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**Race and Crime Conflict in News Coverage in Britain:
The Voice Tabloid Newspaper**

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Abstract

The *Voice* tabloid newspaper was founded in 1982 by Jamaican-born accountant Val McCalla. It is a diaspora media that campaigns for black immigrants in Britain especially on matters of race discrimination at the hands of the law enforcement agencies. During the 1980s, and in the wake of the Brixton riots, the tabloid secured huge circulation figures. Over its three decade reign, it has come to be known as 'Britain's Best Black Newspaper' and has served the black community by giving them a voice where other mainstream media have largely failed. It has over the years been a thorn in the side of the establishment, campaigning on numerous issues and championing the plight of black people nationwide. Its main news is a mixture of features, sports and celebrity interviews. This paper looks at how the tabloid attempts to resolve the race and crime conflicts that surround the coverage of the black community, focusing on the 2011 London riots. It discusses its role and contributions to the diaspora black community in the resolution of conflict in news as presented by the mainstream media.

Contributor Note

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Diaspora tabloid media plays an important role in informing citizens within the infotainment genre, which is generally a type of media which provides a combination of information and entertainment, often emblematic of concern and criticism, as a medium which conveys serious information about issues affecting public interest, into a form of entertainment which happens to have some facts in the mix (Chama 2015). Even though what we mean by tabloid changes over time, Keeble and Mir (2012) explain that the mixture of information and entertainment might be questionable at times but still can provide information of reasonable value. However, despite the scandals that have surrounded the tabloid media practice since its inception, and much more recently, following the phone hacking scandal by the *News of the World*, a redtop tabloid founded in Britain on 1 October 1843, but which ceased operations on 10 July 2011, Bird (2009) explains that many tabloid journalists continue to maintain that they are in the entertainment business and can afford to neglect such journalism concepts as ethics. Moreover, Hall (2003) argues that the main criticism often faced by the tabloids is their tendency to provide information that reinforces racial misrepresentations; on the other hand, not every tabloid is guilty as others are doing commendable work in presenting the facts.

***The Voice* Tabloid Newspaper**

The Voice is a diaspora tabloid media that challenges racial misrepresentations by the mainstream newspapers and broadcast media in Britain, while

catering to black immigrant communities since its inception in 1982 by a Jamaican Val McCalla as a weekly newspaper. Its establishment came just after the Brixton riots in 1981 that exposed tension between the Metropolitan Police and black immigrants in Lambeth, South London between 10 and 11 April. In 1982, the tabloid was set up with its office in Mare Street, Hackney, in East London, with its first editor Flip Frazer, to address the needs of the black community through a combination of human-interest stories spiced with fashion, sport, entertainment, hard news, and investigative stories. In August 1982, its first issue was printed during the London's Notting Hill Carnival (Chrisafis 2002).

Since then, it has continued to speak for black communities in Britain, becoming a thorn in the establishment. A case in point was in 1995 when it was accused of reporting what authorities' classified as an 'inflammatory' statement about the behaviour of police officers. It carried out a six-page assault on Sir Paul Condon, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, for suggesting on local radio that the diaspora tabloid was 'deliberately inaccurate, dangerously irresponsible, and even inflammatory'. Accusations and counter accusations began in July 1995, when Condon made a speech suggesting that 80% of muggers in some parts of London were black, and the tabloid splashed across its front page with a headline titled 'Condon, You're An Ass!' (Beckett 1996).

In December 1995, a young black man Wayne Douglas was found dead in a cell in Brixton police station, which led the tabloid a week later to produce the front



page account of a witness who claimed to have seen the assault, arguing that he saw the police kicking and punching Douglas, and also heard the sound of their batons on his bones. What followed were demonstrations outside the police station over Douglas' death, which turned into rioting. The police accused the tabloid of being provocative, arguing that its inflammatory reporting helped to fan the flames. The tabloid defended its action by claiming the police behaviour contributed to discontent among the black community that resulted in riots (Burrell 2008).

In 2002, the tabloid's founder died, and in 2004, it was taken over by Jamaican Gleaner Company with GV Media Limited becoming its publisher. Its headquarter is in East London at Moorfoot House and it currently publishes the tabloid every Thursday and is also available online, while being distributed nationwide through its more than 5000 retailers with a circulation of 57,000 recorded in the 1990s and early 2000s. It continues to set the record straight on race relations and counteracting stereotypes (Tryhorn 2004).

During the 2011 London riots, following the murder of Mark Duggan, a black man who was shot by the police, which triggered public disturbances, the tabloid pushed back on the mainstream media's characterization of black people in a bad light as predominantly violent and prone to committing crime. It presented the rioters as coming from a wide range of communities and race groups. It cited its own online poll that showed 61% of its readers felt the mainstream coverage was misleading, and that the images of black men and women as rioters and looters caught up in the disturbances

had been singled out as criminals (*The Voice* 2011).

Methodology

In studying *The Voice* and the issue of race and crime conflict, coverage in the mainstream newspapers and broadcast media in Britain, this research focused on the 2011 London riots and the murder of Mark Duggan. It looked at the news content that were published in the *Evening Standard*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, *The Sun*, the *BBC2 News Night* discussion, and the *BBC World Radio* debate from 4 August 2011 when Duggan was shot and killed, during the time of the riots that commenced in London on 6 August, until their end on 11 August. The news content on the riots that continued sporadically around the country was not the focus of this research. The news content analysis concentrated on stories and discussions about the London riots, which were subjected to the questions regarding (i) whether Britain's mainstream newspapers and broadcast media at the centre of the research disproportionately singled out black people during the riots; (ii) whether misrepresentation of black people as criminals occurred in discourses; (iii) whether the mainstream media's news content demonstrated deep-rooted racism in their analysis.

Data Analysis

The mainstream newspapers and broadcast media were purposively selected for this research study because they provided massive coverage on the murder of Mark Duggan and on the riots that followed. The major focus was on content that discussed race and crime in

Britain within the context of riots and the death of Duggan. The data analysis identified key themes that emerged repeatedly during the discussions in print and broadcast media, namely the 2011 London riot and the Mark Duggan Murder, *Evening Standard's* association of crime as an inherent black problem, *Daily Mail's* lack of trust on the innocence of the murdered black victim, the *Daily Telegraph's* murder justification, *The Sun's* portrayal of rioters as black underclass criminals, the *BBC2 News Night's* labelling of blacks as turning whites into violent gangs, the *BBC World Radio* debate on being black and the problem of violent disturbances and criminality.

Discussion on the 2011 London Riot Coverage and the Mark Duggan Murder

Britain has a long history of conflict between crime and race relations, riots, and inequality challenges. Besides, poverty and inequality in black communities has played a critical role in fuelling conflicts; for example, according to Alan and Veronica (1992), the 1196 riot was caused by the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The 1809 riots were caused as a result of the rise in the price of theatre tickets due to worsening living conditions. The 1981, 1985, 1995 Brixton riots and the 1985 Broadwater Farm riots were caused by racial inequalities and conflicts with law enforcement agencies. Similarly, on 4 August 2011, a black man Mark Duggan was shot and killed by the London Metropolitan Police in a suspected gang related crime. The killing triggered riots not only in London but also across the country. The mainstream newspapers and broadcast media coverage of the

murder and the riots put the black community in the spotlight.

Crime as an Inherent Black Problem

The *Evening Standard* presented Mark Duggan as a black man who lived by the gun within the black gang culture and was killed by the gun. Its headline 'When I grew up in Tottenham, we stole sweets; now it's revenge shooting' documented the history of gang related violence in the area as a predominantly black phenomenon. It explained how gangs and black culture have been related since the 1960s. It added that, in 2002, one leading Tottenham Mandem member, Mark Lambie, was convicted of kidnapping two men and torturing them using an electric iron and boiling water in a dispute over drugs and money. In its one-sided argument, it explained vividly how the black gang culture was heavily involved in guns and crime. It concluded and linked the Mark Duggan murder as an offshoot black gang which was influential in Broadwater Farm (Thompson 2011):

Following Mark Lambie's conviction, the Tottenham Mandem evolved into two new groups. The elders – the name given to any gang member of the age of 18 – went on to become the Star Gang, while the young generation call themselves the Bloods. Mark Duggan, the man whose death sparked the latest rounds of rioting, was said to be one of the founding members of the Star Gang.

In discussing the mainstream newspaper's association of crime as an inherent black problem, *The Voice* pushed back arguing that crime was a

symptom of wider social problems not only in the black communities but in the country, as well. It criticised the linking of crime to black people while the mainstream newspaper downplayed the wider causes as misleading. The tabloid saw the persistent and unbalanced coverage of black people that associated them with crime as the reason that relations with law enforcement are often strained, citing instances where police officers have shot innocent black people arguing that they felt threatened, a fear that is a manifestation of a deep rooted mainstream media bias that a black man can be dangerous (*The Voice* 2011).

Innocence of Accused Black Crime Victim

The *Daily Mail* demonized Mark Duggan as a thug and a violent black gangster, arguing that he deserved no sympathy based on police sources. It stated that the 29-year-old was one of the most violent black gangsters in Europe that was linked to 10 shootings and two murders. It listed crimes that ranged from murder to attempted murder and other firearm offences and explained that the thug traded in violence, intimidation and drugs. It rubbished his family's statements, especially his aunt Carole Duggan and his mother Pamela Duggan's argument that he was a family man with children who abhorred violence; who intended to marry 29-year-old Semone Wilson, his long-term partner; and who had two sons aged 12 and nine and one daughter age three. It avoided spending time on the family assertions and the impact of the death on the young family. The mother Pamela Duggan's claim that he had worked at top security airport Stansted was sidelined, and the claim that he was to

start work as a firefighter at the time of his death was ignored. It accused her of being a liar and she was called shameless for defending a criminal who deserved no sympathy (Martin 2014):

His family continue to insist Mark Duggan was a 'peaceful' family man who abhorred violence. But this photograph (inserted) suggests his link with the criminal underworld were far deeper than first thought. Staring menacingly into the camera. As one police source said: 'He lived by the gun'.

The guilty verdict of the accused black criminal in the coverage was evident, including the insensitivity to his grieving family, especially the mother, leading *The Voice* to argue that the majority of black people are not criminals and are just as deserving of a fair trial. It noted that what the mainstream media failed to acknowledge was the fact that the vast majority of black people are responsible and not involved in criminal activities. It stressed that very often the mainstream newspapers fail to properly communicate this reality to the majority of their readers. It pushed an argument that white British people need to hear more about the actual conditions of black people and their success stories. It offered the critique that, given the situation where the major mainstream media have predominantly white reporters and serve a mainly white audience, the 'public', which dictates newsworthy events, is not *the* public but *a white* public. Thus, the daily racial struggles of black people and their success stories are not primary concerns of the wider white public, and only the symptoms of these conditions, such as social disturbances that impinge upon white people, become newsworthy in the

predominantly white mainstream media (*The Voice* 2011).

Justification of the Murder

The *Daily Telegraph* justified the murder, even though many black people saw Mark Duggan's death as another unjust killing. It cited unnamed police sources and emphasized that Duggan was a well-known gangster and a criminal and that he was known to and was being monitored by the police (Tom 2011):

The Daily Telegraph can disclose the police saw him as a 'major player' who was 'well known' to them. A police source said: 'I was told he was a major player and well known to police in Tottenham. He was certainly not a sideshow'.

It is important to note that the murder justification was based on police sources and it did not provide a balanced presentation of facts; as *The Voice* pointed out, there was a need for the police to change their attitude towards the black community, and the black community, too, needed to change their attitude in response to the police, and in either case, the value of human life was precious regardless of race. It gave an example of the controversial Stop and Search law which it noted was disproportionately targeting black people in an attempt to uncover criminal activities. It pointed out that there was a need to overcome the evolving image of a black man as a criminal in the mainstream media, which appeared to be of a more threatening nature (*The Voice* 2011).

Rioters as Black Underclass Feckless Criminals

The Sun relentlessly portrayed the rioters as black underclass criminals. It provided sensational pictures and images with tags that painted black people as criminal opportunists who needed to be understood as individuals coming from dysfunctional families, brought up by mainly single mothers with ill-mannered upbringings, and from poor backgrounds. The redtop tabloid presented the rioters as filthy and deserving of being locked up in prison (Wilson 2011):

Among the rioters, there are frightening numbers of black youths. Many of the rioters are black social benefit cheats, thugs, and part of a feckless criminal underclass.

In refuting rioters and gangs as being predominantly black, *The Voice* pushed back, noting that the rioters came from different backgrounds, many had never even been found guilty in court or cautioned, and the overwhelming majority did not even have a criminal past or connection. It explained that the mainstream media was misrepresenting the facts by tagging black people and using aggressive pictures and headlines to create divisions. In its editorial, it noted that, if readers can only get information from one source, they can develop a narrow and paranoid view. It explained that the misrepresentation contributed to the readers' perception of black people as criminals and to a serious racial divide, which, in turn, produced questions and even doubts about the newspaper's value systems. Moreover, it pointed out that misrepresentations of black people were rarely subjected to scrutiny by its

readers, who were accustomed to the mainstream media's racist style of reporting race and crime news. It stressed that the newspaper provided news stories that featured black people in a negative light and portrayed them as threatening. It argued further that the manner in which black suspects were presented by the newspaper influenced the public perception of a black person, even though both the blacks and the whites were all involved in the rioting and in the violent public disturbances (*The Voice* 2011).

Blacks Turning Whites into Violent Gangs

The *BBC2 Newsnight* aired a debate on the riots in which historian and broadcaster David Starkey made comments on television that blamed black culture for turning white youngsters into looters and he wondered why it was difficult for people to understand that the major cause of violence and disturbances was because of the blacks (Quinn 2011):

The whites have become black. A sort of violent, destructive, nihilistic, gangster culture has become the fashion. And black and white, boy and girl, operate in this language together, this language which is wholly false, which is this Jamaican patois, and this is why so many of us have this sense of literally a foreign country.

The comments attracted criticism from *The Voice* and the black community, arguing that it demonstrated the reasons why the country's racial divide was widening. It noted that, even though black people are often blamed for most

violent city crimes by the mainstream media, they are often the victims, as indicated by statistics released under the Freedom of Information law. It explained that, despite the police figures in London showing that violent inner-city crime is committed by black men, the same statistics also show that black men are twice as likely to be victims of such crimes and often suffer provocation. It cited Operation Trident, set up by Scotland Yard to tackle 'black on black' crime, as the kind of activity that reinforces the idea that there is too much crime perpetuated by black people, despite the fact that just over 12% of London's 8.1 million population is black while 69% is white, according to the Office for National Statistics (Camber 2010).

Being Black and the Problem of Criminality

At the same time, the *BBC World Radio* offered a discussion on whether there was a relationship between being black and crime, following the violent disturbances sparked by a riot, with its listeners providing different standpoints. The majority of its audience suggested an interrelation between black people and crime. The same discussion also triggered several calls from some sections of the audience that felt the debate topic on-air ignored many social problems. Particularly, many black listeners were outraged, arguing that it was an ignorant question. This forced the broadcaster to release a statement apologizing for the title of the topic, though it insisted it was an attempt to debate social attitudes towards black men.

The characterising of a black man as a criminal ranging from a petty thief to a mass murderer by the mainstream media is not a new phenomenon. In condemning the radio discussion, *The Voice* noted that the perception of black people as criminals was to a large extent attributable to its poorly informed radio journalists. It explained that, in the radio debate, black people were consistently stereotyped as criminals, and although this association of crime with black people has existed for some time now, the media channel failed to conduct detailed research on the rioters before airing its debate. It stressed that the rioters came from different sections of society, despite black men being highlighted in a sensational manner in the radio talk show. It noted that what was often ignored was the reality that rioting also reflected a serious problem of poverty, cultural decay, and politicians' failure to fulfil their promises (*The Voice* 2011).

Conclusion

The issue of race and crime conflict in news coverage in Britain continues to attract debates mainly due to the disproportionate crime numbers presented by the mainstream media, which has led many readers to develop a misinformed perception of black people as criminals. This is despite the fact that the statistics on race and crime from the Ministry of Justice in Britain show that many crime offenders are actually not black in comparison to the general population (Ministry of Justice 2014). Besides, among the criminals serving more than 15 years in prison, blacks are not as high as the mainstream media projects. In fact, the conviction ratio since 2009 has been consistently higher

for the white ethnic group compared to all other ethnic groups. Moreover, the number of first-time entrants into the criminal justice system by age and race has been consistently higher for non-blacks since 2008 (Ministry of Justice 2014: 92).

Many of the mainstream media often base their stories on inaccurate race and crime data, which shows case studies of crime in one area and then make a general conclusion to the overall region or community. In fact, there is a need for critical assessment of crime and race data in order to bring about a better understanding on whether crime is overwhelmingly a black phenomenon (Welch 2007). The inaccurate data, as presented by the mainstream media, has led other race groups to perceive black people as criminals. These misleading statistics add to the public's conception of crime as an inherently black problem (Ball et al. 2011). Generally, the public's association of violent crime with black people is the result of narrow research studies on race and crime, which are often selected by the mainstream media without critical interrogation and which often leads to the perception of black people as more involved in crime than official statistics actually indicate. Even though some studies show that black people are more prone to crime, many of them actually ignore comparing them to the overall population (Kennedy 1997). However, it is also important to acknowledge that, even though crime committed by black people is very low according to official statistics, it is perhaps the nature of the crimes committed by black people, which often tend to be gruesome in nature, that attracts massive media coverage and makes the people question the validity of the statistics. A case in point is the

gruesome murder of white military service man Lee Rigby, who was killed by two black men, Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale, in a cruel manner on the street near Woolwich Barracks in South London. This barbaric murder highlighted race and crime and put black people in the mainstream media spotlight (Dodd and Halliday 2013).

Severe prison sentences for black convicts, and difficulty proving the innocence of black defendants, are common by-products of the mainstream media's disproportionate coverage of crime. The heavy sentencing of black criminals in the criminal justice system is at times a result of prosecutors making decisions while being exposed to information that show crime as a black problem. Even though the common belief is that the jury and the prosecutors are supposed to be people of integrity and should base their arguments on facts presented in court instead of what they read and see in the mainstream media, only a naïve individual would believe that media content does not affect people's perception of reality. This makes it very difficult for black people accused of crimes to convince judges and juries of their innocence and to avoid wrongful imprisonment (Welch 2007). For example, it took twenty years for Gary Dobson and David Norris, the killers of a black teenager Stephen Lawrence in London, to finally be convicted of their 1993 crime. The killing by white assailants exposed the institutional racism of the London Metropolitan Police's handling of the case, as highlighted by the 1999 Macpherson Inquiry, which showed that the police did not believe the family and ignored their assertion that the murder was racially motivated (Dodd and Evans 2014). Similarly, on 8 January 2014, after

three months of deliberations, the jury by an 8-2 majority found Mark Duggan's death to be a lawful killing by the police, a verdict that led to discontent from the black community with a black Member of Parliament Diane Abbott tweeting afterwards and questioning how the jury arrived at the conclusion that the murder was lawful while acknowledging that the black victim did not have a gun in his hand when he was shot (Bland 2014).

It is evident that the news content analysis following the murder of Mark Duggan and the 2011 London riots shows that Britain's mainstream newspapers and broadcast media disproportionately singled out black people during the disturbances and massively misrepresented black people as criminals, while at the same time their news content demonstrated deep rooted racism in their analysis. For example, images of blacks in handcuffs heading to prison were popular in their style of news. The mainstream media provided readily accessible depictions of black people as criminals, which shaped the readers' perceptions of crime in which they portrayed accused black men being escorted by white police officers. Such images reinforced the idea of black men as violent criminals, with their faces prominently displayed and headlines indicating their guilt. Their endless parade of black men under arrest made it easy for readers to associate black people with crime as part of their urban lifestyle. Images were so widespread that it was not surprising that the majority of people came to accept black people were largely to blame for gang culture and inner city riots. In fact, the mainstream media were powerful sources of ideas about race and crime and offered platforms where these ideas

were articulated and elaborated. Additionally, the mainstream media constructed the discourse that defined black people as criminals, as a result of the way they were often presented to readers. The 'visual representations' which stereotyped black men as dangerous criminals were assimilated by the readers, especially when images of black people were depicted in threatening pictures which encouraged the social construction of blacks as a violent race group (Hall 2003: 90).

The mainstream media often boost sales when it comes to news stories of race and crime. In fact, Peppiat (2013) notes that, if a journalist can find a crime story of a white person as a victim and a black person as an offender, then that story is guaranteed publication. It is a form of financial exploitation whereby, to attract sales and entice audiences, black people are stereotyped as criminals. Even

though many journalists might disagree that this is not often the case, such subtle financial agendas do exist and continue to be used by media institutions to make profits. Many journalists and editors actually know what is going on but are unable to confront the situation for fear of losing their positions, and this reality only further splits the already sensitive racial divide. Besides, the audience also uses such information, which reinforces racial prejudices against the black community. It is unfortunate that this self-serving negative stereotype has become not merely a bias but a profitable industry generating sales by depicting blacks as criminals and perpetuating ideas linking the black race to criminals, a situation that serves to solidify the stereotype that black people are criminal threats to the 'innocents', which in turn fuels racial conflicts and resentment from the black community.

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