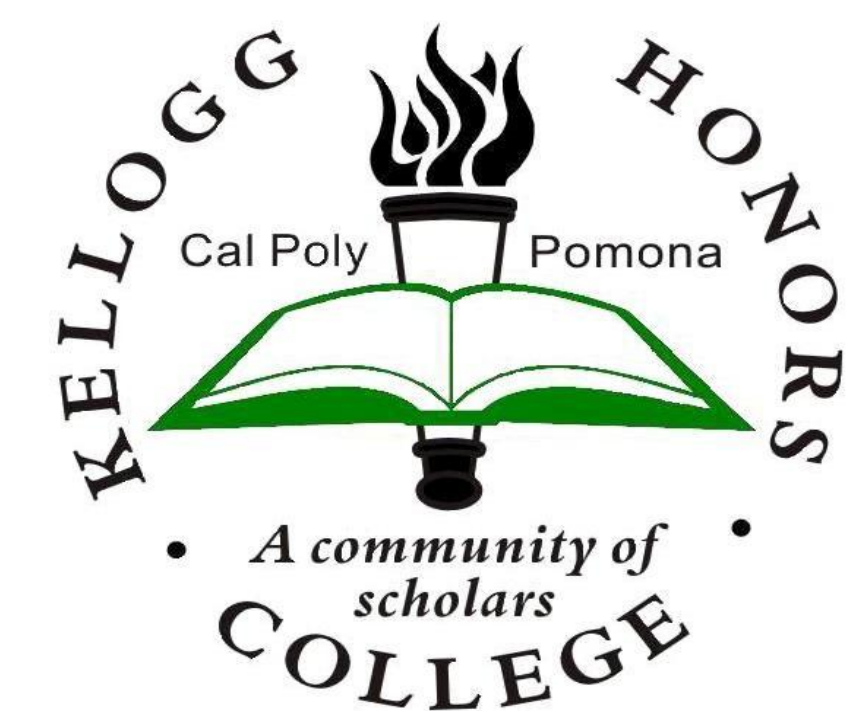# Perceptions of Ferguson Protests from Network News & Their Impact on Public Opinion:
A Content Analysis

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Abstract

I conducted a content analysis of 22 NBC Nightly News reports in order to examine the influence media reports have on shaping public opinion about public protests in the Michael Brown case. Brown was an 18-year-old black youth shot and killed by a white Ferguson Missouri police officer Darren Wilson. My findings demonstrate that video reports' framing promote and are based upon particular paradigms about the protests and the police. I focused on the Michael Brown case because it brought to light drastically differing opinions about policing and about race, to name two of the most prominent items. I conducted this study to help viewers be more conscious of the nature of the news they are consuming.

What is a Content Analysis?

A content analysis involves doing a survey of data on a topic, counting the surface and hidden content. It offers a way to analyze communications that allow one to go beneath the surface appearance in order to reveal underlying patterns. What I counted are theme units. Theme units are reoccurring claims within the data being scrutinized .

Why a Content Analysis?

A content analysis illuminates what the media reports on and penetrates beneath to demonstrate what may be hidden to the conscious eye. It deconstructs the different dimensions of the media reports allowing for a more rigorous study. A content analysis is a logical way to expose what is going on at a largely unconscious level.

Method

I took a total of 20 video reports from NBC Nightly news on the protests of Michael Brown's killing as a sample of media attention. I categorized particular phrases under theme units. The theme units are what allowed me to code the videos in a systematic matter to provide a clear quantitative analysis. I then examined two reports in depth. The two reports are in greater detail to give more of a thorough sense of the nature of my results to how media influences public opinion. Because of the limitations of time, I'm restricted on doing research to this extent so I continued doing a more brief analysis of the remaining 20 videos.

Theme Units

These are the theme units I used:
- **Racial injustice**
Definition: words and phrases such as justice, justice for all, "black lives matter, all lives matter," racial profiling, and needs for change, blacks are living in fear of the police.
- **Racial disparities**
Definition: data or statistics comparing how many blacks are represented in the police force, statistics and data on blacks being pulled over or searched by police.
- **Police as occupiers**
Definition: militarization of police, police brutality
- **Police as upholders of the law**
Definition: doing their job as police, trained to deal with disturbances, police minimizing chances of violence, laws that give more latitude to police action.
- **Police as victims of aggression**
Definitions: depictions and descriptions of police being attacked first, police acting in self-defense, Brown threw the first punch.
- **Law abiding protestors**
Definition: peaceful protests, no reason for force by the police, peaceful marches, constitutionally protected assembly and speech
- **Protests create danger**
Definition: violence in the community, struggles in the community, local business/businesses shutting down, mayhem on the streets, schools shut down, declaration of state of emergency, broken city, rising arrests, violence erupting, violence, war zone, clashing
- **Protestors are unruly, violent people**
Definition: tensions, arrests, there need to be a restoration of order, people in the community or non-protestors worrying, angry standoffs, taking to the streets, attack, preparing to attack police, hoping for meltdowns/violence.
- **Blacks as criminally prone**
Definition: Brown looked like a demon, holding onto "Hulk Hogan," blacks need to rise above their circumstances.
- **Youth as criminally prone**
Definition: asking students [no matter what their race] to avoid trouble.
- **Going through official channels is the way to handle things**
Definition: leaks before the grand jury's official ruling are reinforcing people's belief that system doesn't work, the grand jury agreed with Officer Wilson, proving Wilson guilty would be difficult.
- **Coalition building by police**
Definition: meetings with community leaders and police, bettering community relations between police and protesters, promising police would be less confrontational, meetings to bring community and police together.
- **Need or want for an end to protests**
Definition: protestors have made a point so there is no reason for protests to continue. Protestors insisting that non-violent protests are the only way.
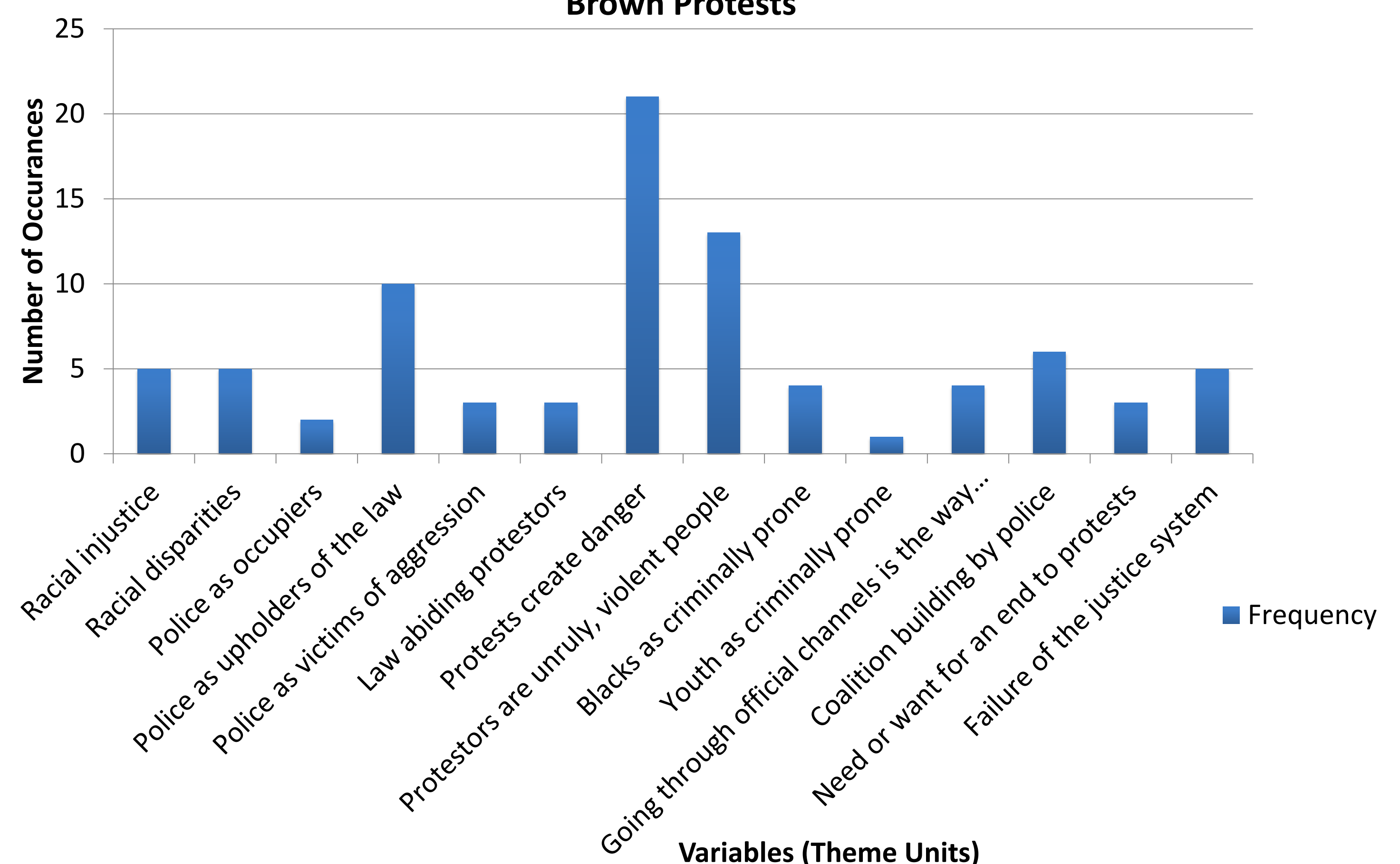- **Failure of the justice system**
Definition: the justice system is a broken process, unusual procedures (e.g., Darren Wilson testifying in front of grand jury), witnesses not being crossed examined by grand jury.

Findings

Variable	Frequency
Racial injustice	5
Racial disparities	5
Police as occupiers	2
Police as upholders of the law	10
Police as victims of aggression	3
Law abiding protestors	3
Protests create danger	21
Protestors are unruly, violent people	13
Blacks as criminally prone	4
Youth as criminally prone	1
Going through official channels is the way to handle things	4
Coalition building by police	6
Need or want for an end to protests	3
Failure of the justice system	5

Table 1: Themes Appearing on NBC Nightly News Reports on Michael Brown Protests

Conclusion

My findings has revealed what lies underneath the NBC Nightly News reports on the Mike Brown protests. The most reoccurring theme units were the perception that Protests create danger to the communities, Protestors are unruly, violent people, and Police as upholders of the law. These being the most reoccurring and prominent theme units in the media reports that I examined demonstrate the major focuses of the reports and the possible messages that they want the audience to obtain. The audience needs to be conscious of the types of perceptions that the media maybe reporting, such as having a more swayed view that the protestors are unruly and violent people. But in reality, the viewer should question if there are larger aspects to the reasoning behind their protests besides being perceived as a potential harm to communities. Although the media reports hone in on the idea that the protests are violent and create danger, I conclude that viewers need to be more aware and conscious of the broader aspects at play with the Michael Brown case, such as racial injustices, than be preoccupied with the focus of the perceived violent protests. Viewers should be conscious of the framing of the media reports in that what they are highlighting, such as the violence and unruliness amongst the protests, may not be the broader and deeper meanings of the protest, like injustices and police brutality.