Not Enough: Public Response to King’s Assassination

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On April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed as he stood on the balcony of his motel. Within a matter of minutes, the American mass media began spreading the news across the nation. Americans were shocked, angered and fearful of what might happen next and they looked to the media to supply them with updated information. Media had, and still has, the power to shape public opinion. By choosing what information to broadcast and emphasize and by making judgements on that information, media influenced public response to King’s assassination.\(^1\) Stanislav Kondrashov noted that TV “schooled Americans on the fact of King’s death” for five days.\(^2\) King’s life was also a main feature of television programming, informing Americans on who King was, what he stood for, and why the Civil Rights Movement was important.\(^3\) By the time of King’s funeral, five days later, the black American population had rioted, destroyed, looted and burned many black neighbourhoods to the ground. Whites, on the other hand, had either experienced an epiphany of understanding in relation to the Civil Rights Movement or become more fearful of black violence. Despite the anger and determination which King’s assassination instilled in blacks and despite the fear and agency with which it filled whites, King’s death was not enough to inspire any exceptional long-term change in American society. To explore this argument, this paper will first look at the power of the media as a shaper of public opinion. Next it will review the context of King’s assassination and the events of April 4, 1968 including the media’s response. Thirdly, this study will look at the black reaction to King’s death, followed by that of the white population. Lastly, it will examine the media’s creation of King as a hero while leaving the African American community no better off than before April 4, 1968.


Media both reflected and led the nation-wide response to King’s murder. Daniel Myers and Beth Caniglia claim that The New York Times is (and was) particularly influential in shaping public thought. Thus, it is interesting to note the manner in which the Times represented the events following Martin Luther King’s assassination. On April 5, the front page story was of King’s assassination. Further articles revolved around President Johnson’s response – urging the nation to remain calm despite the shock of this news, and the response of the black populations in some cities (particularly Washington D.C.). For the next couple of days, coverage focused on racial problems in the United States, criticizing blacks for rioting and, more covertly, criticizing whites for not actively changing America’s racist society. The Times also began to talk about King’s life, championing his work in the civil rights movement. King’s funeral was held Tuesday, April 9, 1968, and the following day the Times discussed it at length. Over the next couple of days there were articles on the newly legislated Civil Rights bill which was passed by Congress on April 11 and on the hunt for King’s murderer. By April 14, attention returned to the war in Vietnam leaving King and the Civil Rights Movement nearly forgotten. Public reaction followed a similar pattern. Shock and grief were quickly replaced by black anger and white fear. Next came several days of violence and chaos, followed by a return to calm and picking up the pieces. The end result, however, did not look much different from the beginning picture. Because The New York Times both reflected and influenced the American response to King’s death through the progression of shock, coverage, resolution and disregard, the Times is an important means of understanding the events following King’s assassination.

Scholars in the 1950s and 60s were developing ideas about how media informed public perceptions. In 1957, Melvin M. Tumin argued that mass media (newspapers, magazines, radio and television) kept the many parts of America in contact with the mass culture, thereby bringing

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4 Myers and Caniglia, “All the Rioting That’s Fit to Print,” 519-20.
a sort of unity to diverse groups of people. In 1966, Walter M. Gerson asserted that media was a form of socialization for minority people groups. More recently, John Downing and Charles Husband, showed through the case of the civil wars in Yugoslavia that the media’s choice of what to show or print affected the way the public responded. While recognizing the public impact of mass media, it is also important to note the white bias of most media during this time. Because there were very few black people involved in the media industry in the 50s and 60s, most news came from the white perspective. As a powerful but racial tool, media contained prejudices both visible and invisible which affected the way Americans responded to Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination in 1968.

Martin Luther King Jr. was a strong leader in the American Civil Rights Movement. His prominent leadership began when he led the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. After the Bus Boycott, King continued to be active in the black struggle for civil rights. He formed the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957 which focused on educating blacks and ensuring that they were able to vote and he led marches in protest of both local and national racial discrimination. King and the SCLC movement sought to bring social change through non-violent means. However, the non-violent marches he led often brought on violence from white opposition. During some non-violent marches, police beat protestors and fired tear gas or

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turned fire hoses into the crowd. Vicious police dogs also attacked protesters. Many people were injured and some were killed. On the positive side, the white violence against non-violent blacks found wide publicity in the mass media. Television was especially influential in opening many white Americans’ eyes to the terrible, active racism of some of their fellow white countrymen. It gave them visual images to go along with written and aural news which had been available for a long time. In 1963, King led the March on Washington where he delivered his best-known speech, “I Have a Dream.” This speech became a symbol of the civil rights struggle and Dr. King became a well-known leader through the 1950s and 60s, partly due to the media’s coverage of the non-violent marches he led.

Unfortunately, King never saw the fulfilment of his dream. He had planned another march on Washington which was to occur at the end of April, 1968. This time the poor people of America would congregate in Washington D.C. and set up a camp, refusing to leave until the government promised them economic aid. Sadly, King was not present at this protest because he was murdered two and a half weeks before it was scheduled to occur. King was in Memphis, Tennessee, during the first week of April, 1968, leading a protest march against unfair wages and labour discrimination against black city sanitation workers. At the end of March he had led a protest over the same issue which had erupted into destructive black violence, much to King’s horror. However, he determined to march again on Monday, April 8 despite the federal court order which prohibited him from doing so. On the evening of April 4, King was preparing to

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11 Miller, 141.
12 Norrell, 177.
13 Norrell, 192-196.
14 Miller, 164-166.
16 Kondrashov, 230; Miller, 268.
go to dinner at the home of a long-time friend. When he stepped out of his room onto the second-floor balcony at the Lorraine Motel to talk with his associates who were waiting for him below, he was shot in the neck by a sniper.\(^\text{18}\) One hour later, King was pronounced dead.

Mass media immediately reported the situation to the American public. Scholar Dana Lanier Schaffer asserts that King was shot at 7:05, April 4, 1968, and at 7:15 the word was spreading via radio broadcasts.\(^\text{19}\) Television was particularly efficient at spreading the news quickly.\(^\text{20}\) Because the murder took place at the same time as the evening news, some broadcasting stations included what little information they knew about the situation as soon as they received word.\(^\text{21}\) Stanislav Kondrashov, a Russian correspondent for the Soviet newspaper, *Izvestia*, stationed in New York City in 1968, wrote a book about Dr. King’s life which was published in 1981, for his fellow Russians.\(^\text{22}\) In it, he related his experience of learning about King’s assassination while watching the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite. Kondrashov wrote:

As always, Cronkite’s face with its familiar wide, bushy brows, crow’s-feet and grey moustaches appeared on the screen at precisely seven o’clock. The channel’s coverage of events that day in America and the world began. We listened to Cronkite and the CBS correspondents he summoned and dismissed from view like a magician. Clearly, nothing had happened that would change our plans for the evening. . . . Suddenly, in the last moments of the half-hour broadcast, Cronkite broke into a short, light-hearted piece of film and almost shouted, gabbling his words – the programme was almost over – that Martin Luther King had been shot and fatally wounded in Memphis, Tennessee, and taken to St. Joseph’s Hospital.\(^\text{23}\)

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\(^\text{18}\) Kondrashov, 236; Miller, 276-277; Lokos, 47-49. James Earl Ray was convicted and sentenced for the death of Martin Luther King Jr., though later the King family questioned this decision and tried to have the case reopened.


\(^\text{20}\) Bal, “The Martin Luther King, Jr., Assassination.”

\(^\text{21}\) Bal, “The Martin Luther King, Jr., Assassination.”

\(^\text{22}\) Kondrashov, 7.

\(^\text{23}\) Kondrashov, 10-11.
Kondrashov recounted that he jumped up, shouting the news to his friend, and together they rushed off to their office to telegraph the news to headquarters in Russia.\(^{24}\) The mass media was very efficient in their response to King’s murder, sending the news around the nation in a matter of minutes.

When newsrooms received word of King’s death they almost immediately added this information to their news broadcasts and began discussing his life and contributions to the Civil Rights Movement. The CBS News, for example, not only relayed information about the assassination, but also included footage from King’s speech in Memphis the night before in which he discussed his likely death yet affirmed for all blacks that they would reach the “promised land”:

> We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. I won't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.\(^{25}\)

CBS News also included President Johnson’s speech in which he decried the “blind violence which has struck Dr. King, who lived by non-violence.”\(^{26}\) The next day, The New York Times carried transcripts of these speeches and others as well as commentaries on the events by many various reporters.\(^{27}\) The first day after King’s murder, the media tried to influence the country to avoid violence by focusing on numerous leaders’ entreaties for calm. Not only did the mass

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\(^{24}\) Kondrashov, 12.


media convey the news of King’s assassination quickly, they also informed the public on background information and the official response to the murder as it became available.

Initially, black people responded to the news that King was murdered with great sadness. “That was a terrible day,” said Bonnie Perry, an African American who was thirteen in 1968.

I remember people being at home, adults and children. I remember crying. I remember everyone being upset in the house. And nobody could go out of the house. I sneaked out anyway. . . . I sneaked out and I saw people upset everywhere. Crying and holding one another and fussing and cussing and walking up and down the street. It was like confusion everywhere.28

Black leaders recognized the grief in their communities and urged people to stay calm and avoid responding to the murder in anger. Gilbert Lindsay, a black city councillor in Los Angeles, expressed his desire that Americans would “keep a cool head and a calm spirit and let the law take its course.”29 Leaders expressed hope that the people would follow King’s example in life and not the mode of his death. The former national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), James Farmer, urged the country to end racism because this would be a “fitting memorial” to the slain King. “Dr. King hated bloodshed,” he said. “His own blood must not now trigger more bloodshed.”30 However, sadness over King’s death quickly turned into anger at the injustices blacks encountered, and though many black and white leaders urged people to remain calm, in many cities, “calm” was not the result.

The black population in many American cities broke out in rioting and violence after King was murdered. Gregg Lee Carter claims that in the first few days after King’s assassination, over 130 cities exploded in riots.31 According to The New York Times, Memphis

30 Van Gelder, “Dismay in Nation.”
erupted into violence including “sporadic shooting, fires, bricks and bottles thrown at policemen, and looting that started in Negro districts and then spread over the city.”\textsuperscript{32} Washington D.C. was hit hard by violence so destructive and out of control that the President, Lyndon B. Johnson, called in the National Guard, the 82\textsuperscript{nd} Airborne, and the 503\textsuperscript{rd} Military Police Battalion. In doing this he enacted “Operation Cabin Guard” which the city government had planned and organized to maintain order during the Poor People’s March which was to have taken place at the end of April.\textsuperscript{33} Stokely Carmichael, the leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was partly to blame for the destruction in Washington because he instigated and encouraged violence throughout the downtown area.\textsuperscript{34} Harlem and Brooklyn also experienced violence, looting and fires as news of King’s death spread.\textsuperscript{35} The \textit{Times} reported further violence in cities such as Newark, Hartford, Greenburgh, Nashville, Raleigh, Tampa, Little Rock, Jackson, Tallahassee, and Cleveland among others.\textsuperscript{36} In many cities, black sorrow over King’s death quickly turned into anger which led to riots and destruction.

There were many reasons for the riots. They were partly in protest of King’s death and partly in anger against built-up frustration with continued discrimination against blacks. Schaffer claims that according to black residents of Washington D.C., blacks did not riot merely out of grief for King, but also out of anger toward decades of American injustice.\textsuperscript{37} One man, who did not participate in the Washington riots but stayed indoors with his parents and family, described the situation: “It’s like the steam sort of builds up and builds up and builds up. . . .

[And then] you find people in a situation where they feel they have no recourse, I mean, look

\textsuperscript{33} Schaffer, 15. At 13,600 men, this was the largest number of troops called in for any American riot.
\textsuperscript{36} \textit{The New York Times}, April 5, 1968, sec. 1.
\textsuperscript{37} Schaffer, 6.
out. Really. Look out.”

Obviously blacks’ violent reaction to King’s death was a result of more than their grief; King’s death was merely the last straw on a pile of unredressed grievances which demanded attention. Another man expressed his anger at the American system saying, “The next black man who comes into the black community preaching nonviolence should be violently dealt with by the black people who hear him. The Martin Luther King concept of nonviolence died with him[.] It was a foreign ideology anyway – as foreign to this violent country as speaking Russian.”

The comparison between non-violence and speaking Russian was a strong judgment and held a tumult of emotion for Americans as they were deeply entrenched in the Cold War against Russian communism. According to these two black Washingtonians, African Americans were lashing out against white oppression and the cold cruelty of the system which discriminated against them and had consistently fought against King’s work.

As rocks angrily crashed through shop windows, blacks saw a chance to hurt whites who had discriminated against them and seize goods which they felt whites had been keeping from them. So looting began. In Washington D.C., looting was often selective to white-owned businesses, especially those that had discriminated against blacks. Thomas A. Johnson of The New York Times emphasized that blacks in Harlem felt a “[d]esire, need and an eagerness to ‘get back at whitey.’” Thus, for some African Americans, looting and destruction were a way to get even with shop owners whose goods were beyond their economic reach or who had discriminated against them in some way. Yet, one store owner reported that blacks took only the

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39 Van Gelder, “Dismay in Nation.”
40 Schaffer, 18.
most expensive garments from his store, and only in their sizes. In this man’s neighbourhood, at least, African Americans’ purpose in looting seemed to be more about getting merchandise, than about harming whites. Some sources viewed the looting scenes as almost a holiday atmosphere. Black youths would gather goods from a store and then gleefully show their friends and other passersby what they had gotten. One reporter even wrote:

> It was hard to view what happened here as a direct and bitter reaction to Dr. King’s murder. Mob violence was limited, and the looting seemed too light-hearted and casual to be entirely in response to Dr. King’s death. Rather, it seemed that the angry or vengeful actions of a few might have stimulated excitement in others and set them free of normal restraints. Most of the looters, far from appearing angry or mournful at the news from Memphis, appeared to be having a good time.

This report is an instance of white bias as the reporter saw only as far as the outward excitement of vengeance and new things; He completely missed the fact that the visible excitement was only a cover for the anger underneath. Bruce MacDonald of The Globe and Mail saw this as he reported that though “most of the Negro looters went about their work as if it was a Roman holiday, there were occasional indication of the anger seething beneath the surface.” Looting served two purposes for blacks, it gave them an opportunity to vent their anger and frustration by financially hurting white shop owners, whom they felt had discriminated against them, and it allowed them to acquire what they had not previously been able to afford.

Though these African Americans gained the attention of the white world, through the media’s extensive coverage of the riots, their rioting did not bring them closer to achieving equality. Some blacks realized this and although many people participated in the rioting, there were a few determined individuals who refused to be caught up in the excitement. One black

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42 Johnson, “Harlem Youths Exhibit Loot.”
44 Wicker, “Thousands Leave Washington.”
45 Bruce MacDonald, “Jubilant Negroes Take the Death of Dr. King as a Sign to Rampage,” The Globe and Mail, April 6, 1968, sec. 1.
anti-poverty worker saw the larger picture when he told a reporter that he wished blacks would
do more than just loot stores; they needed to make a change in American society: “The brother
gets out and grabs a bit of it now and then – I wish he’d learn to grab himself a lot instead of a
little.” Another black man refused to be pulled into the anti-white mayhem saying, “I don’t
want anything I don’t work for.” In Detroit, a twenty-one year old black taxi driver showed his
disdain for black looters saying, “If they wanted to do something for Dr. Martin Luther King
then they should stand up for what he stood for – non-violence. That would be showing the
world. . . It’s not a race riot – it’s a looting contest. They just want an excuse to steal.” This
rational young man did not allow grief to influence his actions, but he did not seem to understand
the complex issues underlying the black response to King’s murder. Nevertheless, he does
exemplify those blacks who followed their leaders’ advice and stood against the looting and
rioting which surrounded them.

During the time immediately following King’s murder, his wife, Coretta King, became an
heroic example of restraint and determination for both black and white Americans. As early as
April 5, the Times reported that apart from a few tearful breakdowns, “Mrs. King” was holding
up quite well and planned to fly to Memphis to continue on where her husband left off. Her
purpose in going to Memphis was two-fold: She wanted to encourage black Americans to
continue standing up to whites and she wanted to ensure that her husband’s work would carry on.
On April 8 the Times reported that Coretta led “a massive, orderly, silent march today through
the streets of Memphis” to further the Memphis city sanitation workers’ strike. Kondrashov
wrote that 35,000 people followed Coretta in this march and on April 16 the strikers finally won

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46 Johnson, “Harlem Youths Exhibit Loot.”
47 Johnson, “Harlem Youths Exhibit Loot.”
50 J. Anthony Lukas, “Thousands in Line: Travel from All Over the Nation to Honor Rights Leader,” The New York
Times, April 9, 1968, sec. 1.
Her determination to not let white America get the better of her black community was the example which many black leaders encouraged African Americans to follow. Coretta also bravely spoke in Memphis about her husband’s life urging African Americans to continue in his footsteps of non-violent protest. She did not want to see her husband’s struggle to overcome white racism by non-violence end in blood. As Americans followed the story through the media, they saw and admired Coretta’s strength and determination to continue the struggle her husband embraced.

In contrast to black anger and determination, white Americans reacted to King’s death in fear. Across the board, whites’ first reaction was fear of black violence. President Lyndon Johnson urged the nation to remain calm though it seemed impossible. Senator and presidential candidate, Robert Kennedy, also recognized the threat of black violence when he spoke to a crowd in Indianapolis exhorting them to work toward understanding rather than anger and hatred. In Washington D.C., panic seized government employees and white people in general as blacks began to riot. The Times compared Washington’s fearful and stunned response to King’s assassination with that of John F. Kennedy in 1963. This comparison illustrates how badly the city was shaken by King’s death. Murray Schumach reported that, in New York City, all sorts of rumours were flying around causing fear and tension. A resident of New York, Eva Hill affirmed that white people were cowering at home afraid of a part of

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51 Kondrashov, 233. There was debate over the number of people who marched with Coretta on April 8, 1968. But it was in the tens of thousands.
52 Lukas, “Thousands in Line.”
53 Cronkite, “Announcement of Martin Luther King Jr.’s Death.”
American society that was foreign to them.\textsuperscript{58} However, whites had good reason to be afraid. The media’s coverage “brought the riots into homes across the nation, sometimes creating the perception of danger even where it might not have really existed.”\textsuperscript{59} Stokely Carmichael, leader of SNCC, urged blacks in Washington to get their guns and “exterminate” the whites.\textsuperscript{60} Floyd McKissick, national director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) stated: “Nonviolence is a dead philosophy and it was not the black people that killed it.”\textsuperscript{61} By this, he implied that violence was the new philosophy and that whites inspired it. Lincoln O. Lynch, who was also associated with CORE, testified that “for every Martin Luther King who falls, 10 white racists will go down with him. There is no other way. White America understands no other language.”\textsuperscript{62} With the media reporting violent war cries like Carmichael’s and declarations that non-violence was dead it is not surprising that white people were afraid. Stories like that of Mrs. Bernadine Laskow of Chicago, the mother of three children, who was pulled from her car and beaten by black youths, only served to fuel fear among whites.\textsuperscript{63} Many African Americans seemed to believe that King’s non-violence had not worked so they turned to violence as a solution to their problems. As whites felt the threat of violence pursuing them through the media, it is little wonder they were afraid.

As well as fearing for their safety, some whites felt that they had missed their opportunity to change the racism in their nation. Some white Americans felt guilt over King’s death, asking

\textsuperscript{59} Michael S. Martin, “‘A Peaceful Demonstration of Our Feeling Toward the Death’: University Students in Lafayette, Louisiana, React to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Assassination.” \textit{Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association} 41, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 302.
\textsuperscript{61} “McKissick Says Nonviolence has become Dead Philosophy,” \textit{The New York Times}, April 5, 1968, sec. 1.
\textsuperscript{62} Van Gelder, “Dismay in Nation.”
themselves what they could, or should, have done. One journalist wrote that if Congress refused to take action on King’s dream, “the dream is certain to become a nightmare. Dr. King recognized that possibility, too, and warned that it would ‘send this nation to hell.’” Some people came down hard on their fellow whites. One example of this is a letter to the editor of the Times which argued that there was no “race problem” or “Negro problem” but only a “sick white man problem.” The letter’s author went on to say that unless white Americans recognized their racism and started changing it, they were as equally guilty of killing Martin Luther King Jr. as the man who pulled the trigger. It seemed that for some whites, King’s death even led them to give up hope for change. Paul E. Thomason of Knoxville, Tennessee also wrote a letter to the editor. He was deeply afraid for the United States because whites lost a great ally when King died. Thomason seems to have given up hope and concluded: “May God have mercy on our souls – we certainly cannot expect the black man to.” Through these letters, we see the fear of some white Americans that perhaps it was too late to resolve the race issue. Yet, on the other side from these self-chastising letters, there were also letters printed in the Times which reminded the nation that it was not right to blame the act of one man on an entire people group. Consequently, people stood firmly on both sides of this argument. Regardless of the theoretical debate however, some white Americans experienced guilt over their contribution to a culture which continued to allow racial discrimination. A few even went to the extreme of fearing for the life of their nation, believing that they had missed their chance to change society.

64 Howard A. Rusk, M.D. “Negro and Medicine: Slaying of Dr. King is Linked to Failure to Provide Equal Opportunities for All,” The New York Times, April 7, 1968, sec. 1.
Though many, or perhaps even most, white Americans responded to King’s death out of fear, some also acted to change society. A number of people took agency to honour the slain leader. Many schools, colleges, offices and shops closed early in New York City on both Friday (the day after King’s murder) and Tuesday (the day of King’s funeral) in respect for King, and also partly to avoid violence. The baseball season’s opening games were postponed as were the Oscar awards. In Lafayette, Louisiana, black and white students responded to King’s murder by staging a non-violent protest. They gathered on the campus of the University of South-Western Louisiana where they lowered the school flag to half-mast. From there they marched to the Air Force base and did the same with that flag. At city hall they met with resistance, but were still able to lower the flag without any violence. The march included speeches from both black and white students and culminated with a non-violent rally that evening. Lafayette is an example of the media’s selectivity; though the story of the non-violent protest was important in the local community, it did not make national news and was thereby robbed of its power to persuade the wider population of blacks’ right to equality. Yet, though this story was not included, others were. For instance, The New York Times carried the story of 25,000 Newark residents, half of them white, who organized a march through the city, wearing buttons which read “I Care,” as a “Walk of Understanding” in memory of King. Many companies put bulletins in The New York Times stating their grief and sympathy over King’s death. Scholar Philip Meyer expressed that white Americans did not fully appreciate King until after his death because they were not ready to listen to him and act on his words until that

71 Martin, 304, 306-307, 309.
point. One company, Levitt and Sons, announced in the *Times* that they would no longer tolerate segregation within their company and encouraged others to follow their example. In Chicago, the Inter-Racial Council of Chicago Centre housed and fed black “riot refugees” by the generous donations of whites and middle-class blacks. Its executive director, John A. McDermott was impressed with the way so many from the white community gave time and resources in support of the homeless blacks; however, Rudy Platiel of *The Globe and Mail* recognized that this was not enough saying, “this is charity and charity is no substitute for justice. More significant is whether this will bring any meaningful action.” According to Whitney Young, executive director of the National Urban League, the worst thing that could happen in response to King’s death would be “black anger and white sympathy.” Unfortunately, this was precisely what happened. Agency ended at emotion and made very little lasting change. Despite white fear across the nation, some whites pulled together in support of black people and the civil rights movement, at least, temporarily.

However, this popular movement was not reflected at the governmental level. At that level of society, white fear led only to symbolic action. President Johnson proclaimed Sunday, April 7, a national day of mourning for King, met with black leaders and cancelled his meeting in Hawaii so that he could stay on the mainland during the national crisis. In a press conference, the president asserted that the nation needed constructive rather than destructive action and urged Congress to meet with him as soon as possible to discuss what could be done. He also made the gesture of ordering the United States flag to be flown at half mast until King’s

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76 Platie, “King ‘Eulogized Now.’”
funeral. Further, the government took immediate action to find the person responsible for King’s death. The President himself ordered the Federal Bureau of Investigation to find the murderer. Though these symbolic acts may have appeased the population and given them assurance that something was being done, none of these actions actually effected any real change. The only true governmental change which King’s death brought about, at least more quickly than it would otherwise have occurred, was the institution of the 1968 Civil Rights Act or “Fair Housing Act.” This act, passed on April 11, 1968 outlawed racial discrimination in buying, selling, and renting housing except for private individual transactions. However, Kondrashov points out that most blacks did not have the necessary money to be able to move out of the black ghettos they were living in, so though the Fair Housing Act made things look better on paper, it did little to actually change American society. Though the president, and the American government, publically made a few symbolic gestures in support of King’s struggle and the Civil Rights Movement, very little actually changed.

Most importantly, although King became a hero, black people were only a little better off than before his death. Perhaps because of all the coverage by the media, King became rather popular, posthumously. One young black man in Miami testified, “You know the follow-up to his death and the reports they had on TV, you know, more people really understood him and what he was trying to do than they did before.” At his funeral the speeches and tributes focused on King’s generous love and acceptance of everyone. Dr. Benjamin Moys, the former president of Morehouse College in Atlanta, where King had once been a student, called him a

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80 Norrell, 264.
81 Kondrashov, 256.
prophet of God and compared him to Jesus, Abraham, Moses, Lincoln, and other heroes of history. Thousands of people attended his memorial service and thousands more watched it on TV. Many people felt King had become a martyred hero to the cause of civil rights.

Kondrashov also praised King as a hero in the biography he wrote for Russia:

He [King] compelled American society to look with fresh eyes at its black fellow citizens. He aroused in black Americans a feeling of self-respect, pride and confidence in their own strength. Finally, he achieved something to which, perhaps, he never gave thought. He himself became an example for those in whose eyes, as he expressed it, ‘beauty is truth and truth beauty – and in whose eyes the beauty of genuine brotherhood and peace is more precious than diamonds or silver or gold.’

Beyond his friends, King was even praised by those who had been his enemies. Chicago’s McDermott noted the irony that King was “being eulogized and praised now by institutions and people who fought him every inch of the way in his drive for racial justice.” After his death, King gained the respect of more people than he had in life. Yet, despite the wide praise he received from all manner of people, the idea of King as a hero is surrounded by debate. Why is he a hero? Who made him a hero? Some scholars argue, and with reason, that the government used King and his image to justify their own agendas. Others argue that by viewing King as a hero, we neglect to understand him as a person. Yet, whatever the reason, for many Americans, King became a hero and a symbol of the Civil Rights movement.

Though the media made King an American hero, black Americans did not find their situation vastly improved. In reporting on King’s assassination and his leadership in non-violent protest for the Civil Rights Movement, the media brushed aside the plight of black people. The

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86 Kondrashov, 9.
89 Harry A. Reed, “Martin Luther King, Jr.: History and Memory, Reflections on Dreams and Silences,” Journal of Negro History 84, no. 2 (Spring, 1999): 164.
point of their coverage was not to build support for African American equality. However, African Americans gained a few things through King’s death: more white awareness, the Fair Housing Agreement and perhaps, as some argue, a better sense of the national black community. Yet, despite these things, many blacks faced more problems after King’s death than they had before and, unfortunately, some of these were of their own doing. For instance, some African Americans living in the black neighbourhoods of many American cities had no home when the smoke cleared after King’s funeral because black youths had burned them down. In Washington D.C., after the riots, whites and middle class people moved out of the destroyed down town area, leaving the financially poor African Americans to fend for themselves. What had once been a decent neighbourhood became a slum filled with poor African American people. Though the city government promised aid, in some cases it took more than twenty years before the neighbourhoods saw the fulfilment of those promises. It is debatable whether the media benefited or damaged African Americans’ reputation as a group. Black riots and the extensive coverage they received in the media certainly did not bring them a favourable reputation; however, the reports brought the racial issue to the front of white Americans’ minds, causing them to evaluate themselves and their society. Yet blacks wanted more than sympathy. They wanted radical change which they did not receive. Therefore, despite the chaos following King’s assassination, black people did not experience the social revolution they wanted to see.

Though it would be ludicrous to assume that the media controlled national response to Martin Luther King Jr.’s death, it did play a role in informing and guiding it. The almost instantaneous dissemination of information about King’s shooting and death brought on national

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92 Schaffer, 26-27.
grief. Black grief soon developed into angry rioting as African Americans expressed their pent-up frustrations with decades of discrimination. Some blacks were able to control their emotions and tried to be examples to the rest, yet mass media capitalized on the racial violence, highlighting the riot developments for several days, and many whites grew afraid for their own safety and for their country. Despite the anger and fear around them, King’s death opened some white Americans’ eyes to the racism in the United States and some of these people used media like The New York Times to share their understanding with others. Blacks received a few token expressions of good will from the government including the Fair Housing Act, which was a good document, but not practically helpful. Yet, these were not the radical social changes blacks demanded. Unfortunately, for African Americans, the media tended to focus more on King than his work. Though the media made him a hero, it did not champion his work enough to influence lasting change. On a television special of the National Broadcasting Corporation, Whitney Young of the National Urban League avowed that “[w]hat we need today is black determination and white action.” ⁹³ Black determination was present after King’s death, though perhaps unproductively channelled, but white America did not follow through with pragmatic action. Therefore, though the public reacted to King’s assassination with extreme emotion for a short while, that emotion was not enough to bring long-term social change.

Bibliography

Primary


Secondary


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