"Ain't Nobody Got Time for That!": Framing and Stereotyping in Legacy and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Background *Social media can be powerful tools for rallying support for a social cause, political mobilization, and social commentary. They can also greatly contribute to incendiary discourses and social stereotypes—often through memes. This article explores the case of one American, known by the moniker of "Sweet Brown," whose interview about a local fire made her an overnight celebrity in 2012.*

Analysis *A frame analysis of her portrayals in legacy and social media is conducted, and reveals that social media platforms facilitate and even encourage a reductionist approach to messaging.*

Conclusion and implications *Sweet Brown's appearance, which conjures gender, race, and socio-economic class, became a powerful tool for circulating stereotypes. The interplay between legacy and social media can serve to reproduce stereotypes and marginalization, as is evident in the case of Sweet Brown.*

Keywords *Stereotypes; Memes; Legacy media; Social media; Framing; Sweet Brown*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Les médias sociaux peuvent être un outil puissant servant à gagner des appuis pour des causes sociales, la mobilisation politique et des commentaires sociaux. Cependant, ils peuvent aussi véhiculer des propos incendiaires et des stéréotypes sociaux, souvent au moyen de mèmes. Cet article explore le cas d'une Américaine surnommée Sweet Brown, qu'une interview sur un incendie local a subitement rendue célèbre en 2012.*

Analyse *L'article comporte une analyse de cadre sur la manière dont les médias traditionnels et sociaux ont dépeint Sweet Brown. Cette analyse suggère que les médias sociaux facilitent et même encouragent une approche réductionniste.*

Conclusion et implications *L'apparence de Sweet Brown, qui évoque le genre, la race et la classe socioéconomique, est devenue un outil puissant pour faire circuler des stéréotypes. Son cas montre que l'interaction entre médias traditionnels et médias sociaux peut contribuer à la reproduction de stéréotypes et à la marginalisation.*

Mots clés *Stéréotypes; Mèmes; Médias traditionnels; Médias sociaux; Cadres; Sweet Brown*

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Introduction

Social media can be a powerful tool for rallying support for social causes, political mobilization, and social commentary, but it can also greatly contribute to incendiary discourses and social stereotypes. Rather than challenging the stereotypes that legacy media are so frequently accused of reproducing, social media can be a space for even less restrained stereotyping, while also fuelling stereotypes in legacy media. To explore how this happens, this article focuses on one image that exemplifies the role of media, both social and legacy, in perpetuating stereotypes. The image was of American Kimberly Wilkins, known by the moniker "Sweet Brown," whose local news interview about a small-town fire in Oklahoma made her an overnight celebrity in 2012. Her popularity, as that of many internet celebrities, may be difficult to explain, but was innocent enough at first. As time passed, however, she came to symbolize class and race stereotypes, while giving license to media to ridicule poverty and African Americans. The way in which her image was exploited and made viral in social media ensured that legacy media could not resist joining in on this exploitation, and even she herself—intentionally or not—contributed to this process.

In much of the media content about her, Sweet Brown had little or no agency, and was the "object" of social commentary and ridicule. This includes dozens of YouTube videos featuring young children, many of them white, dressed similarly to how Sweet Brown was dressed in that local news interview, and dancing and lip syncing some of Sweet Brown's now-infamous lines, including "Ain't nobody got time for that!" She became an oft-repeated image in memes and video remixes that played on stereotypes while completely obscuring the tragedy that launched her into stardom: a residential fire in a low-income neighbourhood (Shepard, 2016). Yet, even in instances where Sweet Brown had agency, such as her media appearances and social media accounts, she followed stereotypical expectations, portraying a one-dimensional, clownish, "aw shucks" persona, star-struck around other celebrities and in disbelief over her own rise to fame.

The way the media story of Sweet Brown developed over time is explored to try to identify how this narrative trajectory came about. The framing of her public persona and the dynamics by which Sweet Brown hijacked the real story of a fire in an American neighbourhood are examined. They reveal that both legacy and social media allowed Sweet Brown, and the stereotypes that were quickly linked to her, to overshadow and indeed outgrow the small local disaster. Both types of media framed Sweet Brown *as* the news. Echoing each other's play on stereotypes, both contributed to how Sweet Brown was fashioned into a celebrity with little agency to such an extent that even in media appearances where she seemed to have agency, she continued to play the stereotypical role expected of her.

Stereotypes, framing, and limits of social media

Social media, as a relatively new site of social interactions and cultural reproduction, both copies and reshapes the practices of legacy media. In interacting with/through social media, people perform according to established social norms and also develop new forms of interacting. Social media interactions thus build on and redefine existing concepts of the "social." Take the example of "friend" and its meaning on social media

platforms: the word has significantly different meanings in "real" life than it does in Facebook, although the two meanings are closely related (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009).

Social media platforms have also redefined *audiences* as users who are no longer passive consumers of media content, but active producers and distributors of it. The early days of Web 2.0 held a great deal of optimism for the democratic potential and diversity of thought that could flourish on interactive, participatory online platforms (Jenkins, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). As Web 2.0 grew and social media came to play an increasingly significant role in how people communicate and obtain information, critical literature has emerged that shows much of the power relations associated with mainstream media have been reproduced in the Web 2.0 landscape (Couldry & Turow, 2014; Elmer, Langlois, & Redden, 2015). From corporate concentration to social marginalization to message control, social media has largely failed to address the imbalances in social and political power, and it has offered only limited agency to its audience/users.

Interactions embedded in social media are shaped by virtual distance, with actors separated by technological interventions at the same time as they are connected to one another in unprecedented ways. On one hand, social media connects communities bridging social and geographical distance. Yet as much as they have the capacity to include, these online communities can also serve to exclude, and may take shape as "algorithmic enclaves" or virtual groups of likeminded individuals who reinforce and legitimize each other's discriminatory beliefs against other social groups (Lim, 2017). The virtual distance can also allow for interactions that are less restrained, as they seem less consequential. Social media platforms facilitate, and even encourage, a reductionist approach to messaging due to social media's preference for abbreviated communication—simple, catchy messages that are easily shared and circulated (Lim, 2013). This tends to simplify complex social issues (Awan, 2014; Lim, 2013; see also Lim, 2018; Bivens & Shah Hoque, 2018; Knezevic, Pasho & Dobson, 2018), allowing for even the most incendiary messages to circulate unchecked, although their consequences are sometimes enormous (National Public Radio, 2017).[1]

It is this oversimplification of social issues that has fuelled continued stereotyping on social media. For instance, InJeong Yoon (2016) found that "the majority of Internet memes about racism perpetuate colorblindness by mocking people of color and denying structural racism" (p. 92). Some have used the term "digital blackface" to describe how racial stereotypes are often mimicked and appropriated online through memes, gifs, and "humourous" online personas meant to resemble and evoke offensive "thug" or "ghetto" tropes (see, for example, Green, 2006; Jackson, 2014; Sowunmi, 2014). In 2017, 14-year-old Caucasian Danielle Bregoli made an appearance on the talk show *Dr. Phil*, where her use of the phrase "cash me outside" ("catch me outside") quickly turned into a viral sensation, which Bregoli capitalized on with music deals and merchandising. Some accused Bregoli, and the internet users fuelling her fame, of appropriating Black culture (see, for example, Edwards, 2017). As Janell Hobson (2008) contends, "representations of digital technology recreate social and cultural hierarchies that encourage appropriation and colonization of knowledge and bodies from marginal communities" (p. 113).

The reductionism of social media allows for the framing of social issues through oversimplified and self-perpetuating stereotypes. This suggests that the decades of frame analysis related to legacy media research have significant relevance to the analysis of social media content.

While there is some debate about the specific definitions of frames, framing, and frame analysis (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011), frame analysis has been central to examining media discourse for decades. As Todd Gitlin (1980) explains, frames are "principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters" (p. 7). Framing, as the process of frame building, refers to how issues are cast by those who control or influence the discourse. It entails selecting particular aspects of reality and making them more salient than others "to promote a particular problem definition" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). This can take place through the careful choice of words and syntax used in discussions, or though providing context (visual or informational) that will direct the audience's interpretation of something.

Frame analysis thus entails a deconstruction of framing, in an effort to uncover how frames come into being, what their consequences may be, and who benefits from the frames that dominate the discourse. Frame analysis allows us to consider how certain communication practices shape our understandings of issues and phenomena. It "is less about cataloguing what is explicitly said than it is about identifying the implicit understandings that are conveyed by the materials" (O'Neil, 2009, p. 6). In a frequently cited example, linguist George Lakoff (2004) describes a key element of the framing practices used by the Republican Party in the United States. By strategically and persistently using "tax relief" instead of "tax break" or "tax cut," the Republican Party effectively framed tax cuts as heroic acts: "For there to be relief there must be an affliction, an afflicted party, and a reliever who removes the affliction and is therefore a hero. And if people try to stop the hero, those people are villains for trying to prevent relief" (pp. 3–4). The use of "relief" is neither blatantly deceitful nor factually incorrect, but how the audiences understand the issue of taxes as a result of this framing has far-reaching consequences.

Much of the framing literature considers word choice and syntax, but a substantial body of research on visual framing analysis has also developed to consider how images are framed (metaphorically, and in the traditional photographic sense of selecting what is in the frame and what is left out), as well as how those images can be examined using the principles of frame analysis (Parry, 2010).

Legacy media, political discourse, and policy development clearly lend themselves to frame analysis. Those objects of study have identifiable agendas and a definable relationship of power between the communicating entity (media company, political party, government, or industry, respectively) and its audience. Literature has also recognized that the interpretation of media messages by audiences is influenced by individual frames that are "the result of socially situated articulations between particular issues, individual and collective differences, experiential knowledge, popular wisdom and media discourse" (Vliegenthart & van Zoonen, 2011, p. 105). But social media analysts have been less inclined to use frame analysis. As Jie Qin (2015) proposes, this is

likely a result of a combination of challenges. Social media blurs the line between media frames and individual frames, and the sheer volume of content on social media can make data selection processes difficult (Qin, 2015). However, individual frames are not necessarily free of power imbalances and can embody systemic social dynamics. When considering how individuals frame (for instance, in social media) various forms of marginalization, such as gender, race, and poverty, what is really revealed is manifestations of systemic marginalization. Hence, despite the challenges identified by Qin (2015), frame analysis of social media content is an important research pursuit.

Some research has examined the role of memes in public discourse. Ryan M. Milner (2013) analyzed memes about the Occupy Wall Street movement as examples of public engagement with the issue of income inequality. Other work has examined memes and discourses on race and gender, noting the dominance of stereotypes and underrepresentation (Milner, 2013). Noam Gal, Lomar Shifman, and Zohar Kampz (2016) drew on memes surrounding the "It Gets Better" movement to articulate how such memes can play a role in the construction of collective identity. These types of memes can serve to "operationalize gendered, classed, and raced classificatory knowledges and construct social forms of commonality on this basis," providing a "readerly lens" that arranges dimensions of gender, class, and race, ultimately "indexing social inequalities without recognizing them as such" (Kanai, 2016, p. 1).

Data collection

Sweet Brown first came to our attention while working on an earlier project that examined poverty-bashing memes[2] (Dobson & Knezevic, 2017). As we searched for such memes, we noticed one image appear repeatedly. It was an image of an African American woman in a brightly coloured tank top, with a "do-rag" (a bandana) and a gold tooth. While some of the memes with her image were offensive (e.g., one contained the following caption: "I'm a stupid African American. I live in poverty"), others were memes with her image and no reference to poverty. As Limar Shifman (2013) posits, even though it can be difficult, or "virtually impossible to study them empirically," memes offer an exceptional and powerful method for increasing our understanding of digital culture since "[m]emes diffuse at the mirco level but shape the macro level of society" (p. 372). Thus, Sweet Brown's visibility in poverty memes piqued our interest, and we wanted to understand why this image kept appearing in our searches for poverty memes. Once we identified the woman as Sweet Brown, we then set out to learn more about her.

First, we searched "Sweet Brown" and "Kimberly Wilkins" using simple Google searches to identify media articles and social media posts about her. We did the searches in "incognito" browser mode to minimize the effect our previous searches would have on the search results. Some of the articles that appeared in the search results contained links that we followed, adding more sources to the data set. The approach to assembling this data set did not entail a systematic collection of artefacts or a rigorous coding of the search results. Rather, it attempted to reproduce the experience of an audience member who, after seeing a Sweet Brown meme, perhaps on Facebook, would be curious enough to set out to learn about her, looking up top search results and following links embedded in those pages.

This Google search was supplemented with the Twitter feed from the handle @TeamSweetBrown, which is labelled as Sweet Brown's official Twitter account, focusing on the 1,240 media (image and video) posts available as of May 11, 2017. A Google image search for "Sweet Brown" was also conducted to understand how her image has been transformed into internet memes. The combination of these search results helped explain how Brown's public image was constructed by her, and possibly her agent/manager, and contrast that to how her image has been exploited in meme circulation, in instances where she presumably had no agency.

From the media content found online a narrative that tells the story of Sweet Brown is pieced together, as told on both legacy media sites and social media platforms. Through this process, Sweet Brown's rise to celebrity is deconstructed (and reconstructed) to identify how she is framed in this discourse, and—possibly more importantly—what is left out of that frame.

While imperfect, this approach provided a corpus of data that would be accessible to anyone with internet access and unrestricted Google use. Joan Pedro (2012) describes Google as an engine that allows for the "compilation of universes," and notes that, "the enormous progress represented by access to corpuses of sources that are so abundant and so fast and easy to use justifies the use of Internet search engines by researchers to obtain their corpuses" (p. 38). As Google is the world's most popular search engine, this approach tracks the story of Sweet Brown as any internet user could, and makes it possible to piece together how those users would understand her story. Examining this understanding is a key aspect of frame analysis.

Although this method of data collection would presumably not reproduce the audience experience—as most people would have likely been exposed to memes of Sweet Brown through sites such as Reddit or social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter—this method allowed us to see and analyze a wide breadth of the most popular memes, based on their prominence in Google search.

The Sweet Brown story

The story of Kimberly Wilkins, aka "Sweet Brown," is one that has been told and retold via YouTube bloggers, online news and media outlets, and numerous television appearances stretching over nearly a three-year period starting in 2012. It was shortly after 3:00 a.m. on April 7, 2012, when Kimberly Wilkins, a day care worker, woke up and decided to get a drink from one of the vending machines in her housing apartment complex in northwest Oklahoma City. As she said in her now-infamous television interview with KFOR News Channel 4 in Oklahoma,[3] Wilkins thought at first that a burning smell meant one of her neighbours was barbequing, before quickly realizing there was actually a fire in one of the neighbouring buildings.

The three-alarm fire—the result of a tenant's carelessness with a cigarette—caused one resident to be treated at a local hospital for smoke inhalation and resulted in severe damage to five of the apartments, leading to a loss of electrical power to most of the complex. Surprisingly, media coverage of the story lacked any details about how long the more than one hundred residents were going to be without power, or how many became homeless and dependent on the Red Cross for assistance that day because of the lack of power and limited access to their units due to the fire damage.

There were few to no questions asked or details provided in any follow-up interviews about how a resident who uses a wheelchair and was rushed to hospital for smoke inhalation was doing. There was no analysis of how and why residential fires occur more frequently and cause more injury and damage in low-income neighbourhoods compared to higher-income areas (Durkin, Davidson, Kuhn, O'Connor, & Barlow, 1994; *Hamilton Spectator,* 2017; Shai, 2006). Instead, it would be the interview, and Wilkins herself, that would go on to become an overnight sensation. In a 40-second interview with a local television reporter, Wilkins used her children's nickname for her, "Sweet," and added her middle name, "Brown." "Sweet Brown" explained that she had woken up thirsty and had wanted to get herself a "cold pop," when she realized there was a fire. "I said oh Lord, Oh Jesus, it's a fire. I ran out, I didn't grab no shoes or nothing, Jesus. I ran for my life and then the smoke got me. I got bronchitis. Ain't nobody got time for that."

It was after a Reddit user uploaded the 40-second television interview clip of "Sweet Brown" to YouTube later that day that Wilkins would quickly become an internet celebrity. Within 48 hours the video had almost three million views on YouTube and nearly 110,000 shares on Facebook. Parody videos started to appear and, as of June 2017, just two of the more popular YouTube parodies alone (and there are hundreds of them) total over 65,000,000 and 60,000,000 views each, with more added every day. The number of views for the original video, parodies, and other derivative works collectively now surpasses a billion. Four days after her interview with the local television station, a reporter knocked on Wilkins' apartment door and informed her that her story with the station had gone "viral." After the reporter explained to an apparently confused Wilkins what having gone "viral" meant, Wilkins asked, "You think I could be a superstar" (Mills, 2012)?

In the days and weeks to follow, Wilkins became such a YouTube sensation, she would go on to be featured in a dozen national and local television commercials, all playing off some aspect of what had now become a popular catchphrase from her original TV interview. For example, in addition to an advertisement for jail bonds, Wilkins did a television commercial for a dental clinic, which features her gently cradling her jaw with a pained expression, wearing the same outfit she had on during the original television interview. Wilkins looks into the camera and says, "Ain't nobody got time for that!" about her toothache. In another commercial, one for a used-car lot, Wilkins is holding up a car door that looks like it is about to fall off and once again announces, "Ain't nobody got time for that!" to the camera. Some of her other popular catchphrases include, "Oh Lord! It's a fire!" and "I woke up to go get me a cold pop" and they are all featured on her T-shirt clothing line, still available for purchase on Amazon and other online commercial outlets.

In the weeks and months that followed her original interview, Wilkins made numerous television guest appearances where she would suddenly pop up and announce, "Ain't nobody got time for that!" and it never seemed to fail to make the audience laugh uproariously. Her guest appearances included shows such as *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* (close to 11 million views as of May 2017), *Watch What Happens Live with Andy Cohen*, *Dr. Oz,* and *The View*. There are also instances of her being quoted by high-profile celebrities,

such as Beyoncé during a halftime performance at the *Super Bowl,* who said, "Oh Lord! It's a fire!" and Ellen DeGeneres, on her own show, saying, "Ain't nobody got time for that!" In addition to the countless references made by various celebrities, Wilkins' interview was also featured in hundreds of parodies and spoofs online, including some by celebrities, such as Queen Latifah. Whereas all of this could at first glance seem like an empowering development for Wilkins, there is little evidence that this is the case. All of this attention and fame did not seem to change Wilkins' demeanour when being interviewed over and over again, as she continued to appear humble and seemingly delighted by her growing popularity, using it to create several more opportunities. This includes a BBQ sauce line, featuring commercials with her saying, "Oh Lord! It's a fire!," three movie appearances, co-hosting a syndicated show, *Cheaters,* and an attempt at a reality show, *The Sweet Browns.* All of this media attention continued to frame Wilkins as her Sweet Brown persona, and she reinforced that frame consistently.

In addition to having her own IMDb page [Brown, 2013], Wilkins also has a YouTube channel called "Cold Popping," and her catchphrase, "Ain't nobody got time for that!," is trademarked. She attended the Academy Awards in 2013. Wilkins also advertises on her Twitter page that she can be booked through her agent for private parties, corporate retreats, church events, and private barbecues. Wilkins says strangers still knock on her door to ask for an autograph, and stop her on the street to ask to have their picture taken with her (Brown, 2012).

In April 2013, Wilkins and her manager, Sparkell Adams, launched a lawsuit against iTunes, a subsidiary of Apple, and several other defendants, for $15 million for "lost profits" and "emotional distress" after a song called "I Got Bronchitis," which included samples from Wilkins' original interview about the fire, was released. The song included phrases such as, "Ain't nobody got time for that!," "Ran for my life," and "Oh Lord Jesus it's a fire." Apple has since removed the song from iTunes, and the lawsuit was dismissed in court in 2013 (Knittle, 2013).

Media posts on the @TeamSweetBrown Twitter account suggest that despite her goofy public persona, Wilkins is quite business savvy. The Twitter account seems to have been managed by Sweet Brown and Sparkell Adams who was, at least for a time, acting as Sweet Brown's agent/manager. Adams' email is included in the Twitter profile as the "PR & Bookings" contact. The account's handle @TeamSweetBrown is accompanied by a name Sweet Brown^{TM}, clearly indicating that the account is intended for her commercial presence in the Twitterverse. The account was created shortly after her initial interview about the neighbourhood fire, in April 2012. There were a total of ten thousand tweets on the account, and they abruptly stopped on April 9, 2014, with a single exception of a link to a Yahoo hack article posted on December 14, 2016. The 1,240 media posts available for viewing on the account were all posted between September 12, 2012, and March 31, 2014.

The content, once again, frames Wilkins as a one-dimensional Sweet Brown character. The posts fall under two general categories: promotional posts, which constitute the majority of the tweets, and posts that are more personal in nature. Promotional posts are related to Sweet Brown products (such as the BBQ sauce and T-shirts with the "Ain't nobody got time for that!" slogan), the commercials she appears in, her

media appearances, and images of Sweet Brown with celebrities such as Matt Damon and Shamar Moore. The personal posts are much rarer and include images of Sweet Brown with non-celebrities such as friends and family (often these are posts with cross-platform links to her Instagram account); re-posts of other social media content including humorous memes; and a handful of posts with political commentary (e.g., comments regarding the case of Trayvon Martin[4]).

On the one hand, the content on this Twitter account is unremarkable, simply because in many ways it resembles the accounts of the general slate of minor and major celebrities. A commercialized discourse that dominates the account is interspersed with seemingly personal posts that often use Sweet Brown's catchphrases such as "Lord Jesus" (sometimes spelled "Lawd Jesus") and "Ain't nobody got time for that!" In other words, the account reveals the Sweet Brown public persona as a run-of-the-mill celebrity who uses a Twitter account for self-promotion and revenue boosting, while also offering occasional glimpses into what seems to be her personal life. On the other hand, the content shows how essential the media framing was in how Sweet Brown chose to portray herself publicly. With only a handful of exceptions where her Twitter feed offers some political commentary, her media appearances and her social media accounts show her staying on script. She repeatedly uses her catchphrases from the original interview and acts dazzled by her fame. Given that after the original interview she is never asked any serious questions, she offers no serious insights in legacy media appearances. In other words, legacy media, responding to her viral presence in social media, treats her like a meme.

Criticism, controversy, and stereotypes

Although most media accounts on- and offline have been favourable toward Wilkins, some online articles authored by African Americans have been critical of the way her media persona was used. For example, Charing Ball (2012), in an article with *MadameNoire*,[5] said many Black people would be offended by the video.

> Brown's entire natural persona sends chills down the backs of some folks, who imagine the coming of parodies of white people, wearing do-rags and mimicking how they feel these folks sound … It's one of the burdens of a people who never really had control of their media image. (p. 2)

Ball adds (2012) that people like Wilkins can be embarrassing to the Black middle class in particular, "because they get a little too close to the clichéd and narrow picture of what black people are: loud, opinionated, eye-popping, neck-swirling, teeth sucking, gold tooth shiners and do-rag wearers" (p. 2).

Ball (2012) goes on to point out that the story does not acknowledge what she considers some crucial facts, instead highlighting some of the worst clichés and stereotypes about Black people.

> Never mind thinking about what she is going to do for the next day, or two, or possibly weeks now that her living space is probably inhabitable. It's much more important that she not embarrass us … are they going to use this video to make bigoted assumptions about all black folks? Of course. We still do live in a polarized society based on race. (p. 2)

Most articles about Wilkins ask the same question: "Whatever happened to Sweet Brown?" (Kelly, 2014). It has been at least a couple of years since Wilkins has been in the limelight. Her Facebook and Twitter accounts have not had any activity since April and December 2014, respectively.[6] She is now living back in her old apartment, having returned to Oklahoma after her reality show never became a reality, beyond some short clips from the production that are available on YouTube (Swift, 2014). However, her name still shows up from time to time, though most recently in the context of apparently having spawned some copycats. For example, in 2016 the headline of an article claimed: "Woman Escapes Fire, Channels Sweet Brown in Epic Interview" (Merda, 2016). The opening paragraph of the article explains, "She didn't think anyone was barbecuing, but Michelle Dobyne was cooking breakfast for her and her baby when a fire broke out in their Oklahoma apartment complex" (Merda, 2016). By overtly linking this fire in 2016 to the earlier one in 2012, highlighting the quote from an African American woman who said, "Uh huh. We ain't gonna be in no fire. Not today," is perhaps an example of something speculated about in an article, "Why the Internet Loves to Laugh at Poor Black People" (Lang, 2015). "When bad things happen to poor, country, uneducated, stereotypically black people, is it not still a tragedy? Or just funny?" (Lang, 2015). Or, as the young writer Mackenzie Scott (2017) argues, "Although Wilkins' appearances and Sweet Brown folklore present themselves in different forms, the public sees both as one unified image and persona. Together the humorous dialects have come to represent embodiments of black stereotypes" (p. 2).

Sweet Brown's image in memes seems to provide a deeper insight into such comments. In contrast to the content that Sweet Brown (and her agent) have control over, such as her official Twitter account, Sweet Brown memes display a much more insulting use of her image and catch-phrases. The memes frame Sweet Brown in one of two ways: either as a joke or a negative stereotype. In the memes that portray Sweet Brown as a "joke," with no agency, the viewer is invited to laugh at her, not with her. For example, one meme contains a still image of Sweet Brown, altered to show her with a top-hat and a monocle with the following text "One does not have time for such affairs." Another meme has an image of Cinderella running down a set of stairs with Sweet Brown's face pasted onto Cinderella's body, with the caption "Then I ran out. I didn't grab my shoes or nothin', Jesus."

But many of the memes are simple still images from the original Sweet Brown clip laden with offensive messages such as these:

- Fried chicken, Ain't nobody got … well, maybe I got a little time …
- Correct grammar? Ain't nobody got time for that.
- Taxes. Ain't nobody got time for that.
- Get a gold tooth? Well, I do got time for that.

There is even a digital card produced by SomeECards that has the caption: "And then he told me to get a job. Ain't nobody got time for that!" and a drawing of a woman in a business suit. In this light, it is not surprising that our initial encounter with Sweet Brown was a result of searching for poverty-bashing memes. The interplay of stereotyping across media platforms transformed Sweet Brown into a visual synonym for

poverty and other stereotypes, and ultimately framed her as a person that everyone is allowed to ridicule.

Discussion

This is a story about a fire that broke out in a low-income apartment complex that caused major damage to many of the apartments and resulted in over a hundred people being temporarily displaced and dependent on the Red Cross for emergency housing. It also resulted in one woman having to go to the hospital for treatment of minor burns and smoke inhalation. However, that is not the story that caught the media or the public's attention. Instead, what received wide coverage and became sensationalized was one woman's telling of the events live on camera to a television crew. "Sweet Brown" shared the story of what had happened to her in the early hours of that morning in such a way that the public deemed funny, and she herself became the story.

The way in which the local news coverage of the fire was framed was the first step in this process. The local news channel chose to feature Wilkins' description of the fire—perhaps because she was an eyewitness, but more likely because the producers knew their audiences would be amused by Wilkins' account. They foregrounded Wilkins' account of the fire and made it more salient than questions about the risks associated with living in low-income housing. That clip resonated on social media, which detached Sweet Brown from the actual news (of the fire), and further framed the incident as being about Sweet Brown and not the fire itself. As Sweet Brown's image went viral, the legacy media was not immune to her amusement value, and it continued to frame Sweet Brown as a stereotype with entertainment value. By going viral on social media, Sweet Brown became legacy media's click-bait as well.

Though Wilkins showed an astute ability to cash in on this, she also added to this framing of herself. She continued to perform the personality expected of her, to perform Sweet Brown, and seemed to never get tired of saying "Ain't nobody got time for that" to get a few laughs. Her "Cold Poppin" YouTube music video shows her in a most unflattering light, waking up on a couch, pulling out a pack of cigarettes from her bra, and then proceeding to recite all of her oft-repeated lines from the original interview.

Wilkins was also offered a starring role in a reality television series, an opportunity that could have resulted in a potentially large market audience for her products. Wilkins described the show's theme as a mix of two[7] enormously popular television shows from the 70s and 80s, both of which focused on formerly poor families moving to privileged and wealthy neighbourhoods to get laughs when they "shake up the privileged society with their hayseed ways." Wilkins said the show would be "hilarious" and "filled with laughs." As one reader's comment posted in response to an article in *MadameNoire* about Wilkins, suggested, "when you see a Black image promoted in the media you should always ask, 'Why was this particular image chosen?' These decisions do not happen in a bubble" (Victorian, 2012). In another article, in response to some previews of Wilkins' reality show released on YouTube, the writer suggested, "It's difficult to watch these videos and not sense that their popularity has something to do with a persistent, if unconscious, desire to see black people perform" (Harris, 2013).

Over and over, in social media, in legacy media, and in the content of her own making, Sweet Brown is framed as a joke. Her image invites viewers to laugh with her

and at her. The humour obscures the class conditions that created the situation that launched her to fame in the first place. Her complicity in this framing gives the audiences the permission to laugh not just at her, but also at everyone else the audiences might want to believe is like her—African American women, low-income Americans, people with gold teeth, do-rags, or whatever else Sweet Brown, the character, has been associated with.

According to Martin Gilens (1996), the public are greatly influenced by the fact that the Black urban poor dominate news media coverage when it comes to the representation of those living in poverty. Gilens (1996) posits that Black people are often the target of negative stories in mainstream media and overrepresented when it comes to both crime and adult unemployment, resulting in a portrayal that is not only exaggerated when it comes to the proportion of poor African Americans living in poverty, but also creates negative stereotypes that dominate public images and perceptions about those living in poverty. Erin Tolley (2015) argues that a news story that includes a person of colour is framed differently than a "similar story about a white subject," and the media's portrayal of race has not only a negative and significant impact on public discourse, it can also impact how citizens vote and even "discourage potential candidates from running for office" (p. 23).

As William Gamson, David Croteau, William Hoynes , and Theodore Sasson posit (1992), when the production of images is emphasized "rather than facts or information," it is important to be mindful that these images, and even "facts," obtain meaning by "being embedded in some larger system of meaning or frame" (p. 374) and can have a potentially huge impact on public perception. Research demonstrates that how a news story is told and framed, and the specific lens in which it is portrayed, has an undeniable effect on both the perspective and response to the story of those it reaches (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Valentino, 1999; Williamson, Skocpol, & Coggin, 2011). Through the selection of certain issues and events, and by framing these issues and events in a strategic and determined perspective, news and social media can legitimize and reinforce stereotypical portrayals of race and class. Patricia Collins (1991) writes that the media perpetuate and replicate the domination and negative stereotypes of people of colour through the circulation of images that portray them in ways that enable classism and racism to seem natural. As Stephen Caliendo and Charlton Mcllwain (2011) said, first, "we unconsciously 'notice' racially marked features, like skin color or eye shape, while ignoring other visible traits" (p. 206). Further, Lisa Nakamura (2014) argues that despite claims or denials about rampant and widespread racism online, the internet has increased and extended the reach and power of racist images through the circulation of racist memes. Nakamura (2014) reminds us, however, that it is not simply the "internet" that is to blame or responsible for this, of course, as "people are a crucial part of the infrastructure of archiving, transmission, and circulation of digital media" (p. 272). In other words, it is people who are responsible for the creation and circulation of racist stereotypes in media. Some of these negative stereotypical images circulating, as defined by Collins (1991), include the "mammy," and "the bitch," and the criminal, all which normalize racism in media. Perhaps this explains in part the intense focus and attention around Sweet Brown's

way of sharing her story, which led to the overnight fame of certain sentences and phrases she used when speaking, such as "Ain't nobody got time for that." Michael Parenti (1992) posits that not only do print and television news coverage play a crucial role and have an enormous impact on how the public learn not only about their own communities but also about minority communities as well. This means the perpetuation of stereotypes about minorities becomes an important part of the public's education about "others." Joseph Rose (2014) concurs, and argues that racism is rampant in the news media, and is a "tool that has been historically used by those seeking to preserve the racial status quo" (p. 9).

The participatory nature of social media offers the potential for more diverse portrayals of human experience, including those of racialized and low-income groups, but this potential has hardly been realized. While more diversity *can* exist on these platforms, the voices that counter the dominant narratives remain largely marginalized. In fact, social media platforms have also served as breeding grounds for oversimplified and discriminatory discourse (Awan, 2014; Dobson & Knezevic, 2017; Knezevic, Pasho, & Dobson, 2018; Lim, 2017). In other words, social media has served as a reductionist and essentialist echo chamber for those marginalizing stereotypes pervasive in legacy media. As Merlyna Lim (2013) writes, social media has dramatically accelerated the production and circulation of information, necessitating simpler and shorter narratives, only reinforcing the trend that was already in place in legacy media as it tried to adapt to the increasingly competitive and technologically expedited media environments (see also Lim, 2018; Mitchell & Lim, 2018). Moreover,

> [w]hile facilitating freedom of expression, social media also encourages users to practice their freedom to hate, where individuals exercise their right to voice their opinions while actively silencing others, and provides fertile ground for the flourishing of sectarian and racist narratives. (Lim, 2013, p. 14)

Additionally, social media has affected legacy media, but not in diversifying the discourse. Instead, social media has become a gauge for what stories are deemed "newsworthy" (Broersma & Graham, 2012; Martin, Corney, & Goker, 2015), and what type of media coverage is likely to draw audiences and generate click-bait stories. Coverage of social media's viral content has become a staple of legacy media's content. As such, the two types of media now reinforce each other and consequently reproduce discourse, including stereotypes. The case of Sweet Brown shows that this is more than just in bad taste, it is consequential. The framing of Sweet Brown cast her as a joke, turned her into fodder for stereotyping, and at the same time relegated the real story— a residential fire in a low-income neighbourhood and the social conditions surrounding it—to the sidelines.

Conclusion

The Sweet Brown case study illustrates the interplay between legacy and social media, which can serve to reproduce stereotypes and social marginalization. There is much discussion about the potential for social media to democratize, empower, and emancipate, representing a more participatory model of media production and distribution

that opens up gateways and removes barriers, challenging hegemonic narratives that are constructed through legacy media depictions of marginalized populations. This articles argues that in contrast to this celebratory discourse, the picture is often more complex: rather than social media serving to subvert legacy media, there is often an interplay between the two, with depictions in one directing narratives produced in the other. Further, the same qualities of social media that are often portrayed in an optimistic light—the alleged capacity to open up dialogue to a multitude of voices—can in fact strengthen the construction of stereotypical, harmful images, as complex social issues are reduced and simplified. The "Sweet Brown" story began with legacy media coverage that was then "taken up" by social media, which packaged the story into a simplified image/narrative that played into harmful stereotypes about race and poverty, and in turn directed subsequent legacy media coverage about the phenomenon. This interplay reduced Kimberly Wilkins to the one-dimensional Sweet Brown character. More than that, it shepherded along the willful ignoring of the real social issues associated with Kimberly Wilkins and her community. Apparently, "ain't nobody got time" for such discussions.

Notes

1. As a campaigner for Donald Trump's 2016 presidential run in the United States noted "we did it, we memed him into the presidency, we memed him into power … because we directed the culture" (National Public Radio, 2017).

2. The term "meme" was coined in 1976 by the biologist Richard Dawkins (2006) who defined it as "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (p. 194). The definition of "meme" is subject to debate, but the term now commonly describes easily spread online content (Berger & Milkman, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). Most commonly, the term "internet meme" refers to an image with a simple commentary or caption (Hadley, 2016). A Google search for "internet memes" reveals that the vast majority of search results use a small set of very similar templates.

3. The original news interview was with News Channel 4, KFOR-TV, Oklahoma City. The video was posted on the channel's website the next day with a title "OKC apartment complex catches fire, 5 units damaged; Sweet Brown explains" (see KFOR-TV & K-Querry, 2012, and KFOR Oklahoma's News, 2012).

4. Martin, a Florida teen, was fatally shot in 2012 by a neighbourhood watch volunteer who successfully claimed that he acted in self-defense as Martin appeared suspicious to him; as Martin was African American, and his shooter was not, the case became one of the galvanizing moments in contemporary American race politics.

5. *MadameNoire* is an online magazine that describes itself as, "a sophisticated lifestyle publication that gives African-American women the latest in fashion trends, black entertainment news, parenting tips and beauty secrets that are specifically for black women."

6. With the exception of the above-mentioned tweet on Yahoo hack posted on December 14, 2016.

7. The two television shows were *The Jeffersons*, which featured an African American family, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, which featured a "hillbilly" White family, both of which focused on the antics of formerly poor families now living among a much more privileged and wealthier class.

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