

The Civil Rights Movement and the Media

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The media had a profound effect on the entire Civil Rights Movement from 1955 and the murder of Emmett Till to 1968 and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The reluctance of national print media to issue proper coverage of the Civil Rights Movement and the racist environment existing in the southern states kept the effort for equality at a local level in the early years of the cause. The movement gained more attention and momentum when the national media realized the importance and newsworthiness of the various events involved in the cause. Events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycotts (1955-56), the Freedom Rides of 1961, the March on Washington and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963, signified the brutal conditions blacks suffered, especially in the southern United States. Due to the events and media coverage of the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans gained legal equality with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These historical moments can be linked together by the increasing media coverage they received. Once the civil rights struggle became a major topic in the news, Americans throughout the country were able to see and read the unfavorable treatment of blacks by government officials, businesses, and law enforcement. Civil rights groups recognized the important role the media played and therefore shaped and promoted their efforts to be ideal for media coverage which allowed their messages to extend throughout the entire nation. Furthermore, as television developed as a valuable tool for media and journalism in the mid-1960s news networks broadcast moving images complete with sound across America. The sights and sounds of police brutality, civil rights activism, and racist treatment had a profound effect on the American public's view of civil rights and equality. The increasing of media coverage of civil rights activism from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s is directly correlated to the gaining of momentum by the Civil Rights Movement as a whole.

The first significant event for the Civil Rights Movement occurred in the summer of 1955 in the Mississippi Delta. A 14 year-old boy named Emmett Louis Till left his native home of Chicago, IL with his cousin to visit his great-uncle before the school term began in the fall. Till's trip down to the southern United States would forever change the views of racial injustice throughout America. Till spent his days in Mississippi working in the cotton fields with family members and the other half of his days enjoying the summer heat. On August 24th, Till and other teenage family and friends went into the small town of Money, Mississippi. There Till and his cousin entered Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market to buy candy and drinks. Till purchased two cents worth of bubble-gum and exited the store. On his way out, it is said, Till wolf-whistled at the store's owner Carolyn Bryant, a 21 year-old white woman. Other accounts of the story say Emmett spoke directly to Mrs. Bryant, even referring to the older woman as "baby." When Mrs. Bryant's husband returned to town on August 27th, he was informed about the incident that occurred in his store three days prior. Furious that a black boy would so much as look at his wife nevertheless whistle or talk to her, Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam began searching for Emmett. The two men arrived at the house of Emmett's great-uncle, Mose Wright, in the early hours of the morning of Sunday, August 28th. The men entered the home armed with a pistol and kidnapped Emmett. Three days later, Till's body was found in the Tallahatchie River by two boys fishing. The body was swollen and disfigured beyond recognition, other than a ring that had belonged to Emmett's father found on the body. The body was weighed down by a 75 pound

cotton gin fan tied around the victim's neck with barbed wire. When Emmett's mother, Mamie Till, learned of her son's murder, she requested his body to be shown in a public open-casket funeral so everyone could see what those men had done to her son.³¹⁴

The funeral proceedings attracted thousands of mourners, many of whom became physically overwhelmed or ill when they smelled and saw Emmett's body in the glass-covered casket. A picture of Emmett's body was published in black-owned publications, such as *Jet* magazine and *The Chicago Defender*. The murder of a northern black boy by two white southerners became national as well as international news. "The case caused considerable national excitement and even attracted international attention."³¹⁵ The sensation over the events occurred because "both the teenagers' 'crime' and his punishment seemed an atavism, an incongruity in the modern era, the definitive expression of Southern racism, the lethal but logical culmination of the Jim Crow system."³¹⁶ In September 1955, the media rushed to the Mississippi Delta as "fifty to seventy reporters descended on the drowsy hamlet of Sumner [the site of the murder trial], whose population was barely ten times larger" because "the court proceedings provoked front-page coverage throughout the nation."³¹⁷ The media coverage of Emmett's murder further enlightened Americans across the country of the racial abuses occurring in the South. On September 17, *The Lima News* in Ohio featured a full page article complete with pictures of Mrs. Mamie Till, Mose Wright, Roy and Mrs. Bryant, J.W. Milam, and a living photograph of Emmett "Bobo" Till under the headline "Nation Turns Eye to 'Whistle' Murder."³¹⁸ Furthermore, in Nevada the *Reno Evening Gazette* featured an Associated Press article titled "Slaying Trial Is Near Jury: Two Whites Charged In Negro's Death."³¹⁹ The all-white jury found the two suspects not guilty on charges of murdering Emmett Louis Till. The resulting media coverage and reports of the court's findings displayed the instituted and accepted racial injustices in place in the South.

Journalists were surprised themselves that the case was even brought to court, since the charged crime was the killing of a black boy by two white men, which was not necessarily a rarity in the Mississippi Delta during that time. Similar to a *New York Times* editorial, "it appears that the indictments were so exceptional that the black newspaper in Jackson felt obliged to praise 'white men [who] took this step against other white men for a crime against a Negro."³²⁰ However, following the non-guilty verdict, Mississippi newspapers quickly published articles declaring the men had not been brought to the justice they no doubt deserved. The *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* stated "it was a 'stupid, horrible crime. Intelligent Mississippians can only suppose it came about in the sick mind[s] of men who should be removed from society by due course of law."³²¹ The critical response by Mississippi newspapers caught the attention of blacks throughout the state "to a degree unprecedented in Mississippi, blacks 'heard on every side a strong and vigorous condemnation by white people, friend and stranger alike, of brutality in

³¹⁴ [The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till](#). Dir. Keith Beauchamp Perf. Mamie Till, Wheeler Parker, and Simeon Wright. THINKFilm, 2005.

³¹⁵ Stephen J. Whitfield. [A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till](#). Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988 (Page vii)

³¹⁶ Whitfield (Page vii)

³¹⁷ Whitfield (Page 33)

³¹⁸ James L. Kilgallen. "Nation Turns Eye to 'Whistle' Murder." *The Lima News* 17 Sept. 1955: Pg. 12

³¹⁹ Associated Press. "Slaying Trial Is Near Jury: Two Whites Charged In Negro's Death." *Reno Evening Gazette* 23 Sept. 1955: Pg. 1

³²⁰ Whitfield (Page 24)

³²¹ Whitfield (Page 26)

race relations.”³²² The reactions did not go unnoticed as “many of the state’s Negro leaders paid tribute to this development.”³²³ Some journalists even called for the national government to take action in “the Emmett Till case we hope someone gets this over to the nine ninnies who comprise the present United States Supreme Court,” stated the *Yazoo City Herald*. “Some of the young Negro’s blood is on their hands also.”³²⁴

The murder of Emmett Till and the failure for his murderers to be brought to proper justice ignited the modern Civil Rights Movement in the United States. The media’s fixation with the story of Till and his accused murders allowed Americans throughout the country to see firsthand the unequal society they were living in. This event and the subsequent media craze over it, served as the catalyst for more than a decade of struggle and protest for African Americans to achieve legal equality in the United States of America. However, without the media coverage that the events did receive, Emmett’s murder would have become just another of the about 500 lynchings that had occurred over the past 75 years in the state of Mississippi. The media attention allowed others beyond the borders of Mississippi and those outside Emmett’s family to see, recognize, and realize the cruel racial hatred apparent in the United States, especially in the South. *New York Times* reporter John Popham covered the trial in Sumner calling it “the first of the changes that eventually came to the entire South [and] it gave us the general sense of where things would be in the future.”³²⁵ Furthermore, another reporter who covered the trial, this time for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, Bill Minor, stated the case was significant because “for the first time you couldn’t have a quiet little lynching without getting real attention.”³²⁶ Myrlie Evers, wife of the former director of the NAACP Medger Evers, said the Emmett Till’s murder shook “the foundations of Mississippi, both black and white – with the white community because it had become nationally publicized, with us blacks, because it said even a child was not safe from racism and bigotry and death.”³²⁷

The momentum of the Civil Rights Movement increased rapidly over a short amount of time following Emmett Till’s murder and the court ruling of innocent for his accused murders. On December 1, 1955, approximately three months since the Bryant and Milam trial, Rosa Parks, a black woman, refused to give up her city on a Montgomery, Alabama city bus to a white man. Unlike the murder of Emmett Till, Parks’ actions did not find the front pages as “the *Montgomery Advertiser* buried the story the next day on a back page under the headline, ‘Negro Jailed Here for Overlooking’ Bus Segregation.”³²⁸ Parks’ resistance against an established practice of racial injustice in Alabama expanded to be known as the Montgomery Bus Boycott. However, the national press was not all that concerned with matters of the civil rights movement at this time. “None of the nation’s more influential newspapers and magazines had made a substantial commitment to the boycott story,” considering “*The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* relied exclusively on wire services, [while] in both papers, all the stories ran inside [and] most were only a few paragraphs long and devoid of context.”³²⁹ Finally, “*Time* magazine ran its first story on January 16th, six weeks after the boycott began while *Newsweek* would

³²² Whitfield (Page 27)

³²³ Whitfield (Page 27)

³²⁴ Whitfield (Page 35)

³²⁵ Whitfield (Page 145)

³²⁶ Whitfield (Page 145)

³²⁷ Whitfield (Page 60)

³²⁸ Whitfield (Page 88)

³²⁹ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation*. New York: Vintage Books, 2006: Pg. 128

not show up until the thirteenth week.”³³⁰ However, these protests served as the first significant action for the eventual leader of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The national press gave its full attention to the boycotts when a state grand jury in Montgomery returned indictments against King charging him with illegally conspiring to hinder a lawful business by boycotting the city buses. The grand jury dished out 115 indictments in all to the demonstrators. “From the moment the indictments came down on February 21, the Montgomery bus boycott grew to a national news story, and King became the journalistic touchstone for what suddenly was being recognized as a civil rights movement.”³³¹

After news of the boycott in Montgomery finally spread so did fear of similar actions in other parts of the country. All the way up in Fairbanks, Alaska an article titled “Negro Bus Boycott Becomes Famed, Big Dixie Skirmish” written by a United Press correspondent was published on the second page of the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner*.³³² The article leads off with “The Negro boycott of city buses here has become one of the most famous skirmishes in the southern segregation feud.” The correspondent continues by reporting fears the spreading forms of activism with “the question is whether this boycott will remain among isolated cases or whether such a weapon will be used more widely and create a serious economic situation throughout Dixie.” The article warns other cities how effective such resistance was by stating “the boycott today is nearly 100 per cent effective, and while the bus company won’t reveal its figures the loss is estimated to be well above \$100,000.” A few months later, under a section titled “Segregation Roundup” *The Bismarck Tribune* in North Dakota, published an Associated Press article titled “Caution Urged in Bus Boycotts.”³³³ The article warned that “Negro leaders advised caution in two Florida cities where there has been talk of bus boycotts similar to those at Montgomery, Ala. and Tallahassee, Fla.” The boycott would continue for more than a year until the United States Supreme Court found Alabama and Montgomery laws requiring segregated public bus systems unconstitutional in its ruling of *Browder v. Gayle* on December 20, 1956.

The struggle for equal civil rights in the United States continued to target the South and its public services. In 1961, civil rights activists planned a public bus trip from Washington, D.C. to New Orleans which came to be known as the Freedom Rides. The national media continued to follow the developments of the civil rights workers even if progress seemed to be slow at times. While two black reporters rode with the seven black men, three white men, and three white women on the buses, “no white reporter showed up for the trip, although reporters for the AP, *Washington Post*, and *Washington Star* attended a pre-ride press conference.”³³⁴ Coverage of the Freedom Rides increased, when the buses completed their journey and reached the southern United States, specifically Birmingham, Alabama. Describing the overall scene of racial hatred and violence delivered by a white mob attacking the activists, *The Birmingham News* questioned the control of its own city. Running with the headline “Where Were the Police?” the *News* stated “fear and hatred did stalk Birmingham streets yesterday.”³³⁵ The article summed up the events by saying “It was a rotten day for Birmingham and Alabama, the thugs did what they came to do – up to now they have gotten away with it.” The story then begs the questions, “When will the people demand that fear and hatred be driven

³³⁰ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pg. 128

³³¹ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pgs. 138-139

³³² Al Kuettner. “Negro Bus Boycott Becomes Famed, Big Dixie Skirmish.” *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* 27 March 1956: Pg. 2

³³³ Associated Press. “Caution Urged in Bus Boycotts.” *The Bismarck Tribune* 14 June 1956: Pg. 20

³³⁴ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pgs. 242-243

³³⁵ “Where Were the Police?” *The Birmingham News* in *The Race Beat* in Pg. 249

from the streets?"³³⁶ Other journalists continued to question the morality of Americans in spite of the recent events in Alabama. CBS television and radio broadcast Howard K. Smith used his weekly radio commentary as an outlet to guilt Americans. Comparing the racist thugs who attacked the Freedom Riders to the "vilest of the Nazi Jew-baiters," Smith said if America did not give justice and protection for black citizens the United States could become "a racial dictatorship like Nazi Germany."³³⁷ Smith's later television documentary titled "Who Speaks for Birmingham," which further described the racial injustices practiced in the city, drove the city's commissioners to file libel suits against CBS and Smith totaling \$1.5 million.³³⁸

Following the events in Alabama, papers across the country turned their focus to the Freedom Rides and their impact on the nation and the civil rights struggle. Publishing an Associated Press article, the *Lawrence Journal World* in Lawrence, Kansas questioned the effectiveness of the Freedom Rides.³³⁹ Titled "More Freedom Rides Set Despite Criticism," the article states "the so-called 'Freedom Rides' to Southern cities will continue despite some criticism that the segregation tests have not aided the cause of the Negro." The article continues by stating the ultimate goal and theory behind the Freedom Rides and other acts of passive resistance challenging the racial inequality standards existing throughout America at that time. "Leaders of the movement felt they would ultimately achieve desegregation through moral pressures exerted by the riders, legal pressures, and an educational program." The pressures of the civil rights activists and the national media attention did influence government procedures considering racial equality standards. *The Arizona Republic* published an Associated Press article titled "U.S. Judge Drops Ban on Freedom Riders" as U.S. District Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. refused "to prolong a temporary restraining order" therefore leaving "the door open for new Freedom Rides in Alabama."³⁴⁰ Not long after a photograph of a police dog launching at a black boy, President John F. Kennedy appeared on national television and "announced that he was sending to Congress a remedy for 'the events of Birmingham.'"³⁴¹

However, the most effective journalistic coverage of the Freedom Rides would come in the form of a photograph. When one of the buses, the Greyhound, rolled into the terminal in Anniston, Alabama a mob of white protestors attacked the bus and its passengers. Photographer Joseph Postiglione captured the scenes that would make front page news across the country. The images "showed flames leaping from the windows, from the open doors, and from the roof, and massive columns of smoke billowing into the sky." Another photo showed "Freedom Riders sprawled on the side of the road, too stunned to move away from the burning bus." The photos allowed Americans to see what the racial hatred in the south was doing to the country. CORE, Congress of Racial Equality, director James Farmer, who had organized the rides, "called his New York office and told his staff to put together a composite of that photograph [the burning bus] and one of the Statue of Liberty to create a new logo for the Freedom Ride."³⁴²

³³⁶ "Where Were the Police?" *The Birmingham News* in [The Race Beat](#) Pg. 249

³³⁷ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pg. 250

³³⁸ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pgs. 249-251

³³⁹ Associated Press. "More Freedom Rides Set Despite Criticism." [Lawrence Journal World](#) 28 June 1961: Pg. 21

³⁴⁰ Associated Press. "U.S. Judge Drops Ban On Freedom Riders." [The Arizona Republic](#) 13 June 1961: Pg. 32

³⁴¹ Diane McWhorter. [Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama: The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution](#). New York: Touchstone, 2001: Pg. 25

³⁴² Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pg. 245

The year 1963 would deliver both highs and lows for the Civil Rights Movement throughout the United States. On August 28, 1963, the sixth anniversary of the murder of Emmett Till, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. permanently cast himself into American history books. The March on Washington climaxed with Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech. The media began paying tribute to the great event even before it occurred. *The Salt Lake Tribune* ran an article highlighting the believed impact the civil rights march would have almost a week before it happened on August 22nd. "The great 'civil rights march' on Washington, now only a matter of days away, has the full support of President Kennedy."³⁴³ With the media accepting the efforts by activists as a movement, the federal government followed suit. President Kennedy "said that the Washington demonstration, 'which is a peaceful assembly calling for a redress of grievances,' is in the great tradition." President Kennedy also "underlined his support with the announcement that leaders of the August 28th march would be received at the White House.³⁴⁴ As the march's date approached in Washington, D.C. "the Metropolitan Police Department handled more press requests than it ever had: 1,900 police passes were distributed for the march, in addition to the 1,200 it had routinely handed out to the regular press corps covering Washington."³⁴⁵

Moreover, some media outlets thought the popularity of the March on Washington was a news topic itself, regardless of the messages delivered during the speeches. The day after the gathering, *The Corpus Christi Times* in Texas, ran an article titled "TV Coverage of March Draws Wide Audience," highlighting the attention the Civil Rights Movement has drawn from the American public. The story, delivered through the *New York Times* News Service, stated "television in the New York area found a much larger audience than usual yesterday, presumably because of coverage on the civil rights march on Washington."³⁴⁶ An estimated 200,000 to 250,000 marchers took part in the event as ABC, NBC, CBS, and the Mutual Broadcasting System assigned 460 of their employees to Washington on August 28th along with hundreds more assigned to New York. The three major television networks shared twenty-three cameras for coverage, while each had twenty-six of their own.³⁴⁷ Part of that television coverage was a live feed from CBS television. Roger Mudd, anchor of *The Washington Report* recalled how "the march was a magnificent peaceful display of discipline, genuine love of country, and grit." Mudd continued to say, "it changed the face of the civil rights movement from one of isolated acts of violence and defiance into an indefatigable, determined, and respectable movement that gave notice to President Kennedy and the Congress that they had to deal with the issue."³⁴⁸ The influence of the Civil Rights Movement and the March on Washington specifically was solidified as live coverage was delivered to six countries while West Germany, Japan, and France had sent their own media crews to Washington, D.C.³⁴⁹

However, despite all the promise and pride the summer of 1963 symbolized for civil rights activists, their world and the rest of the United States was about to be flipped upside down. On September 15, a Sunday morning, four innocent black girls were killed in an apparent racist bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in

³⁴³ "Peaceful Petition vs. Danger of Riot" *The Salt Lake Tribune* 22 Aug. 1963: A14

³⁴⁴ "Peaceful Petition vs. Danger of Riot"

³⁴⁵ Gene Roberts and Hank Kilbanoff. Pg. 346

³⁴⁶ Val Adams. "TV Coverage of March Draws Wide Audience." *Corpus Christi Times* 29 Aug. 1963: Pg. 49

³⁴⁷ Gene Roberts and Hank Kilbanoff. Pg. 346

³⁴⁸ Roger Mudd. *The Place to Be: Washington, CBS, and the Glory Days of Television News*. Philadelphia: PublicAffairs, 2008. Pg. 117

³⁴⁹ Gene Roberts and Hank Kilbanoff. Pg. 347

downtown Birmingham, Alabama. The killings in Birmingham presented a media craze even more fervently covered than the Emmett Till murder back in 1955. The *Colorado Springs Gazette* ran the story on its front page with an Associated Press article titled “Bayonets Will Not Solve Race Strife, Attorney General Says.” Inside the article, “U.S. Att. Gen. Robert F. Kennedy said today he does not think that sending federal troops to Birmingham would solve the racial crisis there.” Kennedy continued, “The Negro has been subjected to injustices for many decades and wants to be heard.” The article concluded with “He [Kennedy] said he thought progress would be made if the white community would take the attitude of ‘maybe we’ll disagree, but at least we can discuss these grievances.’”³⁵⁰ In a subsequent article underneath the previous headline, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was quoted saying “they did not die in vain.”³⁵¹ “God has a way of bringing good out of evil,” King said. “The innocent blood of these little girls may well serve as a redemptive force for this city.” The article recognized the girls’ funeral processions as “police estimated that 4,000 including numerous white persons, went to the funeral.” Recalling the media coverage of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, CBS Evening News anchor Walter Cronkite, said he believed the north did understand the nature of hate in the south or throughout America until then. “This was the awakening.”³⁵²

The most influential media coverage of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing was a column written in Atlanta by *Constitution* editor Gene Patterson. Patterson retracted the original article he had filed for that Monday and decided to write a column in an effort to guilt his fellow white southerners for allowing the tragic murders to happen. Patterson began with, “A Negro mother wept in the street Sunday morning in front of a Baptist Church in Birmingham. In her hand she held a shoe, one shoe, from the foot of her dead child. We hold that shoe with her. Every one of us in the white South holds that small shoe in his hand.” Patterson continued by writing that it was far too late to blame the criminals who actually placed the dynamite that killed the four girls. In reality, Patterson said it was the other white Southerners who allowed the killings to occur. “We watched the stage set without staying it. We listened to the prologue unbestirred. We saw the curtain opening with disinterest.” Patterson concluded by writing, “May God have mercy on the poor South that has so been led.” Other members of the media were so moved that they asked Patterson’s permission to use his column on their own broadcast. It started with the Atlanta CBS television station and ended with Patterson receiving a phone call from national CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, asking him if he could use some of his column on the evening news that night. Cronkite would go on to read the whole column on air.³⁵³

Furthermore, the media continued to pay attention the developments in Birmingham even after the dust from the bombing had settled. Running a front page article titled “Two White Men Are Jailed in Bombing Inquiry,” the *Ironwood Daily Globe* in Michigan highlighted the Associated Press’s coverage of the southern city. “Two white men were placed in city jail early today for further investigation into the series of bombings that have rocked this racially-troubled city for several years.” Beyond the justice being served for the bombings, the paper mentioned the immediate response to the killings. “The church bombing almost sparked a riot.

³⁵⁰ Associated Press. “Bayonets Will Not Solve Race Strife, Attorney General Says.” *Colorado Springs Gazette* 19 Sept. 1963: Pg. 1

³⁵¹ Hoyt Harwell. “Bombing Victims ‘Did Not Die in Vain,’ Rev. King Says at Funeral in Birmingham.” *Colorado Springs Gazette* 19 Sept. 1963: Pg. 1

³⁵² *4 Little Girls*. Dir. Spike Lee. Perf. Walter Cronkite, Fred Shuttlesworth, and Wyatt Walker. 40 Acres & A Mule Filmworks, 1997.

³⁵³ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pgs. 351-352

Sporadic outbursts of violence continued through the day and night. Two young Negroes were shot to death.”³⁵⁴

Moreover, in 1964, the Civil Rights Movement was finally given a reason to celebrate their struggles and efforts over the past nine years. Legal advances for racial equality were achieved with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The House of Representatives passed the bill by a substantial 290-130 vote and the Senate approved the legislation with a vote of 73-27.³⁵⁵ Obviously the passing of this legislation was important news and the media realized the monumental feat. In an editorial in the *Press-Telegram* from Long Beach, California the act receive praise and concern with a story titled “Not a Perfect Law – but a Necessary One.” “The Civil Rights Act of 1964 now takes its place among the great documents in American history. Like some of the other historic acts, it becomes the law of the land amid misgivings – [and] was probably debated more thoroughly than any other measure in congressional history, and enjoys the support of the majority of Americans.”³⁵⁶ The editorial continued with “although the measure will tear down traditions, alter customs, and at first create turmoil, ultimately the act will build a stronger and a happier nation.” The article’s final line symbolizes the morality of the media during such a pivotal time in American history. “Today, with a new civil rights law on the books, America can hold its head a little longer.”

The national media quickly realized the importance of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 soon after it passed into law. Using an Associated Press article, the *Montana Standard* highlighted the event with a front-page headline reading “Historic Civil Rights Bill Signed.” The article begins, “President Johnson signed the strongest civil rights law in nearly a century Thursday night, only three hours after Congress approved it amid cheers, and called on Americans to ‘eliminate the last vestiges of injustice in America.’”³⁵⁷ The article continues by quoting President Lyndon Johnson, “I urge every public official, every religious leader, every business and professional man, every housewife – I urge every American – to join in this effort to bring justice and hope to all our people and peace to our land.”

Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, African Americans continued to make protest for further legal rights. Martin Luther King Jr. was leading a voting rights drive in Alabama and into Montgomery with a path through the city of Selma. As King and his fellow marchers reached Selma’s Edmund Pettus Bridge, Sheriff Jim Clark’s police force savagely attacked the crowd injuring many of the demonstrators, while the police horses trampled women and children.³⁵⁸ Television news broadcast these striking images across the United States and into Americans’ living rooms. This had an enormous influence as “public pressure became so intense that Congress, despite the heated opposition of some powerful Southern political leaders, passed the 1965 Voting Rights Act.”³⁵⁹ The media continued to follow the developments in Selma and so did Sheriff Clark and his police force. When the activists marched on Selma’s courthouse to demand the right to register to vote, Clark and his deputies would not allow it. The next day *The New York Times* ran a photograph showing an activist being held down by two deputies while Sheriff

³⁵⁴ Associated Press. “Two White Men Are Jailed in Bombing Inquiry.” *Ironwood Daily Globe* 30 Sept. 1963: Pg. 1

³⁵⁵ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pg. 359

³⁵⁶ “Not a Perfect Law – but a Necessary One.” Editorial. *Press-Telegram* 3 July 1964: Pg. 16

³⁵⁷ John Beckler. “Historic Civil Rights Bill Signed.” *Montana Standard* 3 July 1964: Pg. 1

³⁵⁸ Jack Nelson. “The Civil Rights Movement: A Press Perspective.” *Human Rights Magazine* Fall 2001 <http://www.americanbar.org/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/irr_hr_fall01_nelson.html>

³⁵⁹ Jack Nelson. “The Civil Rights Movement: A Press Perspective.”

Clark stood over her with a nightstick. *Times* reporter John Herber noted Sheriff Clark “brought his billy club down on her head with a whack that was heard throughout the crowd gathered in the street.”³⁶⁰

Following the events occurring in Selma, the federal government moved a voting rights bill to legislation. On August 6, 1965 President Lyndon Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law which banned illiteracy tests and other obstacles to black voter registration in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, Virginia, as well as more than twenty counties in North Carolina. The Act also allowed federal intervention into state’s voting registration if the state governments did not follow the law’s provisions.³⁶¹ The national media paid just as much attention to the historic civil rights bill signed the previous year, while also taking special notice of the emphasis President Lyndon Johnson placed on the law’s swift enforcement. *The Charlestown Gazette* in West Virginia ran a front-page headline of “Voting Right Act Signed: Johnson Orders Quick Policing.” The article continues by referencing the long struggle African Americans had fought for racial equality and fair justice in America. The “signing took place in the President’s Room of the Capitol, just off the Senate chamber. There, 104 years ago Friday, President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill freeing slaves impressed into the service of the Confederacy.”³⁶² National coverage of President Johnson’s promise of prompt policing of the Voting Rights Act did not go without response or notice. Running an Associated Press article titled “U.S. Files Suit To Ban Poll Tax In Three States,” *The Evening Standard* in Uniontown, Pennsylvania gave attention to the federal government’s enforcement of equal civil rights. “The Justice Department sped today to abolish the poll tax in Texas, Virginia, and Alabama,” read the article. “The move was another step in implementing the Voting Rights Act of 1965.”³⁶³ The article was given more attention by the newspaper editor than other articles farther down the page including one titled, “101st Airborne Finds Viet Nam ‘Rough Go.’” The media’s work was not done just because the 1964 and 1965 acts had been passed as “the press carefully monitored enforcement of the Acts, helping minimize segregationists’ resistance and ensuring steady federal enforcement.”³⁶⁴ The legal gains secured by the 1965 Voting Rights Act symbolized the climax of the Civil Rights Movement, but it also represented the beginning of the end. John Lewis, former SNCC chairman, looked back on the victory and said it had been the efforts in Selma and later efforts to keep the issue of voting rights in the news that had held the movement together for so long.³⁶⁵ Not long after, the media turned its attention to another matter sweeping the nation, the Vietnam War. Soon activists groups across the country followed suit, specifically focusing on antiwar sentiment. At a press conference on January 6, 1966 the SNCC announced “we’re in sympathy with, and support the men in this country who are unwilling to respond to a military draft which would compel them to contribute their lives to United States military aggression in Vietnam in the name of ‘freedom’ we find so false in this country.”³⁶⁶

Journalism and the media played a significant and vital role throughout the more than decade long Civil Rights Movement. Newspaper and magazine coverage allowed Americans across the country to read speeches and quotes while also seeing still photographs of civil rights activists protesting against racial injustices.

³⁶⁰ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pgs. 380-381

³⁶¹ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pg. 394

³⁶² “Voting Right Act Signed.” *Charlestown Gazette* 7 Aug. 1965: Pg. 1

³⁶³ Associated Press. “U.S. Files Suit To Ban Poll Tax In Three States.” *The Evening Standard* 10 Aug. 1965: Pg. 6

³⁶⁴ Jack Nelson. “The Civil Rights Movement: A Press Perspective.”

³⁶⁵ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pg. 394

³⁶⁶ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pg. 397

Also depicted in the headlines and on the front pages was evidence of police brutality and harassment African Americans and their fellow civil rights activists experienced throughout their struggle for equality. Despite the successes of the print media in being a catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement, a greener form of journalism would serve as a final push to equality for blacks in America.

As televisions found their way into more and more American homes in the 1950s, television journalism began to emerge as a viable and more influential media tool than the preceding outlets for communication. Jack Gould, *The New York Times* television critic noted the media coverage of the Civil Rights movement by writing “the medium of television is proving an indispensable force in the Negro’s pursuit of human rights.” Gould continues with, “through the home screen, the Washington drama of mass protest was brought to life in virtually every household in the nation, a social phenomenon inconceivable before the age of electronics.”³⁶⁷ Gould concluded by saying historians of tomorrow will look at television as an influential factor in persuading “the indifferent white millions for whom integration or segregation was of scant personal concern” to the side of the African American activists. “The sociologist of tomorrow may find it was television more than anything else that finally penetrated this huge camp of the uncommitted.”³⁶⁸

With the proper use of television as a medium, the American public was able to hear and see the Civil Rights Movement and the racial injustices in the United States through newsreels right in their own living rooms. As Roger Mudd, former anchor of CBS’s *The Washington Report* recalled, “the White House had seen on television pictures of young black demonstrators in Birmingham being washed down the streets by overpowering blasts from the city’s hoses.” Americans “had seen Bull Connor’s police dogs leaping and snarling at Birmingham’s marchers.”³⁶⁹ Also, as Eric Sevareid stated on the *CBS Evening News* “A snarling police dog set upon a human being is recorded in the permanent photoelectric file of every human being’s brain.”³⁷⁰

The media coverage of the assassination of the undisputed leader of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., further displayed the importance the media placed upon the actions of the civil rights activists. The national media exhibited its ability to summarize public feelings into a headline flawlessly when news of King’s assassination spread. An Associated Press article titled “Shock Waves Triggered By King’s Murder” headlined the front page of the *Northwest Arkansas Times*. The article noted the impact King’s death had on the entire nation even causing the federal government to crawl to a stand still following the news of the civil rights leader’s murder. The murder “caused President Johnson to delay this morning his departure for Hawaii” while “Atty. Gen. Ramsey Clark and three other federal officials were sped here in an Air Force jet.”³⁷¹ The front-page was littered with other articles covering the reactions and implications of Dr. King’s murder with such titles as “Black Power’s Carmichael Urges Revolt,” “Troopers Sent To Memphis,” “Racial Violence Erupts Over U.S.,” and “Assassination Disrupts ’68 Campaign.”³⁷² Such articles are found higher on the page than other articles concerning the American conflict in Vietnam titled “White House Aides Split Over Peace Chances” and “Thieu [South Vietnam’s President] Warns He May Veto Future

³⁶⁷ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pg. 348

³⁶⁸ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff. Pg. 349

³⁶⁹ Roger Mudd. Pg. 115

³⁷⁰ Diane McWhorter. Pg. 22

³⁷¹ Associated Press. “Shock Waves Triggered By King’s Murder.” *Northwest Arkansas Times* 5 April 1968: Pg. 1

³⁷² *Northwest Arkansas Times* 5 April 1968: Pg. 1

Peace Agreement.”³⁷³ Running a United Press International article titled “Point of No Return’ Came At Montgomery” in the Obituary section, the *Beckley Raleigh Register* in Beckley, West Virginia brought attention to the achievements of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The story highlighted King’s leadership beginning with the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and until his death in 1968. The article attributed the success of the modern Civil Rights Movement to King’s “advocating nonviolence [and] became the nation’s best known civil rights leader and his ceaseless battle won for him the Nobel Peace Prize of 1964.”³⁷⁴ The article also praised King’s ability to harbor public opinion and use the media to benefit the push for racial equality and justice throughout the United States as he “leaned heavily on the dramatic and on the weight of public opinion.” The article continued, “He used symbolic cities for campaigns that gained worldwide attention.”³⁷⁵

Even members of the media realized the significance and importance they were having on the Civil Rights Movement and the United States overall. Legendary CBS television anchor, Walter Cronkite, recalls his experiences covering the movement in his memoir, *A Reporter’s Life*. The struggle for civil rights in America “may have been the most severe test of my own journalistic integrity since World War II.” Cronkite says all the newsmen were on the same side painting the Nazis as the world’s evil during that time, but “this civil rights struggle that was tearing at our nation was of a vastly different order, an order of much greater magnitude in terms of the demands for neutrality in our reporting.”³⁷⁶ Cronkite recalls how the public, generally in the South, responded to national media coverage of the Civil Rights Movement. “Cameramen were not infrequently pelted with stones, and their cameras were pushed into their faces.” Cronkite continues, “sometimes the police joined in the harassment, suggesting in language as violent as their looks that our newspeople had better get out before those threats were carried out.” Cronkite recalls how CBS reporter Dan Rather was struck down by a blow from a rifle butt delivered by a National Guardsman who had aimed it at Rather’s head but missed.³⁷⁷ Even CBS affiliate stations did not agree with the attention the national network was giving to the movement’s events. Southern affiliates complained to CBS management “maintain[ing] that our reports were biased in favor of the blacks and that they distorted the position of the whites by suggesting that all white Southerners were as violence-prone as those we pictured on television.”³⁷⁸ Cronkite writes that some of the stations threatened to withdraw their affiliation with CBS, which with enough support could have shut down the network. Unknown to Cronkite at the time, one station in Mississippi denied CBS network reporters from using its facilities to send reports and messages back to New York for the national news. Many stations flatly refused to make an issue of civil rights and “stepped up their equally vehement protest over our Vietnam coverage.”³⁷⁹ Moreover, Jack Nelson, a reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1950s and 1960s recalls how “some Southern newspapers were part of the segregationist establishment and vehemently opposed what they called “race-mixing.” Nelson continues his point by saying “some major newspapers with strong editorial policies of supporting law and order nevertheless failed to provide comprehensive news coverage of the civil rights movement.”³⁸⁰

³⁷³ *Northwest Arkansas Times* 5 April 1968: Pg. 1

³⁷⁴ United Press International. “Point Of No Return’ Came At Montgomery.” *Beckley Raleigh Register* 5 April 1968: Pg. 2

³⁷⁵ “Point of No Return’ Came At Montgomery.”

³⁷⁶ Walter Cronkite. *A Reporter’s Life*. New York: Random House, 1997. Pgs 289-290.

³⁷⁷ Walter Cronkite. Pg. 293.

³⁷⁸ Walter Cronkite. Pg. 293.

³⁷⁹ Walter Cronkite. Pg. 294.

³⁸⁰ Jack Nelson. “The Civil Rights Movement: A Press Perspective.”

Furthermore, Nelson recalls how reporters worked differently covering the Civil Rights Movement than any other newsworthy event when he served as the Atlanta correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times*. “It quickly became clear that reporters on the scene felt so deeply about the importance of this movement that at times they even exchanged information with competing publications.” Nelson continues, “in more than 50 years of reporting, I covered no other continuing story where reporters of rival newspapers routinely shared information.”³⁸¹ Nelson continues his argument and mine by writing, “many journalists, no matter what else they might have covered, look back on that period as the highlight of their careers—a time when the press had a profound impact on the most dramatic and important domestic revolution of the 20th century.” Overall, “news coverage of the civil rights movement helped galvanize public opinion and prod the government to enact and enforce laws to protect the rights of minorities and demolish the old system of segregation and white supremacy.”³⁸²

In conclusion, the media coverage of the efforts of civil rights activists and the racial injustices they encountered in the United States was directly related to the obvious gaining of momentum the Civil Rights Movement experienced from the mid-1950s to eventually achieving legal racial equality in the mid-1960s with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The media played a vital part in the progression of the modern Civil Rights Movement by exposing the wrongs done to blacks in America during the 1960s and before. Beverly Robertson, Executive Director of the National Civil Rights Museum, offered her views on the role of the media in the primary years of civil rights activism during an interview featured in the film *Freedom’s Call* directed by Richard Breyer. “The media allows us to live vicariously those experiences of those who have come before us and who have made such a tremendous difference, said Robertson. “We will never appreciate what these folks did for us without the work of the media.”³⁸³

The Civil Rights Movement would not have had the same influential impact upon American society without the media coverage and headline news that it received. Without the ability for those outside of the activists groups to see, hear, and read about the injustices experienced by African Americans at that time, the movement would have floundered. The media and news agencies existing from the mid-1950s throughout the 1960s served as a voice and a communication outlet for those suffering from racial hate crimes and legal inequality. By exposing such conditions and occurrences, the media created a mirror for American society to review itself upon while also serving as a watchdog for the entire population of the United States. If the journalists, editors, and photographers did not provide such devotion and courage in covering the actions of the civil rights activists, the Civil Rights Movement would be barely a blip in the American history books. During the more than ten years of struggle for racial equality, the American media proved its societal role as a voice for the people and a watchdog for the public against apparent injustices.

³⁸¹ Jack Nelson. “Reporting on the Civil Rights Movement.” *Nieman Reports* Fall 2003. <
<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reportsitem.aspx?id=100991>>

³⁸² “Reporting on the Civil Rights Movement.”

³⁸³ *Freedom’s Call*. Dir. Richard Breyer. Perf. Dorothy Gilliam and James Meredith. Filmmakers Library Inc, 2007.

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