

#IfTheyGunnedMeDown Campaign

Misrepresentation in the media is an issue that black people have had to face for decades—particularly in the realm of state-mandated violence. Many victims of militant police brutality are often demonized in the media to help justify their own murder and exonerate the perpetrator of the victim’s death. The creation of #iftheygunnedmedown campaign has been attributed to the police shooting of Michael Brown, after which many media outlets utilized photos of Brown holding up a hand sign in lieu of a flurry of other more humanizing photos in order to craft a narrative around him being a part of a gang. As stated by Roni Johnson, Brown was “flashing what has been interpreted as both a peace sign by some and a gang sign by others” (Johnson). This purposefully harmful framing is often utilized in conjunction with guns, alcohol, tattoos, clothing deemed inappropriate for public viewing, and other paraphernalia assumed dehumanizing under the gaze of respectability politics.

To contrast these disrespectful stereotypes and schemas around the duality of black people and whether or not it should be honored, many of the community took to Twitter to post supposedly contradictory “photos of themselves – one where the subject looks wholesome, and another where the same person might look like a troublemaker” (NPR). The hashtag shed more light on what Johnson terms ‘The Inequitable Media Landscape’, in which particular groups are “overrepresent[ed]...such as African American males, [which] can lead to stereotypes and hostility toward those groups” (Jackson).

The #iftheygunnedmedown campaign was one formative in shaping many younger people’s understanding of how “the police...the media” and “those with power and authority”, an insightful movement built off of the taking of an innocent black life. It leaves one to wonder:

how many more similar campaigns will there be before the framing that the media so often utilizes for black victims of police violence is firmly dismantled?

Works Cited

Jackson, R. (2016). If They Gunned Me Down and Criming While White: An Examination of Twitter Campaigns Through the Lens of Citizens' Media. *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies*, 16(3), 313–319. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532708616634836>

Chappell, Bill. (2014, August 11). *People Wonder: 'If They Gunned Me Down,' What Photo Would Media Use?* NPR.
<https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/08/11/339592009/people-wonder-if-they-gunned-me-down-what-photo-would-media-use>