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We are constantly bombarded with media messages. More than just being helpless consumers to these messages, Art Silverblatt provides, one could say, defense mechanisms to these messages that are persistently trying to break through to audiences and get inside their heads. They are the ‘keys’ to interpreting media messages. These keys discuss knowing the importance of the origination of a media message, who the intended audience is, and how the importance of historical and cultural context shape the media messages being consumed in this media saturated environment. The rise of digital media plays an important role in how information is gathered and shared at an alarmingly fast rate. The globalization of media brought on by the internet makes it possible for a non-credited news source to share a message to someone on the other side of the globe. Due to the sophistication of technology, it is possible to see how many people are viewing certain content and the popularity of a certain message. Through the process of internet sharing on social networks, a video can go viral; meaning that it is being shared and received by thousands of viewers in a short amount of time. A recent example of this is the “Bed Intruder Song.” Stemming from a news report in Huntsville, Alabama, Antoine Dodson’s comments concerning the attempted rape of his sister were reconstructed into a song, which then instantly went viral. The underlying functions of this song reveal racial and cultural stereotypes. Furthermore, it is interesting to note how the entertaining song is receiving widespread attention, while the original crime that spurred Dodson’s emotional

outbursts is being completely ignored. Armed with Silverblatt's keys to media literacy, the level of importance attached to the song over the crime will be analyzed along with the racial stereotypes driven by the mockery of the interview and Dodson himself.

The process of creating a media message involves exploring who is responsible for creating the media production, what the underlying functions are, and who the intended audience is. When exploring the origins of the "Bed Intruder Song,"¹ the face of Antoine Dodson is seen singing the lyrics to the song, with additional solos from a reporter and another woman at the same place as Dodson. One would almost automatically assume that Dodson himself wrote the song and put it on the popular video sharing site, Youtube.com. However, after further viewing it is evident that this song is an after-the-fact remix of an excerpt from an actual television news show. There is a reporter with a microphone, graphics onscreen detailing what news station it is and what eyewitness is speaking.

On July 28, 2010, a news report on the station WAFF-TV aired from reporter Elizabeth Gentle concerning an attempted rape in Huntsville, Alabama (Carvin). The victim's brother, Antoine Dodson, is featured in several "sound bites" expressing his anger and fears about the incident. His emotional outbursts created enough of frenzy in Huntsville, that a person(s) decided to share the video and it eventually ended up on YouTube.com. For a couple months it took off as a humorous video due to the over-the-top outbursts of Dodson. The reason why such a horrid crime suddenly appeared humorous will be discussed later when exploring historical and cultural contexts of the media message. Then, a group known as the Gregory Brothers approached Dodson about auto-tuning the news report. The purpose of the production of the actual song is that the Gregory Brothers took a popular viral video of the news and made it into entertainment. The Gregory Brothers, consisting of Evan, his wife Sarah, and his brothers Andrew and Michael,

¹ As officially listed on iTunes, available for download.

are known in cyberspace for their popular segment, *AutoTuneTheNews(ATTN)*, which can be seen on their YouTube channel (TheGregoryBrothers.com). The brothers take everyday news segments and turn them into entertaining songs using a device called an auto tuner. Their basis for ATTN is to take daily, non-stimulating news and make it more entertaining. It helps the singer reach perfect pitch, and is known for its distinct sound, making the singer's voice sound digitalized, robotic almost. MTV correspondent Kyle Anderson explains further, "The technique used these days is actually a software program created in 1997 as a means of audio processing. When a singer's voice is filtered through Auto-Tune, the pitch is tweaked depending on what tone is pre-programmed into the software. The result is the robotic-sounding effect that is familiar from Cher's 1990s hit "Believe" and was later pushed into more common usage by T-Pain" (MTV.com).

As a result of the auto tuned version of The Bed Intruder, the song sold 10,571 copies on iTunes in the first two days and broke into the Billboard Top 100 (Ehrlich). Half of all profits that the song makes go to Antoine Dodson, while the rest to the Gregory Brothers, iTunes, and YouTube. On a positive note, the money that Dodson has earned from the song has helped his family buy a new house and move out of 'the projects.'

According to Art Silverblatt, "context refers to those surrounding elements that subtly shape meaning and convey messages" (66). The cultural context of the "Bed Intruder Song" and its rise to popularity as a means of entertainment reveal America's racial views as it perpetuates stereotypes of African-Americans in the projects. According the Census Bureau, Huntsville, Alabama is estimated at approximately 62% white and 33% African-American. Antoine claims that he resides in 'the projects', a low income neighborhood, and therefore it is safe to assume that it's part of the lower/working class. The reporter, Elizabeth Gentle, along with the news

station WAFF 48, could have had a skewed view of the incident as lower-income neighborhoods have statistically higher crime rates. When asked about the decision to air the piece, including the numerous outbursts of Dodson, Gentle defends herself saying, “Some have contacted our newsroom saying that interviews with people like Antoine reflect poorly on the community. To that I say censoring people like Antoine is far worse” (Carvin). However, the question of whether or not it was really necessary to air so many of Dodson’s comments remain part of the controversy. Do his comments add to the journalistic value of the news story? Or could have the segment gone without most of them? To some it seems that the station and the reporter knew that there would be humor to some in it. Before going viral, local members of the community complained to WAFF offices about the decision to air the content claiming that it perpetuates stereotypes against African-Americans. Now that the video has achieved so much fame through the use of digital media, anyone can comment or blog about their thoughts on the incident. Some are offended by the news station’s decision to air it but most just find humor in it. The medium’s distinctive characteristics allow comments to be posted and shared throughout the web and when the video is over, the viewer has a choice of watching more videos similar in content. In fact, the original version done by the Gregory Brothers encourages viewers to post their own recordings of themselves performing the “Bed Intruder Song.” A YouTube search of the “Bed Intruder Song” yielded 5,280 results. That’s 5,280 postings of the video itself and parodies of the video.

Although it seems like pure entertainment, Baratunde Thurston, web editor of TheOnion.com describes his feelings on the viral video,

“As the remix took off, I became increasingly uncomfortable with its separation from the underlying situation. A woman was sexually assaulted and her brother was rightfully upset. People online seemed to be laughing *at* him and not *with* him (because he wasn't laughing), as Dodson fulfilled multiple stereotypes in one short news segment. Watching the wider Web jump on this meme, all but forgetting why Dodson was upset, seemed like

a form of ‘class tourism.’ Folks with no exposure to the projects could dip their toes into YouTube and get a taste” (Carvin).

In fact, in a recent CBSonline interview, Dodson continues to press the issue. He states that he is now using his popularity to reach out to other rape victims. In the interview Dodson reveals that he is a rape victim himself, and says that he reaches out to his fans who have also been raped. On the other hand, Dodson has also posted a YouTube video of himself promoting his merchandise on DistrictLines.com, which carries many different t-shirts and hoodies sporting lines from the song and Dodson’s angry face from the interview. Dodson also recently appeared on the BET Hip Hop Awards performing his song live with Evan Gregory.

The success of the “Bed Intruder Song” and the skewed image of African Americans in the projects contribute to our culturally-driven racial stereotypes. In most news segments, eyewitness accounts, such as Antoine Dodson’s account of his sister’s attempted rape, are brief and straight to the point. The only need for them is to add credibility to the report by reinforcing the fact that people actually saw news happen. The short interview with Kelly Dodson, the victim, could have sufficed as enough commentary to make the story credible. The news station NBC owned WAFF-48 made a poor decision to air his comments. Instead of calling attention to the criminal activity occurring in the neighborhood, the station made a mockery of the African American lifestyle in the projects. Now the nation and certainly people across the globe aren’t sharing in Dodson’s pain, but finding entertainment value in it. The latent function of the news report is just that; it appears to be an informative report but underneath it is what Baratunde Thurston describes as ‘class tourism.’ In fact, does anyone even know if the criminal, the attempted rapist, was ever even caught? How come no one asks? What does this say about American culture and the importance of social problems versus the importance of good entertainment?

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