
The Role of the Media in Ushering the Civil Rights Movement

The media played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 60s. In the past people could only use newspapers and radio to learn about news, however, suddenly, most people had televisions in their homes, which allowed them to easily and instantaneously view live pictures of events. Due to its increased influence, the media shaped the opinions of many Americans, and therefore, as it had become an ally of civil rights, this meant that it was very important in advancing the cause of Civil Rights. This essay shall investigate the extent to which the media played an important role in advancing the cause of Civil Rights, through the examination of three significant events; the Emmett Till murder, the Brown vs. the Board of Education decision and the Freedom Rides in the south.

Emmett Till was a 14-year-old black teenager from Chicago who was murdered in 1955 whilst visiting his family in Mississippi. Till was brutally murdered by three white men because he allegedly flirted with a married white woman. Till's assailants forced him to carry a 75-pound cotton gin fan to the Tallahatchie river where they then stripped him and beat him to near death, then gouged his eyes out, shot him in the head and threw him into the river, with his body tied to the cotton gin fan. The trial, which was held by an all-white jury in a segregated courthouse in Mississippi, found the two men 'not guilty'; this verdict angered many people across the country. The Emmett Till murder case was perhaps the first large-scale media event of the civil rights movement, and the media coverage throughout the aftermath and trial of the case marked a turning point in the coverage and representation of black people by the white America press. Local and state-wide newspapers helped transform a news event into a powerful symbol. For most of the Mississippi newspapers, the Till story quickly became a case of undue outside influence, with the NAACP, Mamie Till, black residents of Chicago and the northern press all trying to tell Mississippi how to run its affairs, especially in regards to justice and race relations. Houck and Grindy believe that white Mississippians were initially willing to prosecute the murderers of Emmett Till, but this changed when they began to feel threatened by "unwarranted northern press intrusions"[1], arguing that Mississippi papers became deeply defensive after receiving attacks on their own values. This suggests that newspapers had a substantial influence on public opinion in white Mississippi. The language used by newspapers was important in the media's role in advancing the cause of Civil Rights. Language in newspapers is often biased in favour of the market they write towards, and the choice of words can influence what the reader sees and the ways in which the reader views an event. For example, the white Mississippi press describe Carolyn Bryant as a "a pretty 21-year-old married mother of two"[2]; Houck and Grindy argue that, on the surface, this is innocent, but when paired with the description of Mamie Till, "a somewhat plump 33-year-old divorced mother"[3], this becomes rather sinister and deceptive. The Mississippi press reported the events of Emmett Till's murder in a way which influenced their readers to adopt the views of the south, which shows that not all aspects of the media advanced the cause for Civil Rights. Sympathetic images of Till were published on many front pages of the Mississippi newspapers in the early days of the case, however the use of words was used to negatively exaggerate the case in newspapers. The Greenwood Morning Star used the term "Till Rape Attempt Case"[4] to describe the trial, transforming Till's actions from a playful wolf whistle to an attempted rape in a matter of weeks, as though trying to justify the murder and attend to southern people's fear of interracial sex. In

the weeks leading up to the trial, media coverage was enormous, with influential African American weeklies like the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier publishing vehement condemnations of southern injustice. More than one hundred press representatives attended the trial from across America and the world. After the trial had concluded, African American newspapers and magazines, with the support of the northern white press, called for national protests and boycotts. The real question remaining following the trial was whether or not it was possible for black people to get justice in Mississippi. The media managed to galvanise the country through the reporting of the Emmett Till case. In 1987, the producers of *The Eyes on The Prize* documentary marked the Emmett Till death as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. The media's role in uncovering the brutal murder helped advance Civil Rights and produce future activists like Anne Moody and Eldridge Cleaver. Radio was another form of media which was important in the advancement of the cause of Civil Rights. This media outlet was fundamental in the broadcasting of Bob Dylan's song "The Death of Emmett Till"[5], which explicitly described the events of Emmett Till's murder and the subsequent trial. The song had a great deal of influence as it was written and performed by Bob Dylan, an already popular folk singer, which meant that his message was transmitted to a huge number of people and consequently a great deal of awareness of the injustice was raised. The song was very effective in depicting the tragic murder of Emmett Till; the use of language such as 'tortured', 'screaming' and 'bloody red rain' generates sympathy as it paints Till as a helpless victim and evokes a vivid picture of the horror he was forced to endure. Bob Dylan intended to instil guilt and shame into people who refused to condemn racial violence and hate crimes such as the death of Emmett Till, which may have therefore encouraged many to begin supporting the cause of Civil Rights. He ends the song on a more positive note, suggesting that the civil rights movement may be further advanced if people 'gave all [they] could give'; this message may have had an important role in advancing the cause of Civil Rights. Magazines were also an influential form of mass media during the Civil Rights Movement, and one in particular played an important role in reporting the story of the death of Emmett Till. An issue of *Jet Magazine*, published less than a month after the lynching, evokes sympathy through the graphic description of the state in which Till's body was found, for example, 'his face was crushed to the bone.' The sympathy conjured by the powerful language used in this article may have motivated people to become more involved in the Civil Rights Movement. This sympathy may have been amplified by the graphic images of Till's 'battered' corpse used within the article, as they explicitly reveal the horror that Till suffered; additionally, these images are placed alongside images of his grieving family members, which may induce feelings of empathy in people with sons and grandsons. This empathy may have created a feeling of a connectedness to black people that many white people had not felt before, and this may have inspired them to come out in support of the Civil Rights Movement. Overall, this article serves to shock and inform its readers, and its effective use of language and images as well as the widespread availability of this form of media may have meant that this article was extremely important in the advancement of the cause of Civil Rights. The Till case gave America a harsh, inescapable glimpse of racial violence and injustice. Through newspapers, television, magazines, images and radio, the media's reporting of the Till case had an important role in advancing the cause of Civil Rights.

In May 1954, The Supreme Court of the United States delivered its ruling in the landmark case of *Brown vs. Board of Education at Topeka, Kansas*. The court came to the unanimous decision that 'separate but equal' public schools for black and white students were unconstitutional. The *Brown* case was a catalyst for the advancement of Civil Rights, inspiring education reform but also challenging segregation in all areas of society. The court effectively overturned the notorious 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* case which permitted racial segregation under the

appearance of 'separate but equal'. The case made newspaper and television headlines across America and the world. By 1957, the NAACP had enlisted nine black students to attend the previously all-white Little Rock High School. However, it is argued that the Brown vs. Board ruling was one of the least important events of the Civil Rights Movement in regards to the media; Klarman suggests that media coverage of Civil Rights events such as the Brown case attracted "little attention"[6] compared to the demonstrations which produced confrontation and violence. This suggests that the media's coverage of the Brown case wasn't a major factor in the advancement of the cause of Civil Rights, because Brown didn't make northerners more sympathetic to the movement. Klarman argues that "the percentage of respondents identifying Civil Rights as the nation's most urgent problem surged after the Montgomery bus boycott, not after Brown"[7], suggesting that the lack of press attention or obvious human pain didn't create an increase in public attention. However, the Brown case indirectly contributed to the advancement of Civil Rights as it appealed to people's moral consciences. After the U.S Supreme Court delivered its unanimous ruling against the 'separate but equal' mandate, the black newspapers and magazines reported with joy and pride at the decision, hailing it as the most significant event in the cause of Civil Rights to date. On May 22nd 1954, 'Age' magazine reported that hours after the decision was on the airwaves, residents of the area were still stunned at the "milestone" they had just experienced in Civil Rights Movement. This suggests that, with all the jubilation, came shock over the monumental unanimous decision. In Atlanta, the 'Daily World' hoped that the decision would help spark a chain reaction within the Civil Rights Movement. Newspapers across America reported the case, and they also reported the reaction of the south, revealing that the unanimous decision wasn't a decision which pleased the whole of America. Many southerners assumed that, if children were in a desegregated setting, they would get to know each other, date each other and then potentially marry one another, which is the strongest taboo the south held. 'Time' magazine reported the words of the governor of Georgia, Marvin Griffin. He was quoted as saying that he pledged to keep Georgia's schools segregated "come hell or high water" and vowed that blood would flow in the streets before they'd permit white children to attend school with black children; this suggests that, although the media was an important tool in the advancement of Civil Rights, reports like this one wouldn't have advanced the cause of Civil Rights. Brown vs. Board was not the beginning of the modern Civil Rights Movement, but there is no doubt that it constituted a watershed moment in the struggle for racial equality in America.

In May 1961, thirteen African Americans and white Civil Rights activists launched the Freedom Rides; these were a series of bus trips through the American south to protest the segregation in interstate bus terminals. The Freedom Riders, who were recruited by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), attempted to integrate facilities at bus terminals across the deep south. The group encountered tremendous amounts of violence from white protesters along the route but they also acquired national and international attention to the cause of Civil Rights. The next few months saw hundreds of Freedom Riders engage in similar actions. In September 1961, the International Commerce Committee issued regulations prohibiting segregation in bus and train terminals nationwide. The media coverage of the Freedom Rides throughout the protests was extensive and extremely important in helping the cause of Civil Rights in the United States. The freedom rides were successful, in large part, because they were able to engage the media and obtain a sympathetic national audience. Photographers and reporters from the black press were allowed to accompany the riders on the buses. The initial coverage of the Freedom Rides was either mixed or strongly negative, with some parts of the media accusing the riders of being outside agitators. It wasn't until May 14th 1961 that the media would start to be important to the advancement of the cause of Civil Rights through their coverage of the Freedom Rides.

Footage of a burning bus, photographs of beatings inflicted during the riot and of James Peck lying in a hospital bed shocked the nation, as they were different to anything previously seen. Accounts of the Freedom Rides in the white southern press remained very negative and mocking. Meanwhile, the national media coverage had become more favourable in the days that followed these pictures. Television was an important form of media which was influential in the advancement in the cause of Civil Rights. Not only was television able to screen pictures from the rides and pictures from the aftermath, it was also able to broadcast emotional and sympathetic interviews to portray the cause of Civil Rights in a positive light to its viewers. This media outlet was fundamental in broadcasting interviews with certain members of the Civil Rights Movement. These interviews would boost the cause for Civil Rights and when Jim Peck was interviewed about Freedom Rides on NBC network's Today Show it did exactly this. Peck was able to portray the "sympathetic human face"[8] many Americans had imagined was within the monstrosities of the movement. Peck defended the Freedom Rides to the same audience which had seen him injured in hospital just ten days before. The power of television gave the cause the opportunity to portray both sides of the movement and appeal to an audience it would never have reached without this media outlet. This shows the importance of television to the advancement of the cause of Civil Rights. Radio was another important form of media which was important to the advancement in the cause of Civil Rights, as it could provide information to the masses through news reports, talk shows and breaking eye-witness accounts. Radio was essential in the broadcasting of Howard K. Smith's gripping eye-witness reports over the CBS radio network. His reports of the attacks on the Freedom Riders were very effective in depicting the violence in relation to the Freedom Riders. Arsenault describes the veteran reporter as being "shaken by what he's seen"[9]; this emphasises the brutality of the attacks. Through radio, Smith was able to voice to millions of Americans the terror he was seeing, and the language he used, such as "a bloody pulp"[10], generated sympathy for the victims as well as painting the beatings as unjust. This interview and many others like it managed to spark public reaction. Arsenault states how few listeners had previously known of CORE or even the Freedom Riders, but "this would change in a matter of minutes"[11]; this shows the power of the radio and how this form of media may have advanced the cause of Civil Rights. Magazines were also an important form of media which was important to the advancement in the cause of Civil Rights, as they were able to run cover stories and lengthy features about the Freedom Rides. On June 2nd 1961 'Time' magazine featured a five-page article on the south and the Freedom Riders. Articles in major magazines mainly focused on recent events but were also openly sympathetic to the cause. 'Time' magazine reported "the boldness and bravery of the Freedom Riders"[12]; this demonstrates the sympathetic look the Riders were receiving and the extent to which they were beginning to win over the support of many Americans. In the same week, 'Life' magazine chose to run the story of the Freedom Riders as the 'story of the week'. The feature was a photo essay which exhibited powerful images of "the most shocking racial attack in U.S history"[13] alongside commentary. Features like this showed the racial injustice which was happening on people's doorsteps and, thus, they were captivating the nation. Magazines would have been important in advancing the cause for Civil Rights. The Freedom Riders were the most effective and best-remembered campaigns of the Civil Rights Movement. The news media captured iconic images that the nation found impossible to ignore. Through newspapers, television, magazines, images and radio, the media surrounding the Freedom Riders played an important role in advancing the cause of Civil Rights.

In conclusion, I believe that the media played an important role in advancing the cause of Civil Rights in America during the movement. The research surrounding three separate cases shows how important the media may have been. The media coverage of the Emmett Till case played

an important role in advancing the cause of Civil Rights, and, arguably, this case was the most important event the media was involved in, in regards to its role in the advancement of the cause of Civil Rights. After a 'media civil war' between the southern, northern, and black media outlets, the coverage of the case had become so scrutinized and well known that it began to galvanise the nation into the cause of Civil Rights. The Emmett Till case was the birthplace of future activists. Language used in newspapers and within songs generated sympathy and painted a picture of what the media outlet wanted the reader to see. Magazine articles and the picture of Emmett Till's corpse would have appealed to the hearts of the nation and encourage them to begin supporting the Civil Rights Movement. On the other hand, the media coverage of the Brown vs, Board case was limited in advancing the cause of Civil Rights. Klarman believes that it was a crucial event in the Civil Rights Movement, but he suggests that it did not grip the hearts or minds of the nation. However, newspapers did report the jubilation of the black population and the anger and fear of the white population in the south. Overall, the media coverage surrounding the Brown case was perhaps less important than the media coverage of other major events in advancing the cause of Civil Rights. In contrast, the media coverage of the Freedom Rides was crucially important in the advancement of the Civil Rights Movement. Arsenault suggests that the language within influential radio and television interviews changed the advancement and knowledge of Civil Rights in a matter of minutes. The coverage of the Freedom Riders was, overall, very effective once violence ensued. In conclusion, without the media, the cause of Civil Rights wouldn't have gained the national and international attention it needed to advance and succeed. The media played a vital role in being able to galvanize more Americans into witnessing for themselves the atrocious violations of individual rights that were taking place in the South. The media showing the unbearable conditions, or the agony that protesters had to endure from others helped to bring more people into the Movement. The media therefore played a key role in advancing the cause of Civil Rights, however not all that the media reported was helpful in advancing the Civil Rights Movement.