

DOES THIS MICROPHONE MAKE ME SOUND WHITE? AN EXPERIMENT  
EXPLORING RACE RECOGNITION AND SOURCE CREDIBILITY  
IN RADIO NEWS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Despite efforts to increase the number of minority journalists working in radio, television, newspaper and digital newsrooms across the United States, the percentage of people of color working in newsrooms is only slightly more than half of the percentage of minorities in the overall population. Social Identity Theory holds that an individual's self-concept is shaped, in part, by their perceived membership in a group. With the U.S. expected to become "minority White" by 2045, minority representation in newsrooms could have significant implications for not only increasing the number of people of color employed newsrooms, but also increasing listeners, viewers, and readers of media organizations as people of color would see themselves — or more accurately, hear themselves — reflected in those organizations.

This experiment used an online questionnaire to expose U.S. adults to the voices of professional radio newscasters of various races to determine if the participants could accurately identify the race or ethnicity of the newscaster from a voice recording. The race of the newscaster—White, Black or Hispanic—served as the independent variable and was manipulated to measure perceived source credibility, which served as the dependent variable. Participants were best able to correctly identify White newscasters. Results were mixed as to whether racial congruence between participant and newscaster affected the ability to identify the newscaster's race, but racial congruence did influence the credibility scores of individual newscasters.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Jason, Miranda, Olivia, and Hannah, who have gone above and beyond to support my goal of returning to graduate school after a 30 year hiatus by making sure I am well fed, highly caffeinated, and have 24-hour access to in-house tech support. You are the best.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

$\alpha$	Cronbach's index of reliability
$M$	Mean: sum of a set of measurements divided by the number of measurements in the set
$Mdn$	Median: the middle value of a dataset when the values comprising that dataset are listed in order, from either highest to lowest or lowest to highest
$p$	Probability associated with the occurrence under the null hypothesis of a value as extreme as or more extreme than the observed value
$SD$	Standard deviation: amount of variation of dispersion from the mean
$n$	Sample size
$\leq$	Less than or equal to
$=$	Equal to
$\geq$	More than

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research actually began several years ago in the conference room of a news organization. A small group of us had gathered to audition new radio programs to replace one that was being retired. As we listened to several potential replacements, we assessed whether it would be a good fit for our audience. After listening to one of the programs, a member of the team said that they loved the show, but really wanted a non-white host because so many of our current hosts were white. A laudable goal. When I informed the team member that this host was a person of color they were genuinely surprised. “He doesn’t sound black,” they said. But what does “black” sound like? With the help of my professors both inside and outside the Department Journalism and Creative Media, as well as working professionals in the field of audio journalism, I developed that question through a series of smaller research projects that culminated in this thesis. It would not have been possible without the support of the following people.

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## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	v
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
CHAPTER 3: METHODS.....	19
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.....	25
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	41
REFERENCES.....	50
APPENDIX A: SURVEY QUESTIONS.....	61
APPENDIX B: NEWSCAST SCRIPT.....	67
APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENTS.....	68

## LIST OF TABLES

- 4.1 Reliability Score for Credibility Scale of Individual Newscasters
- 4.2 Cumulative Totals, by Race/Ethnicity, of Identification of Newscaster Race
- 4.3 Hispanic Participants Identifying Hispanic and White Newscasters
- 4.4 Hispanic Participants Identifying Hispanic and Black Newscasters
- 4.5 Black Participants Identifying Black and Hispanic Newscasters
- 4.6 Black Participants Identifying Black and White Newscasters
- 4.7 White Participants Identifying White and Hispanic Newscasters
- 4.8 White Participants Identifying White and Black Newscasters
- 4.9 Newscaster Credibility Scores
- 4.10 Combined Mean Credibility Scores by Race/Ethnicity

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Fifty years ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson convened the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to examine the causes of race riots that rocked dozens of major U.S. cities. The commission published the Kerner Report, which offered a stinging rebuke for the federal government's role in creating and propagating economic segregation in predominantly black urban areas (Zelizer, 2016). It also bluntly criticized news coverage of race and politics, while pointing out the lack of diversity in America's newsrooms. "The news media have failed to analyze and report adequately on racial problems in the United States, and, as a related matter, to meet the Negro's legitimate expectations in journalism," it reads (Zelizer, 2016, p. 368). "The media report and write from the standpoint of the white man's world" (Zelizer, 2016, p. 368).

A half century later, the population is more diverse yet newsroom staffs still do not reflect that diversity. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that in 2018 the nation's population was 60.4% White (not Hispanic or Latino), 18.3% Hispanic or Latino, 13.4% Black or African American, 5.9% Asian, 2.7% two or more races, 1.3% American Indian and Alaska Native, and 0.2% percent Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander (United States Census Bureau, 2018). In all, 41.5% people in the U.S. are people of color, and the Census Bureau predicts the U.S. will become "minority white" in 2045 (Frey, 2018a). In the United States, the non-White population skews younger than the White population, meaning the tipping point will come sooner for some

demographics. An analysis by the Brookings Institution finds that for those younger than 30, people of color will overtake Whites as the major demographic by 2027 (Frey, 2018a).

In 2018, the American Society of News Editors reported that minority journalists made up 22.6% of the staffers in U.S. newsrooms that responded to the annual Newsroom Employment Diversity Survey (American Society of News Editors, 2018). The percent of minority journalists working at online-only news organizations was higher, at 25.6%. Both of these numbers were up from 2017, but the ASNE noted that the response rate of newsrooms was the lowest in the survey's 40-year history, at just 17%. The 2019 RTDNA/Hofstra University Newsroom Survey found that people of color comprised 25.9% of local TV newsroom staff and 14.5% of local radio newsroom staff (Papper, 2019). The TV newsroom staff percentages are the highest ever recorded, but are still growing more slowly than the overall minority population in the U.S. When Harvard University's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy contacted 15 of the nation's largest news outlets for a report on racial and gender diversity on their political reporting teams, just four offered up the requested information, three provided incomplete data or data other than what was requested, and the rest declined to share any data or simply didn't answer the request (Zook, 2018).

Public- and private-sector organizations have funneled considerable research dollars into examining diversity of newsrooms, from tracking demographics to studying the gatekeeping implications of diversifying staff and the effects on journalistic norms (Armstrong, 2004; Beam, 2008; Craft & Wanta, 2004; Richardson & Lancendorfer, 2004; Shoemaker et al., 2001; Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996; White, 1950). There is less research on the non-gatekeeping effects of

minority journalists in newsrooms, such as the perceived credibility of journalists. Social Identity Theory holds that individuals tend to categorize themselves into social in-groups when they perceive similar attributes with others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The in-group to which a person belongs can be an important source of pride and self-esteem. Being in the out-group can also influence a person's evaluation of themselves and others. Media is a powerful socialization tool. It creates and reinforces stereotypes through story selection, framing, the message and the messenger. It helps shape who is considered authoritative and who is not. When a person does not see themselves reflected – or sees themselves reflected inaccurately – they may feel apart from the greater dialogue. It would stand to reason, then, that media outlets looking to diversify not only their staffs, but their audiences, might do so by increasing the number of minority journalists.

As previously noted, television newsrooms have some of the highest diversity numbers in journalism. Many high-profile anchor positions are occupied by minority journalists, especially at the local level and particularly in communities with large minority populations. In this visual medium the optics of diversity are there for all to see. An anchor is usually easily identifiable as Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, or other. The same cannot be said for radio anchors, whose work appears on a platform that strips away any visual clues of race or ethnicity. Or does it? Perhaps voice can telegraph race. There is little research that examines whether listeners can identify race and ethnicity in audio-only platforms like radio and podcasting. This experiment seeks to fill that void by exploring the intersection of voice, race, and credibility. It asked whether people listening to audio recordings (i.e., “a listener”) can accurately identify the race or ethnicity of the

person speaking in the recording (i.e., “a speaker”) and tested whether a listener is better able to identify the race/ethnicity of a speaker who is of the same race as the listener, referred to hereafter as being racially congruent. Finally, the experiment tested for differences in how listeners rate the credibility of speakers of various races.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Identifying Race from Audio**

Can a listener discern the race or ethnicity of a speaker from audio alone? Several studies exploring the theory of general deference do not overtly ask listeners to identify the race or ethnicity of a speaker, but many suggest that the listener does – consciously or subconsciously – sense these attributes. One way of testing this has been research focused on race-of-interviewer effect. Research has shown that when Whites and Blacks are interviewed in person about sensitive issues such as race, their answers are affected by whether the interviewer is White or Black (Hatchett & Schuman 1975-76; Campbell, 1981). To test whether this result held true for interviews not conducted in person, Cotter et al. (1982) examined race-of-interviewer effect during telephone interviews, when the interviewer cannot be seen. Consistent with earlier research, they found that “(1) race of interviewer has little or no effect on nonracial questions, (2) race of interviewer does have an effect on some but not all racial questions, and (3) on racial questions, respondents interviewed by a member of another race are more ‘deferential’ to that race than are respondents interviewed by a member of their own race.” (Cotter et al., 1982, p. 281). Reese et al. (1986) found similar race-of-interviewer effects in a telephone survey of Mexican Americans and Whites, with Hispanic and White interviewers who all spoke fluent regional Spanish and unaccented English.

As previously noted, these race-of-interviewer studies (Cotter et al., 1982; Reese et al., 1986) did not expressly ask respondents to identify the race of the interviewer. Their recognition

of race is implied through the statistical analysis of the interview response data. There are, however, several studies that overtly test whether a listener can identify the race or ethnicity of a speaker. Pew Research Center conducted a new analysis of an earlier telephone survey on race and inequality (Brown, 2017). In that earlier survey, the interviewers were told that at the end of the survey they must ask respondents: “You may not have thought about this ... but if you had to guess, would you say I am white, black, Hispanic, Asian or some other race? Just your best guess is fine.” The analysis found that many respondents were not able or perhaps willing to identify the race or ethnicity of the person conducting the survey. Other studies find differently, especially as it pertains to Black and White speakers. Thomas and Reaser (2004) and Yarmey (1995) summarize a body of research that shows that, when given a forced-choice question, listeners can accurately identify Black and White speakers approximately 75% of the time, although Thomas and Reaser note that most studies used Black speakers who exhibited dialectical differences. When Black speakers used ‘Standard English’ those speakers were often misidentified as European American.

There is significantly less research around identification of other races and ethnicities. Kushins (2014) tested participants’ ability to identify the race of White, Black, and U.S.-born Asian American voices. In open-ended questions, the participants demonstrated high accuracy in identifying Black and White speakers by voice alone, but much lower accuracy in identifying Asian speakers. In a study by Newman and Wu (2011), New Yorkers were asked to identify the race and national heritage of eight speakers also living in New York: two European Americans, two Chinese Americans, two Korean Americans, one Latino, and one African American.

Listeners were successful at identifying the speakers' race, including the Asian speakers, but they could not successfully differentiate between the Koreans and Chinese speakers. The researchers assert that Korean and Chinese Americans are "distinct pieces in the U.S. racial dialectal mosaic, instead of relatively minor variations on European American patterns", but they suggest that the vocal cues to racial identity may be "fewer and subtler" than those for African Americans or Latinos (Newman & Wu, 2011, p. 171).

### **Race and Credibility**

Credibility is a "core value of American journalism" (Miller & Kurpius, 2010, p. 139). It matters because message recipients seek out sources that they perceive to be believable (Wanta & Hu, 1994). To effectively influence knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors of the intended audience, audience members must find both the message and the messenger to be credible (Wathen & Burkell, 2002). Credibility has been explained many ways. Hovland et al. (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953; Hovland & Weiss, 1951) focused on trustworthiness and expertise. McCroskey (1975) stressed the five dimensions of competence, character, sociability, composure, and extroversion. Of these, he concluded that competence, character, and sociability were the most important. Gaziano and McGrath (1986) used factor analysis to produce a 12-item credibility factor used to score newspapers and television. The twelve factors considered whether newspapers and television news a) were fair, b) were unbiased, c) told the whole story, d) were accurate, e) respected people's privacy, f) guarded people's interests, g) were concerned about community well-being, h) distinguished fact from opinion, i) were trustworthy, j) were concerned about the public interest, k) focused on facts, and l) had well-trained reporters.

Roberts (2010) argued that while many of the credibility scales seek to isolate the message from the messenger that is folly “because of the complicated interrelationship” (p. 44) of the two. Self and Roberts (2019) note that the 2016 election of President Donald Trump sparked a worldwide conversation about credibility, injecting terms like “fake news,” “alternative facts,” and “bots” into the discussion. They write that “credibility is firmly rooted in socially situated narratives and network relationships that individuals use to filter communication and judge credibility” (Self & Roberts, 2019, p. 435).

Communication researchers have explored the intersection of race and credibility in multiple studies and from various perspectives. For instance, Beaudoin and Thorson (2006) considered the subject of the message and the race of the message recipient. They surveyed 2,000 respondents in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area to examine the role that race plays in predicting perceived credibility of news coverage of minority groups. Non-Blacks assessed news coverage of Blacks to be more credible than Blacks did, and Blacks assessed news coverage of Whites as being more credible than did non-Blacks.

Other studies focus on the race of the messenger. In the field of public relations, Mohammed-Baksh (2012) examined the interaction effects of a spokesperson’s ethnicity and gender on audience perceptions of the spokesperson and message credibility. The study found there was no statistically significant main effects of a spokesperson’s ethnicity on audience perceptions of credibility, although Mohammed-Baksh noted that the over-representation of White participants in the study could have affected the results, since other research has shown

that “members of majority groups are less aware of ethnic cues (than members of non-majority ethnic groups).” (Mohammed-Baksh, 2012, pp. 23).

There are also numerous studies that specifically examine how racial congruity or incongruity between messenger and message recipient affects the perceived credibility of the messenger. Tang (2016) used social psychology and communications theories to test the effects of the race of a vlogger on perceived credibility, self-efficacy and behavioral intentions of the viewer. Participants who watched a racially congruent vlogger giving advice on exercising and dieting showed a “marginally significant greater perceived source credibility” ( $p = .062$ ), compared to those who watched a vlogger of another race.

Khatib (1989) considered two primary communication sources in the African American community: the “preacher” and the “professor.” He wanted to know how the race of the audience related to the perception of the professor’s or preacher’s credibility. While there was no significant difference between the way Black and White respondents rated the competency or trustworthiness of the Black and White preacher, Black respondents were significantly more likely to choose a Black preacher and White respondents were significantly more likely to choose a White preacher. The same pattern held for choice of Black and White professors. This could be due to norms or socioemotional processes.

Escobedo (2015) showed news clips of White and Black television anchors to a group of Black men and then conducted focus groups to explore the emotional response provoked by a newscaster’s race and the impact of newscaster’s race on perceived credibility, as well as the perceived accuracy of news reports of a racial nature. The research found that overall the

participants did not have much trust in the news media, but that race played a significant role in source credibility, with the participants rating the Black anchors as more credible.

In an exploratory study, Johnson (1984) asked the question: do Black television viewers perceive Black newscasters as more credible than White newscasters? The results showed that 66 percent of survey respondents (all Black) assessed Black newscasters as more believable than White newscasters, but only 45 percent of respondents rated the Black news reporters as better performers. While Johnson noted several limitations — a small sample size and the use of video of high-profile anchors from the local community, among them — she raises an interesting question about why the respondents felt the White reporters were better performers. She posits that perhaps it is because White reporters and anchors are the norm, while Black reporters are often relegated to the weekend news programs, a time often referred to as the “weekend ghetto” because the programs are “shorter and usually less newsworthy than weekly newscasts.” (Johnson, 1984, p 367).

### **Public Radio’s Race Problem**

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) was founded in 1967, the same year the Kerner Commission started investigating the cause of the race riots, on the principles of developing programming “that involves creative risks and that addresses the needs of unserved and underserved audiences, particularly children and minorities” (Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, 2018, p. 1165). CPB provides ongoing grant funding to 78 minority public radio stations, including stations licensed to Native American tribes and historically black colleges and universities (CPB, n.d.). CPB has funded many initiatives aimed at increasing diversity in the

public media workforce and on-air, including WGBH's Next Generation Leadership Program (PBS, n.d.), and The Association of Independents in Radio's New Voices fellowships (AIR, n.d.). To attract diverse audiences to public media, CPB has provided funding to Chicago Public Radio's Vocalo Radio, "the nation's first 24/7 public radio station focusing on R&B, hip hop, and dance music." (Vocalo, n.d.).

NPR is the largest public radio network in the U.S., with more than 1,000 independently owned and operated public radio stations carrying its programs (NPR, n.d.). For two decades it has sponsored Next Generation Radio, a journalism training program aimed at increasing diversity by competitively selecting current college students, recent graduates and early-career professionals for an intensive week-long training program and follow-up coaching (NextGenRadio.org, n.d.). The program has more than 250 graduates and many of them now work in public media (Mitchell, 2020).

In January 2020, NPR named Keith Woods as its first Chief Diversity Officer. In announcing Woods appointment, NPR CEO John Lansing said, "I want NPR to reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion in everything we do. As an organization we should be leaders in providing news and cultural programming that speaks to our richly diverse country and connects with an audience that looks and sounds like America — all while creating a welcoming and supportive workplace for all." (NPR, 2020, January 23).

Historically, the network has aspired, and critics say struggled, to meet this ideal. In January 2002, it launched a weekly program focused on race, diversity and ethnicity hosted by former BET talk show host Tavis Smiley. *The Tavis Smiley Show* ended two years later amid

tense contract negotiations (Kurtz, 2005). When asked by *Time Magazine* which was more diverse – NPR or President Bush’s cabinet – Smiley observed, “It is ironic that a Republican president has an administration that is more inclusive and more diverse than a so-called liberal-media-elite network.” (Farley, 2004, para. 9). NPR replaced *The Tavis Smiley Show* with *News and Notes*, a daily one-hour program also focused on African Americans, but then canceled the show in 2009 amid budget problems (Folkenflik, 2008).

In 2007, NPR launched another diversity-focused program, *Tell Me More with Michel Martin*. When the network canceled *Tell Me More* in 2014, Keli Goff (2014) wrote an article for the Afro-centric progressive online publication *The Root* titled “Tell Me More About the Return of the White-Guy Era in Broadcast Media.” In it, she noted the bitter irony that the final program of *Tell Me More* would air while the annual National Association of Black Journalists convention was taking place. “At the same moment that African-American journalists are being celebrated,” Goff wrote, “we are losing one of the most welcoming platforms on which black journalists appear.” (Goff, 2012, para.12). In her article for *Ebony*, “The End of NPR’s Blackest Show,” Peabody Award-winning journalist Veralyn Williams (2014) quoted a long-time African American public radio leader who said “public radio is drunk on the sweet sap of its major donors, and doesn’t believe that that demographic is open to a broader point of view.” (Williams, 2014, para. 9).

Voice – both figurative and literal – may be a sticking point. In the *Time Magazine* interview (Farley, 2004), Smiley recounted the difficulties of launching the show:

I can't begin to tell you the hate mail that I received when I started three years ago. I remember one listener emailing me to complain that my laughter was too boisterous. They didn't like the way I talked, the way I sounded. Because my whole style was so antithetical to what the traditional NPR listener had been accustomed to. (para. 7).

Chenjerai Kumanyika, assistant professor of journalism and media studies at Rutgers University, also reflected on the power of voice in a manifesto he wrote after producing his first public radio story. It was a story about a fisherman who manages a tuna club. Kumanyika observed that while editing the story aloud he realized that he heard it in a voice that was not his own, one that sounded more "White" (Kumanyika, 2015a).

But what does sounding more "White" mean? Radio and television broadcasters have traditionally been trained to speak at a moderate pace and to clearly enunciate each word. Starting in the 1930s, radio networks adopted what is known as General American English (Fought, 2005). General American English is most often associated with the North Midland (i.e. Missouri, Illinois, Iowa, Nebraska, etc.), Western New England, and Western regions of the country (Van Riper, 2014; Labov et al., 1997; Clopper et al., 2006) and is marked by rhotic pronunciation (Fought, 2005). Put simply, rhotic speakers pronounce the *r* in words like *dark* and *charge*. Non-rhotic speakers generally drop their *r*'s. Rhotic pronunciation is perceived as having no distinct regional, ethnic or sociological characteristics (Van Riper, 2014).

One incentive broadcasters have to adopt this homogenous sound is practical: continued employment. Nielsen, the audience measurement company that produces ratings for radio and television, ranks broadcast markets by the size of the potential audience (Nielsen, 2019). For

professional broadcasters, one common route to higher salaries is to move from a smaller market to a larger one. Rossen (2020) argues that broadcasters are often “vagabonds, taking jobs across the country. If an anchor hailing from the South committed to delivering the day’s top stories in a Southern accent, for example, it’s not likely a New York station would feel viewers could warm to them” (para. 5).

The real and perceived pressure to sound more “White” may be at odds not only with the goal of diversifying broadcast newsroom staff, but also attracting new audiences. In an NPR article titled “Challenging the Whiteness in Public Radio,” Kumanyika (2015b) said:

Without being directly told, people like me learn that our way of speaking isn’t professional. This is one of the reasons that some of my black and brown friends refuse to listen to some of my favorite [public] radio shows despite my most passionate efforts. (para. 2).

Given the increasingly diverse population in the U.S., that could have serious implications for not only the financial health, but the underlying mission of public broadcasting.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Much of the social psychology research around intergroup relations has focused on how individual prejudices influence attitudes, perceptions and behavior, but Campbell’s (1965) Realistic Conflict Theory (RCT) provides an interesting alternative lens through which to view the race riots detailed in the Kerner Report. Building on the work of Sherif et al. (1961), the central concept of RCT is that intergroup animosity can arise from conflicting goals and

competition for limited resources such as money, political power, or social status. Tajfel and Turner (1986) extended the research to explore how membership in a social group affects an individual's self-concept and ultimately intergroup relations. Tajfel and Turner's Social Identity Theory holds, in part, that the groups to which a person belongs are an important source of pride and self-esteem. Allen (2004) expands on the idea by explaining what it means to be in a dominant versus non-dominant group and how in-group/out-group distinctions can present obstacles to valuing differences among people.

People can have multiple social identities (i.e. gender, race, age, occupation, affiliations with political parties or clubs, etc.) and the saliency of those roles can change over time. Social identity can also be primed (Gaither, Cohen-Goldberg, Gidney & Maddox, 2015). For instance, a person may identify more with their professional identity when they are at work and more with their role as a parent or spouse when they are at home. They may identify more with their identity as an athlete when they're competing and more with their religious identity when they are in worship.

Racial identity can also be primed. Priming White identity in Black/White biracial students has resulted in better performance on a standardized test (Gaither, Remedios, Schultz, & Sommers, 2015). The performance of Asian women on tests of mathematical competence was affected by whether their gender or ethnicity was primed (Shih et al., 1999). Priming for the White or Black identity in White/Black biracial individuals affected the participants' social interactions with White or Black confederates (Gaither, Sommers & Ambady, 2013). In their research, Gaither, Cohen-Goldberg, Gidney and Maddox (2015) examined social identity

priming and biracial speech. They note that “Language is often used a marker of one’s social group membership and studies have shown that social context can affect the style of language that a person chooses to use” (Gaither, Cohen-Goldberg, Gidney, & Maddox, 2015, p. 1). In the 2015 research (Gaither, Cohen-Goldberg, Gidney, & Maddox, 2015), condition-blind coders assessed audio recorded during the 2013 research (Gaither, Sommers & Ambady, 2013) that studied the social interactions between racially primed biracial participants and Black or White confederates. They found that participants who had been primed to their White identity sounded significantly more “White” in conversation with the confederate and participants primed to their Black identity sounded significantly more “Black” in conversation with the confederate. The idea finds support in Howard Giles’ (1987) Communication Accommodation Theory, which holds that people often shift their style of language to facilitate understanding when talking to someone from another group. This may mean alternating between two languages in a single conversation or from one conversation to another (Zentella, 1997) or switching between more or less formal versions of one language, depending on the situation (DeBose, 1992; Demby, 2013). This linguistic technique is often called code-switching. Young et al. (2014) argue that code-switching places a burden on Black students and suggests the alternative concept they call code-meshing—allowing students to use a mix of standard English, African American English, and other forms of English in formal writing and classroom discussions. Code-switching and its alternatives can complicate research focused on identifying speaker race from voice because “most people, regardless of race or ethnicity, adjust their linguistic style depending on the context of the interaction” (Kushins, 2014, p. 237). This should be considered a potential

limitation of results when the interactions are two-way conversations, as in the telephone research studies cited earlier (Cotter et al., 1982; Reese et al., 1986; and Brown, 2017).

### **The Current Study**

By default, the race-of-interviewer research mentioned earlier, involves two-way live communication between the interviewer and the interviewee. Other research studies that used pre-recorded messages to assess whether listeners can discern the race of speakers have employed average people as the speakers. Both of these methods may introduce confounders such as code-switching and other dialectical cues that might influence listeners' perceptions. Given the radio industry's continued focus on General American English (GenAm), the author of this study believes that having the stimuli voiced by professional radio newscasters who have been socialized to speak GenAm will effectively control for accents and other vocal patterns that might otherwise suggest the race or ethnicity of the speaker. This leads the author to ask the research questions:

**RQ1:** How accurately can listeners identify the race or ethnicity of White, Black, and Hispanic radio newscasters based solely on a voice recording?

**RQ2:** How confident are listeners in their identification of newscasters' race or ethnicity?

To the best of the author's knowledge, this is the first empirical study to also examine the effects of racial congruency on the listener's ability to identify the race of a speaker and the listener's perceptions of that speaker's credibility. To that end, the following hypotheses are put forward:

**H1:** Listeners will more accurately identify the race or ethnicity of a newscaster who is racially congruent with the listener.

**H2:** Listeners will rate the credibility of racially-congruent newscasters higher than they rate the credibility of racially-noncongruent newscasters.

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODS

This study examined the proposed research questions and hypotheses using quantitative methods. Specifically, it employed an experimental design using an online survey that allowed participants to hear various newscasters' voices, speculate as to their race or ethnicity, then rate how credible they perceive the newscasters to be.

#### **Stimuli Design**

The experiment used a Qualtrics-designed survey with embedded audio of six different newscasters reading a prepared script that included a greeting, one news story, and a weather report. The news story was a verbatim transcript of 25-second newscast story that aired on NPR on April 19, 2019. NPR newscasts are heard on more than 900 public radio stations nationwide and reach more than 37 million listeners each week (NPR, 2018). They undergo rigorous editorial review based on best practices in journalism. Multiple newscasts from April 16 and April 19, 2019, were recorded and transcribed. Stories mentioning race and stories that could be viewed as politically divisive were eliminated. This included, for instance, a story about efforts to require stricter gun laws. Transcripts of ten NPR newscast stories were sent to eight public radio journalists. These included one national correspondent for NPR, the news director of an Alabama station, the news director of a Chicago station, a talk show host in Arizona, a news anchor in Ohio, the senior news editor at a station in New York City, the director of podcasting for a statewide network in Georgia, and a long-time public radio coach, journalism trainer and editor. They were instructed to rank the scripts from 1 to 10 (1 = most suitable, 10 = least

suitable) based on content clarity and appropriateness. The story with the lowest median rank ( $Mdn = 1.5$ ) was used for the study. The author—a veteran public radio news director and host—then wrote a script that included a standard time check and greeting, followed by the newscast story and then the weather forecast. See Appendix B for the script. Each newscaster recorded the script verbatim in a professional studio.

### **Newscasters**

To control for code-switching, regional accents and other linguistic signifiers of race or ethnicity, the study used professional public radio newscasters who speak with a standard accent to voice the scripts. Because listeners may recognize the voices of newscasters who work for NPR or other national programs, the study used newscasters who work for public radio stations in Oregon, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Alabama, and Florida. There were two White newscasters, two Black newscasters, and two Hispanic newscasters. Future research may include newscasters who are Asian, Native American, Alaska Native, Hawaiian or Pacific Islanders, but this study was limited to White, Black and Hispanic because these are three largest racial/ethnic groups in the U.S. and adding additional newscasters would have increased the time it took to complete the survey, possibly resulting in participant fatigue and a higher survey abandonment rate. To control for gender-effect, all of the newscasters were male.

### **Participant Recruitment**

The population target sample for this experiment was men and women aged 18 and older who live in the U.S. or a U.S. territory (e.g. American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands). Because the goal was to have a sample that would reflect a

diversity of gender, age, race/ethnicity, geography, and educational achievement, the author identified an initial set of “facilitators” from various racial and ethnic groups as well as geographic regions and educational attainment. These included African American professionals living in Alabama, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Georgia, and California; Hispanic or Latino professionals living in Georgia, Alabama, New Mexico, Florida, New York; Asian professionals living in Alabama; American Indian professionals living in Georgia and Oregon; a Native Islander professional living in Washington D.C.; and several White, non-college educated people living in Utah, Colorado, and Alabama. Each was asked to take the survey themselves, then share it on social media to encourage their friends and followers to take the survey. The author also shared a link to the survey on personal social media channels, which cumulatively have several thousand friends/followers (Twitter = 4,771; Facebook = 3,349; LinkedIn = 2755; Instagram = 320). One of the benefits of this virtual snowball sampling through social media approach is that it allowed the study to reach a large number of people across multiple racial and ethnic groups, as well as other personal demographics that may be useful in future research analysis (Baltar & Brunet, 2012). One of the limitations of this method is that virtual sampling can be biased towards characteristics like age, level of education, and socioeconomic status, which may affect access to the Internet. Nevertheless, the approach (a) permitted a more diverse sample than the use of an in-house participant pool and (b) better ensured that active radio listeners participate in the survey compared to participant pools like Amazon m-Turk.

## **Demographics**

After clicking the survey link and giving informed consent to participate, participants were asked to provide demographic data including age, race or ethnicity, sex at birth and current gender identification, educational achievement, current region of residence, and how many U.S. states they have lived in over their life. These questions, as well as a graphic delineating the U.S. regions, can be found in Appendix A.

Next, participants were asked how many hours a week they listen to audio-only platforms (e.g. over-the-air radio, satellite radio, podcasts) and how much of that listening was to news programming. Additionally, they were asked to indicate which national news or talk programs they regularly listen to.

## **Newscasters and Audio**

After completing the demographic and audio platform use questions, respondents were told they would hear several different newscasters reading the same script and would be asked questions about what they had heard. These questions were designed to assess the credibility of each newscaster, and participants were led to believe they were helping judge qualities of broadcast journalists. Each participant encountered all six newscasters—two White, two Black, and two Hispanic—to ensure that differences in credibility ratings were not simply a product of the individual newscaster. Because research on television news, radio broadcasters, live-streaming and marketing and advertising messages using audio featuring male and female spokespersons found that gender is associated with perceived credibility (see Brann, M., & Himes, K. L., 2010; Kang et al. 2019; Martin-Santana et al., 2017; Todd & Melancon, 2018;

Weibel et al., 2008), the newscasters in the current study were all male to avoid gender effect. Also, the order in which the newscasters appeared in each survey was randomized so that participants heard the newscasters in different orders, thereby limiting order effect.

### **Credibility**

Credibility questions were based on the classic studies of source credibility, such as Hovland (1951; 1953), Ohanian (1990; 1991), McCroskey (1975), Gaziano and McGrath (1986), and focused on three dimensions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness. The study employed a modified version of an instrument developed by Reinares-Lara et al. (2016) to test the effects of accent on spokesperson credibility in radio advertising. Their instrument included 20 items. The present study used a condensed version of the questionnaire to avoid participant fatigue and item redundancy, removing the trust dimension “transmits safety,” the expertise dimensions “efficient,” “expert,” and “professionalism,” and the attractiveness dimensions “attractive,” “nice,” “kind,” and “good nature.” With the elimination of these items, the final credibility questions used in this thesis asked participants to rate 12 measures of expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness on a 4-point Likert scale of 1) strongly disagree, 2) disagree, 3) agree, and 4) strongly agree. This method presented symmetry of categories around a non-existent middle, thereby attempting to avoid the central tendency bias that is often regarded as “one of the most obstinate” response biases in psychological testing (Stevens, 1971, p 428). The 12-item measure of credibility demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = 0.97$ ,  $M = 220.08$ ,  $SD = 26.23$ ). The full credibility scale employed in this thesis is presented in Appendix A.

### **Other Newscaster Dimensions**

After answering the credibility questions concerning each newscaster, participants answered other questions including each newscaster's age, race or ethnicity, level of education and years of professional experience. The questions about age, education and experience were used to mask the true goal of assessing race or ethnicity.

### **Measures**

To answer RQ1 and RQ2, this study used descriptive statistics to analyze participants' ability to correctly identify the race or ethnicity of the newscasters and to assess the participants' confidence in that identification. To answer H1, each participants' identification of newscaster race was recorded into a new variable to be dichotomous (correct/incorrect) and a paired samples t-test was used to determine the mean difference between various sets of observations. Because of the small sample size for Black and Hispanic participants, this study also used a Wilcoxon signed rank test and related-samples McNemar change test to examine H1. To test H2, this study also used paired samples t-tests, Wilcoxon signed rank tests and related-samples McNemar change tests.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

#### **Introduction**

In addition to answering a research question about how accurately participants can identify the race or ethnicity of a newscaster based solely on an audio sample, this study also sought to determine whether participants would be better able to identify the race of a racially-congruent newscaster than a non-racially congruent newscaster and to assess how racial congruency versus non-congruency affected perceived credibility of the newscasters. This chapter discusses the results of the data analysis outlined in the previous section. It will describe the demographics of the study participants. It will also analyze the credibility scales used in the study and discuss the results of the tests used to answer the hypotheses.

#### **Participant Demographics**

To be included in this study, participants had to meet certain requirements outlined in the methods sections. A total of 495 participants consented into the study to access the Qualtrics survey, but 18 did not answer any questions, 15 did not identify their current place of residence, and 16 identified their current residence as outside the U.S. or its territories. These participants were eliminated from the sample. Additionally, 56 people started the survey and provided personal demographic data, but did not answer any questions about the newscasters and were similarly eliminated. That left a final sample of 390 participants ( $n = 390$ ).

The participants ranged in age from 18 to 85 years old, with a mean age of 45 ( $SD = 14.09$ ,  $n = 389$ ). The sample was more female (60%,  $n = 389$ ) than male (39%), with 4 people

identifying as other (1%). Twenty participants identified their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino (5%). Of the 386 participants who identified a race, 314 identified as White (81%), 40 identified as Black (10%), 11 identified two or more races (3%), 9 identified as other (2%), 6 identified as Asian (2%), 4 identified as American Indian or Alaska Native (1%), and 2 identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander (1%). Four participants did not identify a race, but each of these did identify being of Hispanic or Latino ethnicity.

All 390 answered the question asking the highest degree or level of school completed, and the educational distribution was skewed more highly educated than the general population. One participant had some high school, but no degree (.3%), 8 participants had only a high school degree (2%) , 42 participants attended, but did not graduate from college (11%), 1 participant had a trade or technical degree (.3%), 7 had an associate degree (2%), 167 had a bachelor's degree (43%), 112 had a master's degree (29%), 17 had a medical, dental, veterinary or law degree (4%) , and 35 had a doctoral degree (9%). According to U.S. Census estimates, in 2018 10.5 of U.S. residents had no high school diploma or equivalency, 28.6% had a high school diploma or equivalency, 18.6% had some college but no degree, 4.1% had an associate's degree with an occupational focus, 5.5% had an associate's degree with an academic focus, 20.6% had a bachelor's degree, 8.5% had a master's degree, 1.3% had a professional degree, and 1.8% had a doctoral degree (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

The geographic distribution of the sample skewed towards the Southeastern U.S., where the researcher is based. More than half of the participants (64.9%) lived in the Southeast, followed by the Midwest (13.6%), West (8.7%), Northeast (8.2%), and Southwest (4.6%). The

mean number of states in which participants reported living over their lifetime was 3.36 ( $SD = 2.26$ )

### **Credibility Scale Analyses**

The coefficient alpha, also known as Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951), is the most popular measure in psychological research to test a scale's internal reliability, and especially its internal consistency reliability (Hogan et al., 2000). The credibility scale used in this study contained twelve items. The scale was tested for each newscaster individually and for all newscasters combined and was determined to have high reliability ( $\alpha \geq .90$ ). A breakdown of the individual reliability scores for the scale used in this thesis can be found Table 4.1.

**Table 4.1**

#### **Reliability Scores for Credibility Scales of Individual Newscasters**

Newscaster	<i>n</i>	Cronbach's Alpha
#1 (Hispanic)	301	.943
#2 (White)	312	.948
#3 (Hispanic)	301	.947
#4 (Black)	317	.953
#5 (White)	298	.942
#6 (Black)	311	.936

A total of 234 participants answered every credibility question for all six newscasters. The reliability score of the scale for all six newscasters combined was  $\alpha = .97$ .

### **Test of Research Questions**

The stimuli in this study was voiced by six different newscasters. Newscasters 1 and 3 are Hispanic, Newscasters 2 and 5 are White, and Newscasters 4 and 6 are Black.

The first research question asked how accurately listeners could identify the race or ethnicity of radio newscasters based solely on voice recordings. Meanwhile, the second research question examined the confidence participants expressed in their identification of the newscasters' race. The results suggest that participants, as a group, were much more successful at correctly identifying the race of White newscasters than they were for Black or Hispanic newscasters.

Of the 316 people who answered the question about Newscaster 1, only 5% ( $n = 16$ ) correctly identified him as Hispanic, and most (62%) said they had *no confidence* or *slight confidence* in their choice. Even fewer participants could correctly identify Newscaster 3. Just 4% ( $n = 12$ ) of the 322 participants who answered the question identified him as Hispanic, and 57% reported *no confidence* or *slight confidence* in their choice.

The results were better for the Black newscasters. Of the 332 who answered the question about Newscaster 4, almost a third ( $n = 98$ ) correctly identified him as Black. Still, 65% said they had *no confidence* or *slight confidence* in their choice. The results for Newscaster 6 were very close, with 49% ( $n = 159$ ) of the 327 identifying him as Black and 65% indicating they had *no confidence* or *slight confidence* in their choice.

The results paint a completely different picture for the White newscasters. Three hundred twenty-one participants answered the question for Newscaster 2 and an overwhelming majority of participants ( $n = 282$ ) correctly identified him as White, although 54.3% said they had *no confidence* or *slight confidence* in their choice. Of the 317 participants who answered the question about Newscaster 5, 72% ( $n = 228$ ) correctly identified him as White, with two-thirds (66%) indicating they had *no confidence* or *slight confidence* in their choice. Table 4.2 illustrates the cumulative totals, by race, of the participants' answers to the question of newscasters' race/ethnicity.

**Table 4.2**

**Cumulative Totals, by Race/Ethnicity, of Identification of Newscaster Race**

Newscasters' Race	Correct ID	Incorrect ID	% Correct
Hispanic (N=638)	28	610	4.4%
Black (N=658)	257	401	39.1%
White (N=647)	519	128	80.2%

**Test of Hypotheses**

Because this study's hypotheses were framed around the idea of racial congruency—in other words, the participant being of same race or ethnicity as the newscaster—participants who did not identify either an ethnicity or a race and those who chose “two or more races” or “other” were sorted out of the data (leaving  $n = 375$ ).

To understand the relationship between race congruency and both the participants' ability to identify the race of the newscasters and the participants' perceived credibility of the newscasters, the author created several new variables. First, the author dichotomized race/ethnicity into the variables Hispanic\_Other (1 = Hispanic, 0 = not Hispanic), AA\_Other (1 = Black or African American, 0 = not Black or African American), and White\_Other (1 = White, 0 = not White) and coded the sample accordingly. Because the newscasters were White, Black and Hispanic, participants who identified as a race other than White, Black or Hispanic were coded 0. This study used both ethnicity (Hispanic or not Hispanic) and racial categories that align with the U.S. census categories, but scholars disagree about whether these two things should be considered separately or if one category—race/ethnicity—is sufficient. Phinney (1996) argued for combining the two into one category because of “the wide disagreement on its [race’s] meaning and usage for psychology” (p. 918). While Helms and Talleyrand (1997) concede that there is no biological basis for distinct racial categories, they argue that in practice people are sorted and studied by societally-defined racial “features” (e.g. skin color or facial features) that are more salient, at least in the fields of psychology and in American society in general, than ethnicity, which they argue “has no real meaning apart from its status as a proxy for racial classification or immigrant status” (p. 1246).

In this study, 20 people identified themselves as ethnically Hispanic or Latino and, of those, 18 identified a race. For the purpose of analyzing H1 and H2, participants who identified as Hispanic with no race were coded 1 for the variable Hispanic\_Other. Participants who identified Hispanic and Black were coded 1 for both the Hispanic\_Other and Black\_Other

variables. Similarly, participants who identified as Hispanic and White were coded 1 for both the Hispanic\_Other and White\_Other variables.

Hypothesis one proposed that listeners would more accurately identify the race or ethnicity of a newscaster who was racially congruent with the listener. Because of the small sample size of the Hispanic respondents, Related-Samples Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests were run to test H1 for each type of participant and newscaster race/ethnicity combinations.

As Table 4.3 illustrates, Hispanic participants were significantly worse at correctly identifying the race of Hispanic newscasters (NC1 and NC3) than correctly identifying the race of White newscasters (NC2 and NC5). In these cases, the hypothesis is not supported.

**Table 4.3****Hispanic participants identifying Hispanic and White newscasters**

Newscaster/Race	Correct ID	Incorrect ID	% Correct	<i>n</i>	Sig
#1/Hispanic	2	14	12.5%		
#2/White	10	2	83.3%	11	0.020
#1/Hispanic	2	14	12.5%		
#5/White	12	4	75.0%	15	0.004
#3/Hispanic	2	15	11.8%		
#2/White	10	2	83.3%	11	0.008
#3/Hispanic	2	15	11.8%		
#5/White	12	4	75.0%	15	0.003

---

$p \leq .05$

As represented in Table 4.4, there was no difference in Hispanic participants' ability to correctly identify the race of Hispanic (NC1 and NC3) and Black (NC4 and NC6) newscasters. The hypothesis was not supported in either case.

**Table 4.4****Hispanic Participants Identifying Hispanic and Black Newscasters**

Newscaster/Race	Correct ID	Incorrect ID	% Correct	<i>n</i>	Sig
#1/Hispanic	2	14	12.5%		
#4/Black	4	14	22.2%	16	0.655
#1/Hispanic	2	14	12.5%		
#6/Black	3	12	20.0%	15	0.655
#3/Hispanic	2	15	11.8%		
#4/Black	4	14	22.2%	16	0.414
#3/Hispanic	2	15	11.8%		
#6/Black	3	12	20.0%	14	0.655

---

*p* ≤ .05

Related-samples Wilcoxon signed rank tests run on Black participants revealed that they were significantly better at correctly identifying the race of Black newscasters (NC4 and NC6) than they were at identifying the race of Hispanic newscasters (NC1 and NC3). The hypothesis is supported. See Table 4.5 for full results.

**Table 4.5****Black Participants Identifying Black and Hispanic Newscasters**

Newscaster/Race	Correct ID	Incorrect ID	% Correct	<i>n</i>	Sig
#4/Black	13	21	38.2%		
#1/Hispanic	1	31	3.1%	29	0.002
#4/Black	13	21	38.2%		
#3/Hispanic	2	30	6.3%	31	0.008
#6/Black	14	20	41.2%		
#1/Hispanic	1	31	3.1%	31	0.001
#6/Black	14	20	41.2%		
#3/Hispanic	2	30	6.3%	30	0.005

$p \leq .05$

Black participants were significantly worse at correctly identifying the race of Black newscasters (NC4 and NC6) than they were at identifying the race of White newscasters (NC2 and NC5), as indicated in Table 4.6. The hypothesis is not supported.

**Table 4.6****Black Participants Identifying Black and White Newscasters**

Newscaster/Race	Correct ID	Incorrect ID	% Correct	<i>n</i>	Sig
#4/Black	13	21	38.2%		
#2/White	26	6	81.3%	30	0.005
#4/Black	13	21	38.2%		
#5/White	24	9	72.7%	30	0.008
#6/Black	14	20	41.2%		
#2/White	26	6	81.3%	31	0.003
#6/Black	14	20	41.2%		
#5/White	24	9	72.7%	32	0.029

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*p* ≤ .05

Related-samples Wilcoxon signed rank tests run on White participants revealed that they were significantly better at correctly identifying the race of White newscasters (NC2 and NC5) than they were at identifying the race of Hispanic (NC1 and NC3) or Black (NC4 and NC6) newscasters (see Table 4.7 and Table 4.8, respectively). Hypothesis 1 is supported in both cases.

**Table 4.7****White Participants Identifying White and Hispanic Newscasters**

Newscaster/Race	Correct ID	Incorrect ID	% Correct	<i>n</i>	Sig
#2/White	239	28	89.5%		
#1/Hispanic	14	237	5.6%	238	0.000
#2/White	239	28	89.5%		
#3/Hispanic	9	249	3.5%	242	0.000
#5/White	181	71	71.8%		
#1/Hispanic	14	237	5.6%	230	0.000
#5/White	181	71	71.8%		
#3/Hispanic	9	249	3.5%	236	0.000

$p \leq .05$

**Table 4.8****White Participants Identifying White and Black Newscasters**

Newscaster/Race	Correct ID	Incorrect ID	% Correct	<i>n</i>	Sig
#2/White	239	28	89.5%		
#4/Black	79	186	29.8%	245	0.000
#2/White	239	28	89.5%		
#6/Black	131	129	50.4%	246	0.000
#5/White	181	71	71.8%		
#4/Black	79	186	29.8	236	0.000
#5/White	181	71	71.8%		
#3/Black	131	129	50.4%	239	0.000

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*p* ≤ .05

To summarize, H1 was not supported for Hispanic participants. The results were mixed for Black participants, with H1 supported when comparing Black and Hispanic newscasters, but not supported when comparing Black and White newscasters. For White participants, H1 was supported in all comparisons.

The second hypothesis proposed that listeners would rate the credibility of racially-congruent newscasters higher than they rate the credibility of racially-noncongruent newscasters. Using the 216 cases where participants rated all 12 dimensions for each of the six newscasters, a mean credibility score was calculated for each newscaster. See Table 4.9 for results.

**Table 4.9**  
**Newscasters Credibility Scores**

	<i>M</i>	Minimum	Maximum	<i>SD</i>
Newscaster 1/Hispanic	37.07	23.00	48.00	5.29
Newscaster 2/White	38.26	24.00	48.00	5.57
Newscaster 3/Hispanic	38.48	24.00	48.00	5.29
Newscaster 4/Black	36.93	12.00	48.00	6.07
Newscaster 5/White	35.06	12.00	48.00	6.03
Newscaster 6/Black	34.99	23.00	48.00	5.63

$p \leq .05, n = 216$

Combined mean credibility scores were calculated for the two white newscasters, as well as the two black newscasters and the two Hispanic newscasters. And finally, combined mean credibility scores were calculated for all non-White newscasters, all non-Black newscasters, and all non-Hispanic newscasters. See Table 4.10 for details.

**Table 4.10****Combined Mean Credibility Scores by Race/Ethnicity**

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Black newscasters	35.96	5.11
Hispanic newscasters	37.78	4.80
White newscasters	36.66	4.91
Non-Black newscasters	37.22	4.56
Non-Hispanic newscasters	36.11	4.66
Non-White newscasters	36.87	4.57

The cases were selected to include only Hispanic participants and a paired samples t-test was run to compare the combined mean credibility score of Hispanic newscasters versus non-Hispanic newscasters ( $p = .107$ ,  $n = 6$ ). The cases were re-selected to include only White participants and a paired samples t-test was run to compare the combined mean credibility score for White newscasters versus non-White newscasters ( $p = .411$ ,  $n = 184$ ). The cases were then re-selected again to include only Black participants and a paired samples t-test was run to compare the combined mean credibility score of Black newscasters versus non-Black newscasters ( $p = .430$ ,  $n = 24$ ).

Because there were only two newscasters of each race/ethnicity, if one newscaster's credibility score was significantly higher or lower than the other newscasters it could skew the combined mean credibility score for that newscaster's race/ethnicity. Therefore, it was important

to disaggregate the combined scores and re-run the paired samples t-tests comparing the credibility score of each individual newscaster against the combined mean credibility score of the other newscasters who were not the same race/ethnicity. For instance, newscaster 1—who is Hispanic—was compared to newscasters 2, 4, 5, and 6 (White, Black, White, and Black, respectively). For these analyses, participants who did not rate the credibility of each newscaster being compared were excluded; so, in the previous example, if a participant rated newscasters 1, 2, 4, and 5, but failed to rate newscaster 6, that participant's ratings would not be included in the analysis.

Hispanic participants ( $n = 12$ ) deemed newscaster 1 no more credible than they did the non-Hispanic newscasters ( $p = .178$ ), but they rated newscaster 3 as more credible than the non-Hispanic newscasters ( $p = .050$ ). White participants ( $n = 192$ ) deemed newscaster 2 more credible than the non-White newscasters ( $p = .000$ ), but they rated newscaster 5 less credible than the non-White newscasters ( $p = .000$ ). Black participants ( $n = 24$ ) deemed Black newscasters and non-Black equally credible ( $p = .211$  for newscaster 4;  $p = .662$  for newscaster 6).

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

It is eerie how much 2020 mirrors 1968, the year the Kerner Commission released its scathing report. Set against the backdrop of a pandemic, influenza in 1968 and COVID-19 in 2020, racial tension fueled by police brutality sparked protests that, in some cases, turned into riots and cities on fire. By the middle of 2020, the insurance industry already faced a record-breaking \$1 billion-plus price tag for damage to insured properties (Kingson, 2020).

As protests roiled in the weeks after the killing of George Floyd during an arrest in Minneapolis, many newsrooms had their own reckoning. The executive editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer resigned after the paper published a column about a riot with the headline “Buildings Matter, Too” (McCoy, 2020). The editor of the New York Times editorial page stepped down under pressure from journalists after he published an op-ed by a U.S. Senator calling for military troops to restore order to the streets (Tracy, 2020). Vanity Fair’s senior media correspondent called it “a generational watershed at the *Times*” (Pompeo, 2020). Journalists at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette rebelled after the newspaper barred a black reporter from covering local protests (Folkenflik, 2020).

Hundreds of journalists took to Twitter to call out overt racism and implicit bias in their newsrooms (Nieman Lab, 2020). They shared stories of executives kicking of a meeting by rapping while wearing gold chains and saggy pants, being paid significantly less than white coworkers in the same job, and editors dressing up in brownface. Many people of color working in public media expressed frustration that the broadcast system expressly built to elevate the

voices and highlight the needs of the “unserved and underserved” was failing them. In July of 2020, an account named @freepublicradio debuted on Twitter with the description “Just trying to make public radio better.” (freepublicmedia, 2020). It retweets stories from journalists of color about allegedly abusive work environments. Two months later, the Twitter handle @PublicMedia4All was created by people of color working at stations to push for “diversity, equity and inclusion at every level and in every facet of public media.” (Public Media For All #PublicAF, 2020).

It will take time to know whether this groundswell of frustration in journalistic ranks will result in systemic changes. The industry has undergone seismic upheaval in the decades since the Kerner Commission. Newspapers were hard hit by the advent of digital (Pew, 2019a) and network television news — once appointment viewing for most Americans — has also seen declines (Pew, 2019b). Meanwhile, radio listening remains strong (Stine, 2020), especially among Black and Hispanic consumers (Nielsen, 2017), and profitable (Myers, 2020).

Public radio has shown slow and steady growth over the last several years (Pew, 2019c), but it has an audience diversity problem. In 2016, White listeners made up 82.88% of the audience for all CPB-recognized NPR stations (NPR, 2017a). Those numbers have been increasing (NPR, 2017b); still, the network’s CEO says the overwhelming whiteness of the audience “is a concern” given the changing nature of the country’s demographics (Jensen, 2019). Hearken, a consulting company that works with newsrooms looking to better connect with their communities, argues that diversifying audience should be a priority for newsrooms because it

not only contributes to the bottom line, but it also helps restore trust in the media because “marginalized communities feel seen and heard” (Fields & Snyder, 2019).

The results of this study do not suggest that hearing more non-White voices on air will, in and of itself, drive more people of color to listen. That participants were more likely to accurately identify White newscasters than Black or Hispanic newscasters is not surprising. It runs counter to earlier research examining race-of-interviewer effects (Cotter et al., 1982; Reese et al., 1986; Yarney, 1995; Thomas & Reaser, 2004), but the results may be explained by two phenomena.

First, White journalists are over-represented in U.S. newsrooms in general (News Leaders Association, 2019) and especially in radio newsrooms (Papper, 2019). Drilling down further into the data reveals that while people of color make up between 25% and 33% of hosts or anchors on national broadcast and cable television programs, very few— in fact, only one in 2018—host a weekday, primetime show (Arana, 2018). Each year, the industry publication *Talkers Magazine* publishes the “Heavy Hundred” list of America’s most influential radio talk show hosts. In 2019, that list included less than ten people of color (Talkers, 2019). It should not be surprising, then, that listeners might assume a radio newscaster is White because that is what they are conditioned to expect.

Second, the voices in this study are those of professional radio newscasters who have been trained in college and socialized on the job to adopt General American English, the gold standard for broadcasters for nearly a century (Nosowitz, 2016). GenAm’s distinct lack of accent is often, misguidedly, assumed to sound White, although it must be emphatically noted that

many White people have pronounced accents. This socialization of both broadcast journalists and audiences presents a chicken and egg dilemma. If young people of color do not hear themselves reflected on the air, they may self-select out of pursuing careers in broadcasting. This could undermine efforts to foster diversity in journalism and specifically in radio journalism.

The question, then, is how to break that socialization. Broadcasting educators face an interesting choice: prepare students for the market that currently exists or for the smaller, but growing, podcast industry, which many argue has democratized the audio space by breaking down the barriers to entry, even if most early podcasters were white men (Mohan, 2017). The voices heard on podcasts are often more casual, eschewing the traditional “announcer voice” in favor of a more casual, authentic voice. Podcasting has shown “explosive year-over-year growth” (Edison Research, 2019), with estimated advertising revenues exceeding \$500 million in 2018 (Peiser, 2019). Still, only a small number of podcasters split that pie and most of them are not people of color, prompting the Twitter hashtag #podcastsowhite. In June 2020, the founder and CEO of the sports and pop culture website The Ringer responded to complaints about the lack of racial diversity on the company’s dozens of podcasts by saying in an interview “It’s a business. This isn’t Open Mic Night.” (Scheiber, 2020). Critics pointed out that Simmons created a podcast for his teenage daughter (Rigdon, 2020).

While focusing on the diversity of the voices delivering the news is important because representation matters, it can be window dressing—a Benetton billboard on the side of the highway—if it is not backed up with more diversity among the gatekeepers who decide what and how news gets covered. Much progress has been made since the Kerner Commission challenged

the media to stop reporting and writing from “the standpoint of the white man’s world” (Zelizer, 2016, p. 368), yet among news organizations responding to the American Society of News Editor’s diversity survey only 19% of newsroom managers were minorities (American Society of News Editors, 2018). In addition to newsroom managers and editors, reporters are on the front lines of gatekeeping. When NPR started tracking its own on-air and online coverage with an eye to diversity, it found that its sources were overwhelmingly white, male and coastal (Santucci, 2018). Interestingly, 40% of the sources quoted by black reporters were black, compared to just 10% of the sources quoted by white reporters. Similar discrepancies occurred in other racial groups (Santucci, 2018).

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This thesis study had several limitations. The overall sample size was sufficient, but compared to the U.S. population it under-represented people of color, especially Hispanics, but also Blacks (United States Census Bureau, 2018). Future research should include more people of color.

Given that participants in this study were largely unable to identify the race of non-White newscasters, it is not surprising that the results for H1 were mixed and that there was no difference in the credibility ratings participants gave racially congruent versus racially non-congruent newscasters. However, upon disaggregating the combined scores and considering each newscaster individually, Hispanic participants rated one of the Hispanic newscasters more credible than the non-Hispanic newscasters, White participants found one of the White newscasters more credible than the non-White newscasters, and there was no difference in Black

participants' credibility ratings for Black versus non-Black newscasters. This suggests that the results may be less related to the race of the newscasters and more related to other factors including each newscaster's vocal quality, pacing, inflection and other components of on-air performance. The newscasters in this study represent a wide range of years of professional experience, from two years to more than two decades. While there are newscasters with high-quality vocal performances skills working in all sized U.S. cities, the industry often uses market size as proxy for talent. Radio markets are determined by the population of the area where the radio station broadcasts. A radio market is indicated by the largest city in the region. In the U.S. there are 263 radio markets, ranging from #1 (New York City) to #263 (Grand Forks, ND-MN) (Nielsen, 2019). Four of the newscasters in this study work in top-25 markets, one newscaster works in a market that is smaller, but still in the top-100, and the final newscaster works in a market that is in the mid-100s. Interestingly, the newscasters with the lowest mean credibility ratings were from a small market and a large market. Still, future research should control for market-size so that the influence of vocal performance factors are minimized.

There are several other important things to note about the credibility ratings in this study. First, as noted in the results for the first research question and the first hypothesis, participants were not particularly good at correctly identifying the race of the newscasters. An interesting line of secondary analysis of the data from this study would be to test the hypothesis: Listeners will rate the credibility of newscasters *they perceive* to be racially-congruent to themselves higher than they rate the credibility of newscasters *they perceive* to be racially-noncongruent to themselves.

Second, the credibility questions asked in this study were based on the foundational research in source credibility (Hovland, 1951, 1953; Ohanian, 1990, 1991; McCroskey, 1975; Gaziano and McGrath, 1986), which largely examined print and television, and adapted from an instrument used to test the effects of accent on spokesperson credibility in radio advertising (Reinares-Lara et al., 2016), but the current study eliminated several dimensions of the Reinares-Lara instrument, most notably several related to the concept of “attractiveness,” which the current author does not believe applies in an audio-only medium like radio. The scale used in the current study was tested for internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha and returned scores in excess of .90, which is considered “excellent.” Cronbach’s alpha (e.g. coefficient alpha) is the most popular measure of reliability reported in psychological research; Dunn et al. (2013) found it was cited more than 17,000 times since its original publication, but they note that even Cronbach himself stated, “the numerous citations to my paper by no means indicate that the person who cites it had read it” (Cronbach & Shavelson, 2004, p. 932). While numerous researchers have criticized the alpha (see Green et al., 1977; Green & Yang, 2009; Raykov, 1998; Zimmerman et al., 1993, Zinbarg et al., 2005; Sijtsma, 2009; and others), the author of this study is not experienced enough to be able to assess the veracity of their claims. Still, those potential limitations are noted.

Other potential lines of research include analyzing other demographic data collected in this study (e.g. level of education, number of states where a person has lived, etc) to assess any relationships between these characteristics and the ability to identify race or ethnicity of a speaker and repeating the experiment but with three conditions — one where the newscasters

identify themselves with a generic sounding, one where the newscasters identify themselves with an ethnic sounding name, and one where they do not identify themselves by name.

## **Conclusions**

There is a profound racial shift underway in the United States right now, with White Americans expected to be the minority by 2045 (Frey, 2018b). To be functional, a democracy's media must reflect its people (Harris, 2017), but in the United States that is not the case (American Society of News Editors, 2018; Arana, 2018; Jensen, 2019; News Leaders Association, 2019; Papper, 2019). More than 80 organizations are focused on diversity, equity and inclusion in journalism (Democracy Fund, n.d.), often working under the assumption that for news organization to diversify their staffs and their audiences they need more journalists of color in audience-facing positions. In the radio industry this means hosts, anchors, newscasters and on-air reporters.

This study sought to examine the understudied question of whether listeners can, in fact, recognize race or ethnicity from voice alone and found that in many instances the answer is they cannot. Participants in the study were significantly more likely to correctly identify White newscasters than they were Black or Hispanic newscasters. Additionally, when the racial congruency between participant and newscaster is considered the results were mixed. White participants were better at identifying White newscasters than identifying non-White newscasters and Black participants were better at identifying Black newscasters than they were at identifying Hispanic newscasters. All other combinations (e.g. Black participant/White newscaster;

Hispanic participants and all non-Hispanic newscasters) were not significantly better. The author offers several potential explanations for this result.

Additionally, the study examined whether race congruency between participant and newscaster affected the perceived credibility of the newscaster, but because of the inability of the participants, as a group, to currently identify non-White newscasters the author cannot assert that there was a relationship. Secondary analysis should include examining the relationship between participants and the credibility ratings of the newscasters that they *perceive* to be racially congruent to themselves.

The author's hope is that the takeaway of this thesis is not that it doesn't matter who is hired because everyone sounds White on the radio. A significant body of research has already illustrated the value of diversity — more diverse gatekeepers means surfacing untold stories. And that is especially important in this current day.

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APPENDIX A  
SURVEY QUESTIONS

**A: Demographics of participant**

1. How old are you? (open response)

2. Are you Hispanic or Latino?

- Yes
- No

3. Select one of the following races:

- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- White
- Two or more races
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

4. What was your sex at birth?

- Male
- Female
- Intersex/Other

5. What gender do you identify yourself now?

- Male

- Female
- Other

6. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If currently enrolled, highest degree received.

- Some high school completed, no diploma
- High school graduate, diploma or equivalent (for example: GED)
- Some college credit, no degree
- Trade/technical/vocational training
- Associate degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Professional degree (MD, JD, etc)
- Doctorate degree

7. Based on this map, where do you currently live?



- United States – Northeast
- United States – Southeast
- United States – Midwest
- United States – Southwest
- United States – West
- A United States territory (i.e. American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands)
- Outside the United States

8. How many different states have you lived in over your life? (open response)

**B. Audio usage**

1. In an average week, how many hours do you listen to over-the-air radio, satellite radio, or podcasts?

- None
- Less than 1 hour
- 1-5 hours
- 6-10 hours
- 11-19 hours
- More than 20 hours

2. Of your weekly over-the-air radio, satellite radio, or podcast listening, how many hours are you listening to news or talk show programming?

- None

- Less than 1 hour
- 1-5 hours
- 6-10 hours
- 11-19 hours
- More than 20 hours

3. What national news or talk programs do you listen to regularly? (open response)

**C. Messenger credibility (asked after exposure to each audio sample; scale used is 4-point**

**Likert: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree)**

1. After listening to this newscaster, how do you rate the following? The newscaster is ...

- Informed
- qualified
- competent
- intelligent
- credible
- trustworthy
- reliable
- sincere
- charming
- pleasant
- sociable
- warm

#### **D. Messenger demographics**

1. How old do you think the newscaster is?

- 18 – 25
- 26 – 35
- 36 – 45
- 46 – 55
- 56 – 65
- Older than 65

2. How confident are you about your choice of age for the newscaster?

- no confidence
- slight confidence
- moderate confidence
- high confidence

3. What do you think is the newscaster's race/ethnicity?

- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- White

4. How confident are you about your choice of race/ethnicity for the newscaster?

- no confidence
- slight confidence
- moderate confidence
- high confidence

5. What do you think is the highest level of education this newscaster has attained?

- High school diploma
- Bachelor's degree
- Master's degree
- Doctoral degree

6. How many years of experience do you think this newscaster has?

- Less than 1 year
- 1–5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-20 years
- 20+ years

APPENDIX B  
NEWSCAST SCRIPT

Good morning... It's 7:04. Our big story today...

Another wave of strong storms has moved through several states in the Deep South. At least three people are reported dead -- two men in Mississippi and a woman in Alabama. The storm has knocked out power to tens of thousands in Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. The National Weather Service is looking into reports of several tornadoes in Mississippi as the storm system moves east today.

Locally, we're expecting highs in the upper 80's with a 40% chance of rain showers this afternoon. You'll want to pack an umbrella, just in case. Overnight lows in the lower 70's.

Tomorrow -- the rain clears out. We'll have sunny skies with highs around 90. It's going to be a nice weekend.

## APPENDIX C

### IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENTS

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**ALABAMA** | Office of the Vice President for  
Research & Economic Development  
Office for Research Compliance

October 17, 2019

Tanya Ott-Fulmore  
Department of Journalism and Creative Media  
College of CCIS  
The University of Alabama  
Box 870172

Re: IRB # EX-19-CM-260 "Perceptions of Radio Newscasters"

Dear Ms. Ott-Fulmore:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your protocol has been given exempt approval according to 45 CFR part 46.104(d)(3) as outlined below:

*(3)(i) Research involving benign behavioral interventions in conjunction with the collection of information from an adult subject through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection and at least one of the following criteria is met: (A) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the Human Subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or indirectly, through identifiers linked to the subjects.*

The approval for your application will lapse on October 16, 2020. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit the annual report to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Carpentano T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP  
Director & Research Compliance Officer

358 Rose Administration Building | Box 870127 | Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127  
205-348-8461 | Fax 205-348-7189 | Toll Free 1-877-820-3066

## Informed Consent

Please read this informed consent carefully before you decide to participate in the study.

### Consent Form Key Information:

- Participate in a 15-minute online survey about radio newscasters
- No information collected that will connect identity with responses
- No anticipated risks associated with taking the survey

**Purpose of the research study:** In this survey, participants will listen to audio samples of radio newscasts and will be asked to identify the age, race and educational achievement of the radio newscasters and then answer questions about how credible they perceive the newscasters to be.

**What you will do in the study:** You will be asked to provide some basic demographic data (e.g. age, race/ethnicity, sex/gender, educational achievement, and region where you live). You will also be asked three questions about your radio or podcast listening habits. After completing these questions, you will hear three different radio newscasters reading a script and you will be asked several questions about the newscasters you hear. You can skip any question that makes you uncomfortable and you can stop the survey at any time. The survey will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

**Time required:** The survey will require about 15 minutes of your time.

**Risks:** There are no anticipated risks in this study.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research study. The study may help us understand how listeners react to different types of voices.

**Confidentiality:** The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your name and other information that could be used to identify you will not be collected or linked to the data. IP addresses and email addresses will be removed from the data and all survey responses will be stored in a secure password protected location.

**Voluntary participation:** Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can skip any question that makes you uncomfortable.

**Right to withdraw from the study:** You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

**How to withdraw from the study:** If you want to withdraw from the study, simply closer the browser window before completing the survey. There is not penalty for withdrawing.

**Compensation/Reimbursement:** You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

**Using data beyond this study:** The researcher would like to make the information collected in this study available to other researchers after the study is completed. Your information will be stored, used and

Project Title: Perceptions of Radio Newscasters

shared for future research studies, including but not limited to studies examining how gender, geography, educational achievement, and audio listening habits affect the way participants assess the voices of radio newscasters. Researchers of future studies will not ask your permission for each new study. However, the information you provide will be combined with the information provided by others to create a large data set. Because your name and other identifying information will not be collected in this current study, your identity will be anonymous to future researchers.

**If you have questions about the study or need to report a study related issue please contact, contact:**

Name of Principal Investigator: Tanya Ott-Fulmore  
Title: MA Journalism Student at the University of Alabama  
Department Name: Journalism & Creative Media  
Telephone: 205-223-4304  
Email address: tlottfulmore@crimson.ua.edu

Faculty Advisor's Name: Dr. Scott Parrott  
Department Name: Journalism and Creative Media  
Telephone: 205-348-8612  
Email address: msparrott@ua.edu

**If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, would like to make suggestions or file complaints and concerns about the research study, please contact:**

Ms. Tanta Myles, the University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer at (205)-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at <http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/>. You may email the Office for Research Compliance at [rscompliance@research.ua.edu](mailto:rscompliance@research.ua.edu).

**Agreement:** By clicking "I agree" below, you are consenting to participate in this study.

I agree

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB  
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 10/17/19  
EXPIRATION DATE: 10/10/20