Martin Luther King And Mass Media Essay, Research Paper

Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Mass Media

Martin Luther King Jr. was a very significant and influential man. Though his life was cut short at 39 years old, he left a big mark on today’s society. From the Prayer Pilgrimage of May 17, 1957, an event and a date that marked King’s entr?e into the field of national Negro leadership to the unforgettable March on Washington. (Bennett 10) King was determined to reach his goal, which was to have blacks and whiter united and treated equally.

King was faced with many obstacles, including the press. At first, there was hardly any print about King’s events and protests. When the events did get recognition King’s name wasn’t mentioned at all. Not until many years later when the protests sparked violence and death was King’s name mentioned and even then, it was used in negative way.

In this paper, I will discuss how the news magazines Time, Newsweek, and the U.S. News went about distorting, neglecting, and eventually praising King and his events.

In order to help understand the Civil Rights Movement and it controversy you have to start at the beginning.

On the way home from work as a seamstress Mrs. Rosa Parks boarded a Montgomery City Line bus. When asked to give up her seat for a white passenger Rosa Parks refused. The bus driver left his seat and summoned the police. The police officer arrested Rosa Parks for violating the cities segregation ordinances. ( Bennett 59) Rosa Parks arrest sparked a one-day boycott that stretched out to 382 days. That event started the Civil Rights movement and changed the spirit of Martin Luther Kings, Jr.

Time magazine was the first of the newsmagazines to pick up the story of the bus boycott. (Lentz 26) Newsweek didn’t print the story until five months after it happened. In addition, not until then did King’s name was mentioned by it or Time.

Neither King nor the cause grabbed the attention of U.S. News & World Report. What they did report was how disturbed the southerners were over the population shift in Montgomery that seemed to be leading to black control. (Lentz 28 ) With the bus boycott in full swing merchants were loosing millions of dollars and white housewives were having to drive their black maids around, whose services they didn’t want to loose. With people, complaining the Montgomery government stepped in. While the court was scheduled to hear the city governments petition to stop the bus boycott, the Supreme Court stepped in.

A message came down form the Supreme Court striking down the motion that the bus segregation ordinance as unconstitutional. When this was heard a joyful bystander stated “God Almighty has spoken from Washington D.C.” (Lentz 31)

After King’s victory, there was almost nothing in Newsweek and Time. Not until 382 days after the bus boycott began, did Time and Newsweek report on the event. Both magazines predicted that the black victory would be accepted by whites. (Lentz 31) This later proved untrue. Snipers fired shots at buses and the homes of black ministers were bombed, as were black churches.

Kings first arrest after trying to enter a crowed courtroom where another Negro integration leader was testifying put his face in Newsweek. A photograph showing policeman handling King roughly, appeared in Newsweek. The caption noted “Alabama arrests a Negro minister on a loitering charge.” (Lucaitis 27) Not even mentioning Kings name.

In the late summer of 1962, King decided to launch a series of demonstrations in Birmingham. The demonstrations lead to wide spread violence. White police officers with K-9 dogs invaded the march and arrests were made. King was one of the demonstrators arrested.

Time, Newsweek, and U.S. News & World Report would find themselves forced to write about the events in Birmingham. U.S. News would be forced into the all-together awkward position of having to account for the brutal and open violence black demonstrators, especially children, that the entire world had seen.(Lentz 78)

Time and Newsweek would recall the Birmingham campaign as a crusade for freedom. (Lentz 78) When reporting about Birmingham, Newsweek entertained doubts. The journal chose terms, siege, army, generals, and recruiting troops, -that spoke of invasion and military. (Lentz 80) Newsweek also criticized Kings timing of the demonstrations. Kings problems were not limited to criticism from Newsweek and Time. Unexpectedly his movement was running out of steam. King and colleges set out on a march in order to force police to arrest them. They were taken into custody and jailed. The headlines of Newsweek and Time were unchanged as King campaign continued.

The best example of how the papers chose to ignore King was after one of his many arrests. Following the arrests of King, President Kennedy called Kings wife to express his concern and to tell her that she would be hearing from her husband. Recognizing a good stroke of publicity, King instructed his wife to get word of the telephone call to the SCLC for an announcement to reporters. No mention of the call appeared in Newsweek and Time, which was odd, considering Kennedy was the nations most visible news maker.(Lentz 84)

The turning point came when King recruited Birmingham’s school children, most of them teenagers. He had sent them on marches downtown. Before nightfall, thousands were jailed. During the marches police officers chose to use billy clubs, police dogs, and fire hoses. More than 250 journalists, from America and many of the nations of Europe and Asia, covered the story.(Lentz 84) Time, for example, described the scene as, police against children, dogs against humans, whites against blacks.(Lentz 87)

The U.S. News described King as a sinister and a ruthless leader “Helping to mastermind the Birmingham protest and promising to add demonstrations in a city that already had enough violence.” Fireman doused the children with high-pressure hoses. Many were sent sprawling across the pavement. There were screams as the water streams hit the people. The crowd surged forward again, and was hit by another blast of water. Police brought dogs, let them lose on long leashes. Officers on motorcycles chased Negro’s back into the churches and used nightsticks on stragglers.(U.S. News & World Report 8)

The reports made by Time were masterfully understated. The “high-pressure” hoses lacked the power, to strip bark from a tree, and there use was justified by the notation and the crowd “surged forward” twice. Only one policeman used a nightstick

and that was merely to just prod stragglers. Dogs were employed but carefully, on long leashes, and dogs and demonstrators did not even meet.(Lentz 86-87)

The March on Washington was the one event that united millions of blacks without violence and caught the eye of the world. It was also the place where Kings now famous speech “I have a dream?” originated. That speech caught the mood of the event.

Time and Newsweek reported the March as a rite of national idealism. Kings popularity rose with Time because his oratory was “catching, dramatic, inspirational;” He became the “Civil Rights Leader who holds the heat of most American Negro’s in his hand.”(Lentz 104)

Four months after the march Time magazine was the first to print the entirety of Kings “I have a dream?”speech. U.S. News described King as a false prophet and a dangerous radical who preached the necessity of social disruption, and increasing militancy throughout the nation.(Lentz 118)

Time selected King as “Man of the Year”. Time said King was selected “As a man- but also as the representative of his people for whom 1963 was perhaps the most important year in their history.(Bennett 118) King was also honored by receiving the Noble Peace Prize on December 10, 1964. He was the twelfth American and third Negro to win this prize.

In conclusion, the victories and failures of Martin Luther King, Jr. were many. In the beginning, Time magazine had refused to write about King and his demonstrations. Reluctantly writing about his arrests and the Birmingham riots. Newsweek wrote negatively about King and the Birmingham riots. Stating that it was almost military like, and that King had asked for violence by letting teenagers protest. After the Washington March, Time and Newsweek reported the event in a positive mind frame. In the end, Time made King its “Man of the Year”. The U.S. News had called King “Ruthless and Sinister” and all throughout Kings career, U.S. News hardly printed anything positive.

As you can see King gained popularity, Time and Newsweek gradually showed interest in his message. Their articles helped King gain support from political figures, and citizens with their controversial headlines. Martin Luther King, Jr. was and still is a very important figure in our society today. There is no doubt that America’s mass media helped place King there.