). Cultivation and social cognition theories shaped many of these investigations (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 2002; Shrum, 2009).

Experimental Evidence for Stereotype Reinforcement

The most difficult challenge for media effects scholars is teasing out the relationship between cause and effect: are racist stereotypes more accessible because we live in a racist culture or because people repeatedly watch racist news programming? Which factor causes which result? To address these concerns, my colleagues and I conducted a series of experiments designed to understand the impact of repeated exposure to stereotypical news coverage on stereotype activation and use.

We hypothesized that frequently viewing newscasts overrepresenting Black criminality would develop and reinforce a cognitive association between Black men and lawbreaking. Thus, we measured whether and how watching biased news coverage of Black criminals contributed to the chronic activation of the Black criminal stereotype. In addition, we tested whether viewing such content increased the accessibility of the stereotype when viewers subsequently made relevant policy judgments. We did this by exposing participants to a news program featuring large ratios of Black to White suspects, large ratios of White to Black suspects, all race-unidentified suspects, or all non-crime stories. We also asked participants about how much news they watched on a daily basis.

We found that heavy news viewers were more likely than light news viewers to believe, when exposed to large ratios of Black rather than White suspects, that the world is a dangerous place and to experience emotional discomfort when witnessing such images (Dixon, 2006a; Dixon & Azocar, 2007). Heavy news viewers were also more likely than light viewers to assume, when exposed to either a majority of Black rather than White criminals or race-unidentified criminals, that a subsequent race-unidentified perpetrator was culpable for his offense (Dixon, 2006b; Dixon & Maddox, 2005). Further, we found that race-unidentified suspects are assumed to be African American and that race-unidentified officers are assumed to be White, especially among heavy news viewers (Dixon, 2007).

These studies suggest that heavy news viewing perpetuates fear of Black perpetrators and a willingness to assume that Black suspects are guilty. Moreover, the research suggests that because chronically biased news coverage activates racialized stereotypes, participants found the images more accessible and used this to explain the stories we showed to them. A number of other experimental studies have replicated and extended all of these findings (Gilliam & Iyengar, 1998, 2000; Gilliam et al., 1996; Johnson, Adams, Hall, & Ashburn, 1997; Oliver, 1999; Oliver & Fonash, 2002; Peffley, Shields, & Williams, 1996).

It is important that some of our experiments involved the assessment of and/or exposure to news images of race-unidentified suspects. We thought that soliciting reactions to race-unidentified suspects might be an effective way to demonstrate whether news programs reinforced cognitive links between Blacks and criminality. Would viewers, even when shown a suspect of nondescript status, tend to assume that the offender was a Black man? The answer was yes. People misremembered race-unidentified suspects as Black suspects. They also became equally punitive when exposed to Black and race-unidentified suspects, and their support for the Black community declined after exposure to race-unidentified suspects. Apparently, the cognitive association between Blacks and criminality is so strong that simply thinking about crime conjures images of African

Americans. When exposed to a majority of White suspects, none of these effects was observed.

Survey Research and Stereotype Reinforcement

Experimental studies provide the strongest evidence that a causal agent (watching TV news) produces a particular outcome (stereotyping of Blacks) (Babbie, 2012; Wimmer & Dominick, 2005). However, they generally lack external validity, meaning that we are unsure of the extent to which we might observe the same effect in the real world with actual stimuli. Survey research tends to have stronger external validity than experiments do, and researchers have often used surveys to address questions about the effect of news on stereotypical conceptions of crime and race.

For example, I have used surveys to assess whether television news reinforced already firmly lodged stereotype biases (Dixon, 2008a, 2008b), and found that even after controlling for prior racial attitudes, attention and exposure to crime news was positively correlated with a general concern about crime. In other words, the more crime news you watch, the more afraid of crime you become. In addition, crime news exposure was positively associated with the culpability ratings of Black and race-unidentified criminals, but not with White criminals: the more crime news you watch, the more likely you are to believe that Black suspects are guilty. Finally, and most telling, respondents with heavier exposure to local news content over-representing Black men as criminals had a stronger perception that all African Americans are violent.

This reaction was found even among respondents who condemned explicit racism, meaning that independent of one's prior racial attitudes, seeing Black men depicted as criminals in the news is positively connected with negative racial thoughts about all African Americans. Even people who are consciously sympathetic to Blacks can unconsciously stereotype Black men if they watch extensive amounts of TV news portraying Black male criminality.

Digital Media, News, and Stereotyping

Based on the literature, therefore, we know three things about traditional television news: news content has historically reproduced stereotypes of African Americans; experiments demonstrate a causal relationship between television news exposure and stereotypical thinking about African Americans; and these effects occur both within and beyond the laboratory setting and thus can be observed with survey tools. However, the bulk of this prior work focused on traditional broadcast television news; today increasing numbers of Americans turn to the Internet and

digital media for news (Pew Research Center, 2013). How is race depicted in these new outlets? Are the effects on stereotyping more pronounced or less problematic? Our team has done some limited work in this area and found that stereotypes continue to be perpetuated on the Internet (Josey, Hurley, Hefner, & Dixon, 2009), and that Internet news sources are linked with racist ideas (Melican & Dixon, 2008).

We must intensify our investigations of digital media because the news and information landscape has changed. Americans no longer rely on traditional news sources for prepackaged information, but today repackage, bundle, and transmit their own filtered forms of information to one another. Users cobble together news from various sources including websites, newsfeeds, and YouTube videos. What are the effects on stereotyping within this context? Do self-reinforcing search behaviors and closed social networks reify racial prejudice?

Social media and user-created aggregation of Internet information sources provide an interesting point of study for those of us interested in race, media use and social justice. Due to the “one to many” format of traditional news, the professional editorial function determined the content to which an audience member was exposed. However, news stories now appear on one’s social media feed based on the selection of friends or sources. In addition, the algorithms of social media continue to send digital users content aligning with their prior online behaviors. Psychological theories of selective exposure and social identity theory suggest that the probability of conversations justifying racism and stereotyping is magnified under conditions where receivers self-select reinforcing stories. Below I overview some data that might help illustrate this point, and then I offer a theoretical synthesis, followed by an outline of the Socially Mediated Stereotyping Model (SMSM) that may help us move forward in this new context.

Internet News Studies of Race and Crime Stereotyping: New Findings, New Frontier

Internet-distributed news might be especially potent in shaping racial conceptions because the Internet offers an unprecedented ability to choose certain kinds of content over others. Users can shape their media diets to confirm the worst stereotypes about outgroup members. We may have observed this when we examined Internet news consumption patterns and reported user trust of online news sources (Melican & Dixon, 2008). Some Internet-only news sources (having no mainstream counterpart) reflect extreme partisan views (e.g., Drudge Report), whereas others present Internet content aligned with traditional media (e.g., CNN.com or ABCnews.com). We found participants who sought out Internet-only web news reported more racism than did those who consumed more mainstream content. Further, respondents having strong trust in Internet-only

sites with extreme views also expressed more racial hostility compared to those who sought out mainstream messages online.

However, the above assumes that online-only Internet news might be more biased than traditional news, even when traditional outlets repost their content online. Our studies of news content reveal that this may not be the case; for example, we found that the websites of online-only news outlets and news outlets having traditional media counterparts both stereotyped African Americans as poor, Muslims as terrorists, and Latinos as undocumented immigrants (Josey et al., 2009). I became curious to test directly whether Internet news consumption overall, and not specific online sources, might reinforce racial stereotypes.

Web News Consumption

Above I reported on a pair of surveys I conducted that assessed the relationship between traditional news consumption and stereotypical beliefs regarding Blacks (Dixon, 2008). These surveys also asked about respondents' Internet news consumption, and here I report on a secondary analysis of the data as an initial test of whether web news contributes to racial stereotyping. I asked 500 Los Angeles based respondents a series of questions regarding their consumption of newspapers, local television news, network television news, and web news. I controlled for a number of factors including age, gender, education, income, racism, race, and overall television viewing. To test stereotype activation, I used a dependent measure similar to one I have utilized before: predicting the culpability/incorrigibility of a hypothetical race-unidentified suspect. I then submitted the entire series of variables to a hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Table 10.1 indicates that Internet news consumption ($\beta = .19$) positively predicts culpability judgments for the hypothetical suspect. This replicates what I have found in the past with traditional news, but extends it to online news.

Social Media Effects

Another compelling avenue for study involves Internet news distributed by social media. In many ways online news operates much like traditional news in that journalists post content for mass distribution. However, social media users can repost online news or citizen journalist pieces, blog, comment, and more. Many people use social media for activist purposes and to raise awareness of issues. My 2008 surveys did not assess the impact of social media, the effects of which—because social media offer users an opportunity to actively engage in producing and sharing news about social issues with their friends—may differ from those of traditional or online news (Pew Research Center, 2013, 2014).

Table 10.1 SRS Urban Sample: Web News Use Predicts Incurrigibility of Unidentified Suspects

<i>Variable</i>	β
Age	.20*
Females (Reference Males)	.03
Education	.10
Conservatism	-.07
Income	.01
Racism	.22*
Blacks (Reference Whites)	-.42*
Latinos (Reference Whites)	.12
Others (Reference Whites)	-.17
Overall Television Viewing	.08
Newspaper Exposure	-.01
% People of Color in Neighborhood	.14
Crime Rate (Crimes per Thousand)	.01
Local TV News Consumption	.04
Network TV News Consumption	-.18
Internet (Web) News Consumption	.19*

Note: Final Model: $F(16, 127) = 2.62, p < .001, R^2 = .25; *p < .05. **p < .01, ***p < .001$

I tested this notion with a small sample of 40 left-leaning activist graduate students at a small southern college. I included similar controls as in my earlier studies: age, gender, education, conservatism, income, racism, and race, and attempted to predict the belief in Black violence (a measure I have used in several studies) with the following variables: attention to crime news, news trust, newspaper exposure, online news use, social media consumption, and blogging about social issues. The results are displayed in Table 10.2. Surprisingly, I found that social media consumption ($\beta = .54$) was the only predictor that was very strongly associated with this stereotypical belief in Black violence. However, I neglected to directly ask the respondents whether they used social media for counter-stereotypical activism.

Table 10.2 Convenience Progressive School Sample: Social Media Use Predicts Black Violence Stereotype

<i>Variable</i>	β
Age	-.08
Females (Reference Males)	-.30
Education	.21
Conservatism	.06
Income	.09

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Racism	.23
White Respondents (Reference Others)	.24
Attention to Crime News	.22
Newstrust	-.44
Newspaper Exposure	-.44
Internet (Web) News Consumption	.18
Social Media Consumption	.54**
Blogging about Social Issues	-.29

Note: Final Model: $F(12, 20) = 2.42, p < .05, R^2 = .35; ^*p < .05, ^{**}p < .01, ^{***}p < .001$

Theoretical Challenges of Digital Media

The above-mentioned studies suggest a need for a programmatic investigation of socially mediated news and racial stereotyping. Racial stereotypes seem to persist in online news outlets and to influence race and crime judgments. However, much more research is needed to investigate the potential content and effects of social media. Moreover, prior theoretical models might need fine-tuning to better guide this new era of investigation. I believe we will be well served by a synthesis of four mass communication theories: cultivation/accessibility, agenda setting, social identity, and selective exposure. After a brief consideration of these theories, I present a model integrating the most relevant components of each—the Socially Mediated Stereotyping Model (SMSM).

Cultivation and Accessibility's Declining Relevance?

Cultivation is one of the most oft-cited and heuristically valuable theories in media effects research (Gerbner et al., 2002; Shrum, 2009). Fundamentally, it suggests that our perceptions of social reality are shaped by our media consumption such that the more we consume television the more our view of the social world reflects the television world. Psychologists, political scientists, and communication scholars have utilized notions emanating from social cognition to drill down on processes explaining the cultivation effect (Dixon, 2000, 2001; Potter, 1991; Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007; Shrum, 2009).

Two key constructs to emerge from this theorizing include *chronic activation* and *chronic accessibility*. Chronic activation denotes how consistent exposure to stereotypical images triggers chains of associations in the brain. Chronic accessibility denotes how, after years of chronic activation, viewers learn to draw upon stereotypes to explain their world, thus generating meaning through the use of stereotypes (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Kunda, 1999).

However, as Metzger (2009) noted, cultivation as originally formulated might not fully apply to spaces on the Internet. The original notion

assumed that the same formulaic messages pervaded all of media due to the one to many composition of traditional media outlets (Gerbner et al., 2002; McQuail, 1997). However, today users can create their own content which competes with Internet content produced by traditional media sources (Melican & Dixon, 2008). With the Internet, citizens can use both kinds of content to create unique mediated spaces designed specifically around their interests. Social media users can inhabit self-contained media worlds in ways that simply did not exist prior to online news distribution. Therefore, although cultivation and accessibility might continue to play a role, it may be a diminished role. Instead, we must consider the specific media diets of users, and for what purposes users approach their consumption.

The Role of Agenda Setting

Instead of cultivation effects we might consider how social media and Internet news set the agendas of individual users (Metzger, 2009). Agenda setting suggests that the media do not tell us what to think, but rather what to think about (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002): repeated media messages make us think certain issues are more important than others, and we consider these highlighted issues when making judgments about relevant policies and issues (Price & Tewksbury, 1997; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

This theory has powerful implications for online news distribution and effects. Even though people inhabit individual media worlds online, issues may begin to trend within their network. As a result, major issues continue to be debated and discussed even within one's tailor-made social media realm. People in the network might share posts which represent either traditional mediated content or alternative media content, some of which may be extreme and inflammatory. The sharing might create discussion, but this discussion might be very much linked to the personal identities of those participating in the debate.

Social Identity Theory

Scholars have used social identity theory (SIT) to predict media stereotyping effects, and this theory might have even more relevance in the digital media environment. As originally constructed, this theory posits self-construct protection comes at the expense of perceptual distortions of outgroup members (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). In other words, we feel better about ourselves by negatively judging and evaluating outgroup members. Mastro and her colleagues have applied this theory to numerous investigations of traditional entertainment media consumption and race/ethnicity (Mastro, 2004; Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Kopacz, 2008), finding that

Whites process mediated images of Latinos in stereotypically meaningful ways in order to boost their own self-concepts.

This theoretical perspective offers extremely useful insight regarding online distribution of news and information. Obviously, people might process Internet-distributed news in ways that promote outgroup stereotyping, which may explain how and why people seek and share information that others view as inflammatory. Digital media offer an opportunity for social exchange that SIT does not fully address. As articulated, SIT describes a connection between one's ingroup identity and outgroup psychological processing, but does not focus on exchanges between ingroup members.

Selective Exposure and Social Utility

The rise of digital media has in some ways encouraged a return to classic conceptualizations of media effects, including selective exposure, which posits that we choose consumption based on our own attitudes and predispositions (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012; Vidmar & Rokeach, 1974).

Selective exposure plays an integral part in our interactions with digital media. Our consumption of web news often starts with a search engine or a habitual click on bookmarked (i.e., already filtered) sources. Knobloch-Westerick and her colleagues have worked on this phenomenon for some time and have concluded that social utility is the driving force behind selective exposure (Knobloch-Westerwick, 2012): people make decisions about media consumption based on their potential future social interactions. This suggests that beyond social identity, one must consider how social media create social utility. Selective exposure remains pivotal in the new media context; along with cultivation and social identity theory, it may have great explanatory power regarding stereotyping in the digital era.

The Socially Mediated Stereotyping Model (SMSM)

Given the changes in the delivery and content potential of digital media, we must re-conceptualize our theoretical approach to understand the effects of socially mediated news. I propose that we consider the Socially Mediated Stereotyping Model (SMSM) that applies and extends prior theory to Internet news consumption. The SMSM contends that the default digital media consumer is susceptible to unconscious bias reinforcement through the process of mediated accessibility. This bias strengthens when users seek stereotype confirmation and lessens when users focus on counter-stereotypical social activism. I argue strongly for a consideration of individual differences in the exploration of the psychological effects of social media consumption (Oliver, 2002). Below I present two propositions

of the SMSM and three media groups that it predicts. Following this I propose a series of studies to test the underlying principles of the SMSM.

SMSM Propositions

Proposition 1 of the SMSM states: Dominant themes proliferating on social media make racial stereotypes more accessible but are shaped by agenda setting and media diets. Social media users are susceptible to dominant themes presented in digital media newsfeeds as predicted by both cultivation and agenda setting. These themes have been shown thus far to largely conform to the problematic stereotypical depictions inhabiting traditional news outlets (Josey et al., 2009). However, this susceptibility is moderated by media choice and by the interplay of new and traditional media agenda setting.

Although traditional media has historically set the agenda, social media users can influence the traditional media agenda by disseminating alternative content; with enough attention those stories can become prominent or trend—in popular terms, they can go viral. Some of these viral postings get picked up by traditional media news outlets, which may supplement the original posting with additional commentary or journalistic investigation. Such alternate content may or may not be controversial or inflammatory, but it does represent a sea change in that it is user-generated. When it is racially inflammatory, it may go a long way to increasing the accessibility of racial stereotypes for social media consumers.

However, users can also reinforce traditional media's influence on the agenda by reposting stories from traditional news outlets. The agenda propagating one's news feed and hence one's media diet matters because certain agenda items (e.g., immigration reform) may be more rife with racial stereotypes than others (e.g., tornadoes hit Midwest). Therefore the particulars of an individual's media diet play a large part in what is activated during his or her engagement with digital media. Moreover, the user's news feed might derive from a combination of other users, traditional media corollaries, independent media corollaries, or the user herself. The more one's news feed contains problematic racialized stereotypes, the more a user's social media use will increase the accessibility of stereotypes and subsequent unconscious bias.

However, although the SMSM suggests that the themes present in social media might lead to stereotype activation, the social aspects inherent in social media also must also be considered. This is explored in the second proposition of the SMSM.

Proposition 2 of the SMSM states: Social utility will moderate the effects of social media on stereotyping via selective exposure. The significant SIT work suggesting that we seek to feel better about ourselves through the derogation of others should be enhanced by focused attention

to the properties of social media. If this proposition is correct, users should seek, post, and discuss content with others in an ingroup community that makes them feel better about themselves while stereotyping outgroup members. The process of using social media content to uphold the values of the ingroup while derogating the outgroup should occur especially with ingroup members heralding from socially marginalized groups such as White supremacists. Moreover, the social utility function of selective exposure and social media use should also motivate specific posts and discussions designed to promote and stabilize ingroup membership at the expense of outgroup members. In this case, social media content serves the social utility function of ingroup valuation. These postings will likely include heavily editorialized and often-untrue news postings that rely on outgroup stereotypes. Therefore, as members of these ingroups use social media, they should also display increased stereotype endorsement over time.

However, for ingroup members who see their identity as closely tied to the removal of racial stereotypes in society, the opposite should occur. They should use social media to share posts, online news, and other content that counters racial stereotypes. The process of selective exposure would have them either resist or severely critique racist and stereotypic content. This would also percolate through social utility as these ingroup members seek to sustain an identity as anti-racist activists. Therefore, we should see less stereotyping over time from people with this view.

SMSM-Predicted Social Media Groups

Unconscious Bias Group

This group resembles traditional media consumers, and will generally not pay much attention to the news content of their feeds, instead engaging the social network on mostly non-controversial topics. This group may also include lurkers who read and post few things. Because these people will most likely ingest a media diet dominated by the most popular and trending stories, they are likely to receive stereotypical information. As a result, the accessibility processes outlined in Proposition 1 will reinforce the unconscious stereotypical bias of this group.

Stereotype Confirmer Group

Members of this group will perceive their identity as being under assault, and will largely blame outgroup members. They will highlight news clippings, blog posts, and videos that confirm the negative stereotypes of outgroup members. Users in this group will demonstrate a penchant for rumor, innuendo, and the spreading of inaccurate information, particularly

about outgroup members. As articulated in the second proposition of the SMSM, they will use this information to maintain solidarity with other ingroup members, and will demonstrate greater stereotyping than seen in the unconscious bias group.

Anti-Stereotype Activist Group

Members of this group will see their role as utilizing digital media tools to break down stereotypes. They will seek to debate mainstream discourse regarding racial stereotypes. Their newsfeed will be populated by content that critiques traditional news media stereotypes, undertakes critical analyses of news events, and encourages other social media users to engage politically for social change. This group will demonstrate fewer stereotypes than both the unconscious bias and stereotype confirmer groups. As predicted by Proposition 2 of the SMSM, they will generate social utility from online interactions with other anti-stereotyping activists interested in resisting the power of stereotypes.

Investigating the Utility of the Social Media Stereotyping Model

The SMSM could be a useful starting point to examine stereotyping effects in the new media environment. However, we must first test the model's validity. Validation tests should employ a survey of social media users' attitudes and activism combined with an observation of social media use; a systematic content analysis of social media user sharing behavior, content and sources; and an experiment assessing content frames and the development of racialized attitudes and activist behavior.

A diverse group of participants could take part in a survey that could be administered to measure respondents' racial attitudes, political attitudes, media exposure, social activism, and cross-racial contact. Participants could then be asked to allow researchers to follow their news feeds for a year. The combination of these two methods would allow us to assess whether the three groups predicted by the SMSM manifest in the real world. A content analysis investigating the source and content of shared posts regarding race and crime could be informative on multiple levels. Besides the manifest content (the messages and their sources), we could also discover some catalysts of social justice and policing discussions. To what extent do social activists and stereotype confirmers (including inflammatory extremists) set the agenda? Can stereotype confirmers resist and subvert the social activists' messaging and vice versa?

Controlled experiments allow us to understand the potential causal impact of social media messages. For example, a study could assess

implicit bias and support for outgroup members after exposure to social media news reports of criminality varied by race of the perpetrator and of the officer. This would help us examine more closely the existence and structure of the unconscious bias group.

In summary, traditional media stereotyping research has suggested that the messages spread from one or a few sources to many receivers have led to the chronic activation of stereotypes, which then makes the stereotypes more accessible when making judgments. The new media environment challenges that conceptualization of effects, and no single theoretical perspective can be deployed to explain the digital world we now occupy.

The SMSM incorporates multiple theoretical perspectives. It proposes that exposure to social media still makes racial stereotypes more accessible, but this process is mediated by users' specific social media diets. It also proposes that social utility and selective exposure drive the effects of social media. As a result, social media consumption will lead to stereotype use at both an implicit (unconscious bias group) and explicit (stereotype confirmer group) level. However, it is also possible that the tools available to activists might allow them to counter the stereotypes that continue to proliferate in society. Researchers who wish to make an impact in the new media arena must be prepared to assess these multiple possibilities when conducting their research. The SMSM presents a useful path for moving forward that goes beyond the limitations of prior theoretical notions and old contexts.

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