"Nothing to do with race or gender:" Delegitimating discourses surrounding ideological bias in online discussions of high-profile crimes

This study explores the ways in which discourses surrounding gender, race, and privilege are constructed as irrelevant or inappropriate in certain online comment sections. The comment sections used in the study relate specifically to mainstream news articles covering the disappearance and murder of two separate women, one in the US and one in the UK. Both stories received high levels of media coverage, particularly when compared with similar cases involving women of colour, men, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds; this led to questions about equality and ideological bias in news reporting about crime. Commentators suggested that because the victims were white, middle-class women, their stories received more intense media attention. The explanation given for this was the phenomena known as Missing White Woman Syndrome, a term used to explain the implicit media bias towards certain crime stories. However, within the online comment sections, openness to discussion of the bias varied. This study therefore examines the discursive (de)construction of the legitimacy of this discussion in the comment sections.

The data used for the study comes from a corpus comprising approximately 3 million words collected from the comment sections of three mainstream anglophone news sites. The study adopts approaches from within Critical Discourse Analysis, in particular frameworks for analysing (de)legitimation strategies (van Dijk, 1998; van Leeuwen, 2007). Analysis of the corpus shows that commenters frequently contract the discourse surrounding race and gender ideology through judgements of the discourse as ill-timed or not-applicable, rather than through a consummate denial of the existence of a bias. The study finds that commenters employed moral evaluation to construct the discourse as inappropriate given the gravity of the crimes committed, while others use rationalisation to point to other elements of the crimes, such as the role of social media, or police involvement, to explain the media interest. This study thus explores how online commenters discursively construct conversations surrounding ideological bias as not legitimate through appeals to morality and rationality.

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