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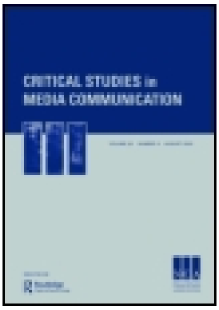

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Media Frames and Displacement of Blame in the Don Imus/Rutgers Women's Basketball Team Incident: Sincere Fictions and Frenetic Inactivity

Faye Linda Wachs, Cheryl Cooky, Michael A. Messner & Shari L. Dworkin

Shock jock radio by its very nature involves the creation of spectacle through outrageous utterances that simultaneously reinforce and resist dominant norms (Nylund, 2007). Self-proclaimed media "bad boy" Don Imus referred to the Rutgers University Scarlett Knights, National Collegiate Athletic Association (N.C.A.A.) women's basketball championship runner-ups as "nappy headed hos" during an April 4, 2007, broadcast of his "Imus in the Morning" radio show, simulcast on MSNBC. Applying Foucault's concepts of sin and redemption to this media event, we explore dominant media frames of the Don Imus incident. We ask, "what do dominant media frames reveal about agendas of privilege and oppression in media discourse?" Textual and content analysis of national and regional U.S. newspapers explicates dominant media framings of the narratives of Imus's apology and his subsequent dismissal from radio and television. We discuss what these narratives reveal about media frames of the displacement of blame, sin, and redemption. We conclude that the Imus event and the subsequent assignation of blame operate to maintain "sincere fictions" that minimize racism in the larger culture, while amounting to what we call "frenetic inaction" around structural sources of social inequalities.

Keywords: Framing; Sport; Discourse; Race; Media Events

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Introduction

During an April 4, 2007, broadcast of his “Imus in the Morning” radio show, simulcast on MSNBC, self-proclaimed media “bad boy” Don Imus referred to the National Collegiate Athletic Association Women’s Basketball runner-ups, the Rutgers University Scarlett Knights, as “nappy headed hos.” Known as a “shock jock,” Imus had previously generated media spectacle with his controversial comments and ire-drawing insults that were racist, classist, sexist, and heterosexist. For example, Imus said of then *New York Times* reporter Gwen Ifill, “Isn’t the ‘Times’ wonderful, it lets the cleaning lady cover the White House.” At the time when President Obama was a Senator, Imus referred to Obama as “that colored fellow” (Johnson, 2007a). In remarks regarding the appearance of professional tennis players, Serena and Venus Williams, Imus claimed they were “animals” better suited for *National Geographic* than *Playboy*. Although past incidents have drawn criticism from media outlets and academics, they had little impact on Imus’s career. However, the “nappy headed ho’s” comment temporarily cost Imus his radio show.

Part of a larger project that analyzed dominant media frames of the Don Imus event (see Cooky, Wachs, Messner, & Dworkin, 2010), we apply Foucault’s concept of “sin and redemption” to examine the media framing of Imus’s apology and his subsequent dismissal from radio and television. We explore what these frames revealed about racism and sexism in contemporary American culture. As such, we investigate what aspects of the Imus incident were visible and what aspects were rendered invisible by the media (i.e., agenda setting). Moreover we examine what linkages and associations were presumed by the meanings embedded in the media frames. This analysis is important for explicating how agenda setting and media framing shape dominant discourse in ways that often reproduce limited understandings of social inequality and impose constraints upon social justice.

Media Frames, Culture, and Ideology

Media frames and agenda setting inhibit the functioning of democracy, because they impose limits on the terms of debates in ways that ultimately serve the interests of corporations (McChesney, 2004; McCombs, 2004). Thus, the importance of mass media as a transmitter of dominant cultural beliefs, ideologies, and values is widely accepted by media scholars (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992; Hall, 1981; Kellner, 2005).

Agenda setting and media framing are two major theoretical models for media message construction (Sheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Agenda setting highlights the correspondence between the media’s emphasis on specific issues and the importance afforded to these issues by the public (Edelman, 1988; Fiske, 1996; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2010).

By contrast, media framing illustrates how presentation shapes understanding. Information tends to be presented in schemas with which audiences are familiar. Given that individuals learn through processes of memory and association, we are predisposed to fit new information into existing schemas or mental patterns and contexts (Willingham, 2009). Media frames operate within and reinforce existing schemas, or patterns and associations that the mind uses to understand the external world. Social forces, such as neoliberal economic agendas, help shape the frames that are "built" in the mass media (Sheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Media framing structures what Foucault terms the "realm of the fathomable"—in other words, what is possible to be known given existing social structures and beliefs. According to media scholars, there is not a single over-arching way in which an event is framed, but overlapping, sometimes contradictory and competing frames. These frames may be interpreted by audiences in multiple and oppositional ways (Condit, 1989; Edy & Meirick, 2007). There are, however, preferred readings, which refers to an interpretation of an embedded meaning consistent with that intended by producers. The context in which preferred readings are imprinted with power and effectively institutionalized is a fertile area for analysis (Hall, 2000). "Studying up" on dominant texts to understand embedded messages is critical to understanding the production of prevailing social ideologies (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Hall, 2000). Despite what some hail as the profusion of new democratic principles engendered by audience input (McChesney, 2004; Zhou & Moy, 2007), interrogating dominant frames remains a priority in media analysis. While audiences may interpret texts in a multitude of ways, the pleasure one obtains from the text and by employing alternative readings may not supersede the role of texts in conveying dominant ideologies (Condit, 1989; Croteau & Hoynes, 2003; Hall, 1981; Kellner, 2005). Indeed, recent research by the Pew Foundation (2010) demonstrates that mainstream print news media continues to serve as the primary source for the vast majority of media stories, including alternative media sources.

Media Events

Certain incidents capture the attention of the mainstream news media and become "media events." According to John Fiske (1996), media events take on symbolic importance in setting frames regarding the interpretation of social issues and, as such, embody wider societal dynamics. Studying the ways media events are constructed through news media frames provides insight into critical issues in our culture, such as racism and sexism. For example, the O.J. Simpson trial became a media event in which the implications of race and justice were contested and legitimated in ways that transcended the facts of the case and obscured other relevant frames, such as gender (Fiske, 1996).

The Imus affair operated as a sport media event in a number of ways. First, similar to many of the events Fiske (1996) discussed, the incident and subsequent media framings policed the boundaries of acceptable behavior around the issue of race. For example, in previous work we found the mainstream news media's dominant frame centered on race, which neglected the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the Imus/Rutgers University women's basketball team media event (Cooky et al., 2010).

Second, the mainstream news media set the agenda for how race and racism were debated. Moreover, the media rendered gender and sexism invisible in the silencing of key women and women of color leaders and organizations. The athletes, Coach Stringer, and women's groups were given almost no voice in the mainstream news media coverage of the controversy (Cooky et al., 2010). Also outside the frame was any discussion of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism in wider society and the myriad ways these forms of oppression intersect to shape the experiences of women, and in this case, female athletes (Cooky et al., 2010).

Finally, the story was primarily about media and media coverage. Indeed, the Imus controversy, which is effectively a story about media coverage of the N.C.A.A. women's basketball tournament, garnered two to three times more print news media coverage than the entire women's N.C.A.A. Division I tournament (Cooky et al., 2010). Hence, the very same media conglomerates that hired and profited from Imus benefitted from the controversy that emerged around his comments and subsequent dismissal. The mainstream news coverage of media events generates agendas and legitimates certain framings, while other aspects of the event are rendered invisible.

Overview and Timeline of the Don Imus/Rutgers Women's Basketball Team Media Event

In an exchange with co-hosts Bernard McGuirk and Sid Rosenberg, Don Imus referred to the Rutgers University Scarlett Knights women's basketball team as "nappy headed hos."[1] Independent watchdog Media Matters posted the clip on its blog later that day. On April 5, 2007, MSNBC distanced itself from Imus as groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) called the remark racist; as such online criticism increased (Farhi & Ahrens, 2007). By April 6, the National Association of Black Journalists issued a news release that condemned Don Imus and demanded his immediate dismissal. On the same day, Imus apologized on his radio show on WFAN, the New York based radio station on which *Imus in the Morning* was broadcast. CBS, which owns WFAN, also issued an apology. On April 9, Don Imus appeared on Al Sharpton's radio show and again apologized. Although Sharpton accepted an on-air apology from Imus, Sharpton still called for Imus's resignation. Jesse Jackson led a protest in front of the NBC office in Chicago. Later that day, it was announced that Imus was suspended for two weeks. On April 10, the Rutgers Women's Basketball Team hosted a press conference and accepted Don Imus's apology. Coach Vivian Stringer referred to his comments as, "deplorable, despicable and unconscionable." Also that day, in response to public pressure, many of Imus's corporate sponsors, including Proctor & Gamble, Bigelow Tea, and Staples office supplies, pulled their commercials from Imus's show. The following day, on April 11, additional sponsors withdrew and MSNBC canceled its simulcast. On April 12, CBS announced it had fired Don Imus.

Nearly eight months after the controversy began, on December 3, 2007, Don Imus returned to radio and television on RFD-TV, a cable/satellite channel with a "rural" target market of approximately 30 million homes. Imus was welcomed back by

Senators John Kerry, Joseph Lieberman, former Governor and former presidential candidates Bill Richardson, Rudolph Giuliani, Mike Huckabee, and John McCain. On April 4, 2008, Jesse Jackson appeared on Imus's show, symbolizing his redemption. He continues to broadcast his *Imus in the Morning* show: at the time of submission, it was available in 37 states.

Understanding Models of Sin and Redemption

Foucault (1979) draws attention to the exercise of power, through both its constitutive and repressive aspects, which are rendered visible through the legitimation of experts in a system of knowledge production that ultimately takes on the role of surveillance. Foucault describes this model as the confessional, a means for producing discursive "truth" through the process of self-revelation to experts. In Foucault's original model, the experts to whom one confesses were medical doctors, who had replaced religious authorities as arbiters of health, morality, and well being. Scholars argue that in contemporary society it is the mainstream media that plays the role of Foucaultian expert (Giulianotti, 2005; Wachs & Dworkin, 1997). The boundaries of acceptable behavior are defined and policed by these experts, who either censure transgressing bodies or hear the confessions of those who have transgressed.

Subject to bio-power, a system of expertise imposed on bodies defined as problematic or lacking, docile bodies are surveyed, managed, and controlled (Foucault, 1978). Docile bodies have little voice or role in the construction of public discourse, just as the Rutgers University women's basketball players are rarely, if ever, given voice in the media coverage outside of a scripted apology (Cooky et al., 2010). Confessional bodies engage in "technologies of self" and undertake a self-managed quest for improvement. Similarly, Imus, with his continued access to media, has a role in shaping media discourse.

One model for the confessional is a classic sin and redemption theoretical framework. In this framework, one is accused of a misdeed, apologizes, and is or is not redeemed (Hegde, 2007; Messner & Solomon, 1993; Wachs & Dworkin, 1997). The meanings embedded in Imus's apology, his subsequent redemption by the media, along with what was inside and what was outside media frames, revealed dominant cultural assumptions about the salience of race, gender, class, and sexuality (for other examples see Messner & Solomon, 1993; Wachs & Dworkin, 1997). Therefore, we utilize the "sin and redemption" model to examine how the narrative developed and shifted over the course of the mainstream news media coverage of the controversy. Imus's apology and subsequent firing provide a timely opportunity to study media framings of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism. Foucault's theoretical framework allows us to interrogate an ostensibly liberatory moment to reveal the dynamics of power and privilege. Thus, this article situates the firing of Imus as a failure for social justice, given that the mainstream media frames of the structural dynamics that reproduce racism, sexism, classism and heterosexism remained unchallenged.

Multiracial Feminist Theories and Sport

Theoretical concepts developed by multiracial feminists have proven useful for analyzing issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the media coverage of sport. Multiracial feminism refers to a theoretical perspective that situates race as a central category of analysis of gender formations (Baca Zinn & Thornton Dill, 1996). Unlike certain feminist theories that had a tendency to universalize the experience of women's oppression, multiracial feminist theoretical perspectives offer insight into how individuals (and social institutions) are situated within interlocking forms of power/privilege and subordination/oppression, what Collins (1990) referred to as the matrix of domination. Thus, through the lens of multiracial feminist theories "both/and" perspectives rather than "either/or" perspectives of social locations (i.e. race, gender, class, sexuality) are used to understand the ways that power/oppression shape experience (Collins, 1990; hooks, 2000; Houston & Davis, 2002).

At least since the early 1990s, studies of and by women of color have led the way in the development of intersectional analyses in the field of sport studies (Birrell, 1990; Smith, 1992). This research demonstrates that discourses of femininity and race intersect in specific ways for women of color. For example, African-American women's stigmatization as less feminine both opened avenues to sports deemed "unfeminine," while simultaneously undermining the image of black female athletes (Cahn, 1994). The work of Douglass and Jamieson (2006), Schultz (2005), Spencer (2004), and Vincent (2004) demonstrate the complicated intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality that continue to shape the media framings of female athletes. For example, Schultz (2005), Spencer (2004), and Vincent (2004) each found that race and gender intersect to construct the athleticism of the Williams sisters as a negatively infused racial trope. We view the Imus/Rutgers Women's Basketball Team controversy as a media event that illustrated the articulations of race, gender, and power in the mass media in contemporary U.S. society.

Methods

We modeled our methodology after Hall's (2000) framework of a discursive domain of dominant or preferred meanings. We conducted a content and textual analysis of newspaper coverage of the incident. Preferred readings limit the possible meanings encoded in texts by producers and thus limit the possible meanings decoded by audiences (Hall, 2000; Hunt, 1999). The content analysis reveals the preferred meanings of the text, as encoded by the mainstream news media (Cooky et al., 2010).

While we acknowledge the existence of multiple, competing, and subversive readings (Condit, 1989), we argue that the dominant framing, what is inside and outside the frame, sets the terms for the public debate over key social issues. Hence, our analysis is key to what is called "studying up" on contemporary cultural ideologies (Kane & Pearce, 2002; Messner, 1996). This technique is often used for grounded theoretical approaches, such as textual analysis in media studies, in order to provide the empirical basis for a critical examination of preferred and/or hegemonic meanings (Kane & Pearce, 2002). For this project, authors reviewed the dataset of articles and made note of media frames. Using an inductive approach, an initial coding scheme was developed and refined (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Eight themes emerged through this textual analysis. The eight themes were: *displacement of blame*; *framing of key figures*; *voices in the article*; *framing of comment*; *gender/race marking*; *connections to sport*; *connections to culture/society*; and *connections to other events*. Eighty-eight individual codes emerged and thus inform our analysis. Four themes, "framing of key figures,", "voices in the article," "framing of the comment," and "gender/race marking" were discussed in our previously published work (Cooky et al., 2010). In this article, we focus on the following themes: "displacement of blame"; "connections to culture/society"; and "framings of key figures."

Our analysis focused on mainstream print news media coverage in 13 newspapers, four national and nine regional. The four national papers, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*, were selected as four of the five highest circulation papers in the U.S. Regional papers were selected based on purposive sample techniques (Patton, 1990) from different regions in the U.S. (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West). The nine papers selected were ranked in the top 25 newspapers based on circulation rates and included the local paper for Rutgers University, *The Star Ledger*. Our data collection period lasted from April 4, 2007, to April 19, 2007. We continued to follow the story, especially Imus's return to radio and cable television.

Results

Framings of Imus: Charity Fund-raiser and Equal Opportunity Offender

In other media events such as Magic Johnson's HIV announcement, blame is displaced away from privileged aspects of identity onto subordinated aspects (see Wachs & Dworkin, 1997). Given his privileged position as a white male media figure, Imus as a confessional body was able to shape and frame his apology. To understand Imus's redemption, we examined the shifts in the framing of Imus before and after he was fired. We coded articles as having a "negative frame" if the article included references to Imus's past misdeeds, or if the article contained an explicit critique of his behavior. For example, a journalist from *The Washington Post* wrote, "He tried to generate some edgy laughs for an audience that delights in the daily shots he takes at whomever he feels like shooting (blacks, gays, women, especially Sen. Hillary Clinton)" (Duke, 2007). Overall, we found that Imus was framed negatively in just over two-thirds (67.5%) of articles. Just over 75% of the articles frame Imus negatively prior to his firing, while somewhat fewer articles, (61.0%), frame him negatively after the firing (see Table 1). There were fewer articles that had an obvious frame (either positive or negative) of Imus after his dismissal; the percent of articles that did not have an obvious frame (either negative or positive) of Imus increased from 3.6% to 14.3% (see Table 1). After his firing, the percentage of articles with a negative frame decreased to 14.9% while a higher percentage that provided a positive frame increased to 6.1%. This indicates a shift in the narrative toward redemption. Indeed, Imus returned to radio and cable television less than a year after the incident occurred.

When Imus was framed positively it generally occurred through three types of frames: (1) that he made considerable contributions to charity, (2) that he is a shock jock doing his job (well) in a climate in which popular culture normalizes that language, or (3) that he is a legitimate political commentator who fills a very specific and important niche. The positive frames of Imus's personal charity included discussions of a camp he runs for children with cancer and his other fund-raising efforts. For example, "He got a Hackensack Hospital wing and the Imus cattle ranch for kids built. He was arguably the most important force behind the new veterans' rehab center in San Antonio" (Wood, 2007). In the second frame, the format of the show rather than Imus himself was blamed. "Imus's defenders say that he is actually an equal-opportunity offender: Jews, gays, and Roman Catholics are his frequent targets" (Carr, 2007a). In this view, shock jock radio provides a specific product that fills a market niche.

In the third positive frame of Imus, he was presented as a legitimate political commentator. In this frame, Imus's show was explicitly referenced as political commentary, and key political figures that have appeared on Imus's program were frequently mentioned. Articles that utilized this frame focused on the "value" of the show. For example, one article stated the Imus show filled an important niche as, "some of the smartest political conversation on morning radio or TV" (*USA Today* 2007). Jay Marvin, a radio host, was quoted in the *The Denver Post*, "If Imus loses his microphone, there aren't many other venues like it around" (Kreck, 2007). In this frame, there was a tendency to describe Imus as a maverick or a hard-hitting journalist who was able to get away with saying things that other commentators could not. A number of politicians who appeared on his show were mentioned, including John McCain and John Kerry, which gave a sense of legitimacy to Imus's program as a serious forum for political debate and discussion.

Table 1. Media Framing of Imus.

	Framing of Don Imus * Timeline of Events Cross-tabulation			
		Timeline of Events		
		Before firing	After firing	Total
Framing of Don Imus	Positive	10 12.0%	19 18.1%	29 15.4%
	Neutral	7 8.4%	7 6.7%	14 7.4%
	Negative	63 75.9%	64 61.0%	127 67.6%
	Not Framed	3 3.6%	15 14.3%	18 9.6%
Total		83 100.0%	105 100.0%	188 100.0%

In many articles, a combination of the above positive frames was used to justify Imus's sexist and racist insult. For example, one journalist explained, "But his politically incorrect satire has been tempered by an intellectual and considerate side: He runs a camp for sick kids, cares about politics and has an eye for books that can catapult them into the best-seller list" (Johnson, 2007b).

When we examined how media frames shifted over the course of the media event, we found that approximately 20% of articles used a positive frame after the firing, while less than 10.0% used a positive frame prior to his dismissal. For example, the positive frame of Imus as political commentator declined after his firing, from nearly 35% to approximately 24% (see Table 2). The shift in frames suggests that Imus's firing undercut his position as a legitimate political commentator who "tells it as it is." Table 2 summarizes the positive framings of Imus. This table illustrates how the positive frames of Imus shift prior to and following his firing.

Media Framings of Imus's Apology

As we noted earlier, according to the sin and redemption model, it is not the one who confesses that defines the story, but the confessor who shapes the story. In the Imus/ Rutgers Women's Basketball Team controversy, the media coverage of Imus's apology, and Imus as the confessor, determined the agenda and framing of the story. As *The Seattle Times* put it, "... the apology made the story explode" (Steel & McBride, 2007). It was when the media took on the role of confessor that discourse emerged. Not a single story appeared in mainstream print media until Imus apologized. Thus, the role of the media as confessor and arbiter of justice became the media frame on which the story was founded.

From the beginning of the controversy, the confessor (i.e., mainstream media) made clear the punishment that was up for debate. The mainstream news media discussed whether Imus should be fired, and, once he was fired, the media provided framings of the subsequent debate surrounding the firing. Of the articles published prior to his termination, 78% of the articles discussed whether or not Imus should be fired. Part of this frame included calls for Imus's dismissal. "Calls for the dismissal of the syndicated radio host Don Imus continued over the weekend despite his apology ..." began a *New York Times* article (Van Gelder, 2007). Of the articles published after his firing, 57% included a discussion of whether or not he should have been fired. Articles in this frame focused on his removal: "Bowing to a national

Table 2. Positive Frames.

Framing of Imus	Apology to Firing	Post Firing
Charity (21.3%)	21.7%	21.0%
Shock Jock (37.8%)	37.3%	38.1%
Legitimate Political (28.7%)	34.9%	23.8%

Note: Table summarizes the presence or absence of each frame. More than one positive frame may be present in the same article. Hence the table does not sum to 100%. Percentages in parenthesis represent the total percent of articles with that frame.

outcry and internal protests, CBS Radio said yesterday it would end Don Imus's morning program 'immediately'" (Farhi, 2007).

Although his show was broadcast in a small market, as stated above, he returned to radio in December of 2007, approximately eight months after his firing, and is broadcast, as at time of writing, in 37 states. In this way, the development of the narrative of sin and redemption situated the media as confessor that imposed a punishment and then granted absolution. Through his access to the media, Imus remains a public figure, which reflects his status as a confessional body and reinforces his privileged position as a white male (Foucault, 1979).

Displacement of Blame

Although Imus was framed negatively in many articles, there was a concomitant displacement of blame. This displacement of blame shifted responsibility from dominant culture and identities onto subordinate identities and "othered" groups and individuals. Despite the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality intersected in the Imus media event, race was inside the frame, while sexism, heterosexism, and classism were largely ignored, and specifically the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality remained outside the frame (Cooky et al., 2010). Instead, what appeared inside the mainstream news media framing was a discussion of the culture of shock jock radio (25.5%), audience blame for the comments (22.9%), and the blaming of media profit (20.7%). In addition, hip-hop culture (17.6%), popular culture (10.1%), and black culture (5.9%) were framed as responsible for contributing to a cultural context that normalized such references (see Table 3 for examples from text; see Table 4 for results).

Moreover, once Imus was fired, the displacement of blame shifted onto the medium (shock jock radio), the audience, and media profit. This displacement effectively exonerated Imus and displaced blame onto for-profit media. Yet, there was no critique of profit as a key determinant of media content. Prior to Imus's firing, shock jock radio was blamed. In this frame, although what Imus said was objectionable, he was simply fulfilling the job requirements. The second most frequent target for the displacement of blame, the audience, was also often included within this frame. As noted *in The Star Ledger*, "Imus's audience is heavy on the political and media elite that advertisers pay a premium to reach" (Perry, 2007). According to this frame, Imus was exonerated because he simply delivered what audiences wanted to hear, and what audiences wanted to hear was profitable to the media networks that broadcast Imus's show. However, the role of mainstream media in generating and building audiences remained outside the frame.

It is important to note that, when taken together, the three dominant frames of displacement of blame focused blame onto a generalized, anonymous audience. The classic neoliberal conflation of free market and freedom emerged, as mainstream print news media decried Imus's statements, while simultaneously protecting his right to broadcast. For example, one article observed, "Does this mean he should be silenced? The Rutgers team pointedly never asked for that, and I don't think the

Table 3. Textual Analysis Examples of Blame Displacement.

Displacement	Example(s) from Text
Shock Jock Radio (26%)	"'We have a whole genre called shock radio, seeing who can get the biggest rise.' Tollefson said. 'The broadcasting industry deserves blame for allowing this overall problem of intolerance and hatred'" (Narducci, 2007) "Imus gets the biggest ratings not just because he's bright and funny and attracts top-tier guests, but also because he and his sidekicks constantly push the envelope of acceptability, saying things that by any definition demean blacks, Jews, gays and women" (*USA Today*, 2007)
Audience (23%)	"There is an audience out there that is hungry for the ribald and the offensive. It is an audience that will not go away and cannot be boycotted" (Meyers, 2007) "There have been calls for his corporate bosses to fire him, but the greatest punishment that can be inflicted on Imus is in the hands of his listeners. If he cannot be civil, do what he dreads most: Turn him off" (*Denver Post*, 2007)
Media Profit (21%)	"When CBS executives fail to rein in such behavior—and that consistently have been the case—they effectively say bigotry is OK. They abdicate any responsibility to define the limits of civil dialogue" (*USA Today*, 2007) "Part of the reason that his corporate owners are eager to apologize, eager of the latest gaffe to blow over, is so that they can get back to counting the lucre he generates" (Carr, 2007b) "That Don Imus can be abrasive and offensive is undeniable, but he is also one of the most successful and influential pitchmen in the history of radio, if not broadcasting" (Steinberg et al., 2007)
Hip-Hop Culture (18%)	"Some analysts wondered why Imus has drawn so much fire at a time when many stations broadcast rock and hip-hop songs that include racially and sexually charged lyrics" (Lieberman, Petrecca, & Strauss, 2007) "Some, including radio shock jocks Opie and Anthony, have supported Imus's freedom of speech and suggested that his slur was no worse than the lyrics of popular rap songs" (Farhi, 2007)
Popular Culture (10%)	"And she said it's time to address the use of derogatory and insensitive remarks in popular culture" (Prunty, 2007) "We can spend time persecuting Imus, or we can have a real, honest, open discussion about the perpetrators of racism in a culture that allows some to feel that it is acceptable to use disparaging and demeaning terms to describe women, under the guise of pop culture entertainment, while selectively raking others over the coals" (Hutchins, 2007)
Black Culture (6%)	"The sensational indignation that got Imus fired last week struck many of us as hypocritical. It cast African Americans principally as the victims of discrimination—ignoring the fact that they are the chief purveyors of the demeaning language being decried" (Barras, 2007) ". . . an important question emerged from an Imus on-air soliloquy as he tried to defend himself: 'This phrase that I use, it originated I the black community. That didn't give me a right to use it, but that's where it originated. Who calls who that and why?" (Rich, 2007)

punishment fits the crime . . . as a free-speech near-absolutist . . . the answer to his free speech is more free speech—mine and yours" (Rich, 2007). Undergirding this logic is a neoliberal valuation of profit that was conflated with democratic choice and freedom of speech. As noted by McChesney (2004), the media tends to defend all media content as essential to the maintenance of a free press, especially ideologies that support ratings and profits. This defense is presented as free market democratic

Table 4. Displacement of Blame.

Displacement of Blame	Prior to Firing	Post-Firing	Total
Shock Jock Radio	25 (30%)	23 (22%)	48 (26%)
Audience	28 (34%)	15 (14%)	43 (23%)
Media Profit	22 (27%)	17 (16%)	39 (21%)
Hip Hop Culture	8 (10%)	25 (24%)	33 (18%)
Popular Culture	5 (6%)	14 (13%)	19 (10%)
Black Culture	3 (4%)	8 (8%)	11 (6%)

choice, while little attention is given to the economic inequality that fundamentally undercuts democracy by limiting access to speech to a select few. Hence, the role of the media as confessor becomes an exercise in Foucaultian power dynamics.

In addition to audiences and media profits, there was a displacement of blame onto popular culture, especially hip-hop and black culture. In this frame, rap and hip-hop artists such as Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre were blamed for using demeaning language to describe women from "their" community. A journalist from the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* explained, "Imus himself argues, 'that phrase originated in the black community. I may be a white man, but I know that these young women and young black women all through that society are demeaned and degraded by their own black men and that they are called that name'" (Downey, 2007). And *The Seattle Times* notes, "Over the past 15 years, performers including Snoop Dogg, Dr. Dre, Notorious B.I.G. and 50 Cent have built lucrative careers, and transformed hip-hop music into a billion-dollar cultural force, with the gratuitous use of such words (and much harsher ones) in reference to black women" (Ollison, 2007). Snoop Dogg's defense that the women basketball players of Rutgers University were not the women described by the term "ho," illustrated the displacement of blame for racism onto African-American individuals and onto "blackness" as a culture. Snoop Dog explained on MTV, "... it's a completely different scenario. Rappers aim their lyrics at 'hos in the 'hood, not at achieving collegiate athletes" (Puente, 2007).

Discussion

Sports and Color-blind Racism

While many recognize that there is a history of racial discrimination in sports, sports are largely viewed as an arena in which racism has been successfully contested (Hartmann, 2000; Smith, 2007). Whites continue to embrace what Bonilla-Silva (2003) refers to as "color-blind racism." Color-blind racism refers to the ways that racial inequality is perpetuated by denial of the continued salience of race in the U.S. And sport is a primary site wherein discourses of color-blind racism are reproduced, specifically what Bonilla-Silva calls "abstract liberalism" and "minimization of racism." According to Bonilla-Silva, abstract liberalism refers to the belief that institutional racism no longer exists because there is now equal opportunity. In sport, we see the abstract liberalism reproduced in the ways in which sport is understood as a level playing field. Sports also play a critical role in what Bonilla-Silva (2003) terms the "minimalization of racism," whereby discrimination is perceived by whites as largely a thing of the past that no longer impacts the life chances of people today. Therefore, to suggest that African American female athletes, who by all other measures represented the tenants of "abstract liberalism" (equal opportunity in sport), were "hos", will surely draw the ire of members of dominant groups that benefit from the reproduction of neo-liberal ideologies. In the case of Imus, the corporations that sponsored Imus's program, and the media networks that broadcast Imus's program, have their interests served in the reproduction of those dominant beliefs. The ideological underpinnings of sport as a "way out of the ghetto" were fractured when Imus called the Rutgers players "nappy-headed hos." Imus's racist, sexist, and sexualizing insult was constructed into a "media event" precisely because the insult was directed at "undeserving victims," thus challenging the very ideological foundations by which dominant institutions such as the media and sport are upheld.

We argue the Imus/Rutgers Women's Basketball Team media event and the subsequent assignation of blame operate to maintain "sincere fictions" about the minimalization of racism, especially in the world of sports. Feagin and Vera (1995) coined the term "sincere fictions" to refer to the ways that whites make sense of their own complicity in highly racialized and racist incidents such that racist attitudes and racism are reproduced. In her analysis of the Indian Wells controversy wherein the Williams' sisters boycotted the event due to racism, Spencer (2004) explains, "By creating fictive accounts, whites make sense of their complicity in racist behaviors that are considered to be politically incorrect" (p. 118). In creating "sincere fictions," white audiences, the white-dominated media, and Imus himself, displaced blame for racism onto black culture or black individuals that denied the existence of institutional forms of racism. Moreover, bell hooks (1999), in her discussion of commodity racism, argued that the commodification of the symbols and cultural conventions of black culture creates the false impression that racism has disappeared from the larger culture. Hence, racialized symbols are valued for their marketability and benefit specific hip-hop artists and the mostly white-owned and controlled record companies that produce such work (Rose, 2008). Shifting responsibility to a homogenized "black community" for the use of racial slurs by white individuals displaced blame away from racism in the mainstream media and in the sports world. Given that the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality remained outside the frame ultimately reinforced the liberal discourse of "minimalization of racism," and created a toxic "sincere fiction" that stigmatized African Americans as the perpetrators of racism, while exonerating Imus, the media, and audiences. Moreover, the profitability of the media event itself, and the construction of race and racism into a marketable event, was completely ignored.

Exonerating Audiences and Imus's Redemption

Foucault (1979) argued that power is transmitted through the tendency of discourse to reproduce dominant relations of privilege. When race and racism become visible, media events become packaged as commodity spectacles, rather than as an opportunity for a serious dialogue on race and racism in the wider culture (Joseph, 2009). Instead, this media event established the frame for addressing racism through public shaming and condemnation of Imus and his comment. The necessary discussion to address structural and systematic oppression was silenced or rendered invisible.

Discussion of the intersections of race, gender, class, and sexuality, and a discussion on how these social locations were outside the frames in the mainstream news media. The history of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism in mass media (see Ferguson, 1983; Hegde, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Tuchman, 1979) and specifically in sport (see Griffin, 1998; Hartmann, 2000; Lenskyj, 1986; Messner, 2002; Spencer, 2004; Vincent, 2004) has been well documented. Black women's bodies in have long faced the stigma of being marked as immoral (Brooks, 2006; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995) and less attractive (Craig, 2002). Indeed, Imus has demonstrated his propensity for using classed, racist, and gendered slurs to devalue the accomplishments of women/people of color, as evidenced by his comments regarding Gwen Iffil and the Williams sisters, discussed previously. In this case, Imus devalues the achievements of these young women by questioning their sexual attractiveness and highlighting their presumed availability. The media frames of this incident should highlight the intersection of race, class, sexuality, and heterosexism precisely because of the embedded assumptions in the statement. Instead, the sole axis of race is highlighted and reduced to an individual failing. As noted by Collins (1990) the marginalization of "othered" individuals serves the interests of the dominant group by perpetuating a system of knowledge that reproduces existing relations of power. Addressing one axis of oppression fails to take into account the way that the system operates as a whole to reproduce knowledge that maintains inequitable relations. Joseph (2009) argues how the belief in a "post-racialized" and "post-feminist" world operates to both obscure not only the continued presence of structurally embedded racism and sexism, but also the inter-relationship between the two. She examines the media condemnation of Tyra Banks's weight gain and her eventual redemption to illustrate this argument. For Joseph (2009), Banks was only redeemed by bringing her body back into line with dominant standards and thus was situated in a post-racialized/post-gendered discursive space, despite the assessments of her body being inherently the product of a gendered and raced history. Similarly, Imus transgresses by highlighting the continued salience of race, destabilizing assertions of a post-race/post-feminist society. Although both Banks and Imus were redeemed, Banks was required to take on a proscribed embodiment to attain/maintain legitimacy. By contrast, Imus starts with legitimacy and simply has to regain it.

After participating in a confessional to an expert (i.e. the media) that framed his remarks as unacceptable, and despite being fired, Imus subsequently was redeemed and returned to radio and television. This illustrates the theoretical salience of Foucault's distinction between docile and confessional bodies, and the increasing role of the media as the generalized expert to whom one confesses. The role of media as profiting from the racialization and "resolution" of the incident was further obfuscated through the confessional process. We found that the displacement of blame onto popular, hip-hop, and black culture operated to reproduce cultural racism wherein cultural signifiers, rather than biological signifiers, mark racial categories and define racial hierarchies (Carrington & McDonald, 2001). Merging cultural and commodity racism, the commodified aspects of "black" culture (what is marketed as "black") were a justification for the continued existence of racism, which simultaneously displaced blame from white racism and consumer culture.

Concluding Thoughts

Addressing social inequality requires change on multiple levels, including the levels of social interaction, cultural symbols, and structural/ institutional contexts (Messner, 2002). The mainstream media frames enabled audiences of the Imus/Rutgers Women's Basketball Team media event to view the debate within the realm of the cultural symbolic. We argue this serves as another form of displacement. Thus, the media event was not simply a "sincere fiction" (Feagin & Vera, 1995; Spencer, 2004) but what we call a "frenetic inaction." Here, we coin the term "frenetic inaction" to refer to the tremendous amount of media coverage, occurring in a short timeframe, coverage that ultimately did little to address the problems of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism in the wider society. In the mainstream news media coverage of the controversy, racism was identified, defined, debated, and discussed, albeit at the individual level, or it was displaced onto popular culture or black culture. At the same time, the media frames left the structurally embedded forms of inequality in dominant culture intact and unchallenged.

We argue this "frenetic inactivity" is an essential part of media events, one that operates to undermine meaningful social action by channeling energy and focus into specific understandings that often are limited to micro-level debates. While certainly Imus's comment was problematic given the racist, sexist, classist, and homophobic content, the commodification of the incident as infotainment resulted in a discursive construction of racism as primarily occurring at the level of the individual. In following the story, debating the points, and participating in the various media framings, the media created a specific set of frames for audiences to experience the event, one that generated a sense of civic engagement in the absence of any meaningful social change.

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