



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

MISCELLANEOUS

Altered meaning of Zimmerman's 911 call

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment April 5, 2012 11:00 AM

Where is the outrage? More to the point, where is the news coverage?

You may have missed it. Actually, unless you were searching for it (or are a frequent viewer of Sean Hannity's [show](#)), you probably did.

It seems that a version of the 911 tape that we all heard over and over again of George Zimmerman calling the cops to report suspicious behavior by 17-year-old Trayvon Martin just before fatally shooting the boy was like something out of the Nixon White House -- edited. Sure, we all heard it with our own ears, but it is what we didn't hear that's key to understanding the confrontation between the neighborhood watchman and the Skittles-toting youngster.

Back on March 27, a full month after the shooting, NBC's *Today Show* aired Zimmerman's call to the police, featuring these words: This guy looks like he's up to no good & he looks black. The recording then went viral as did the presumption of racism in Zimmerman's overreaction. The juxtaposition of Martin looking suspicious and looking black was enough to accelerate a firestorm of anger and protest.

Apparently, hearing is not exactly believing, or rather shouldn't be. The folks at the *Today Show* had shortened the Zimmerman tape for broadcast (as if the show didn't have lots of time to devote to the story).

Here is the fuller version of the recording:

Zimmerman: "This guy looks like he's up to no good. Or he's on drugs or something. It's raining and he's just walking around, looking about."

911 dispatcher: "OK, and this guy -- is he black, white or Hispanic?"

Zimmerman: "He looks black."

And so, Zimmerman's description of Martin as looking black came only in response to a specific question about race/ethnicity.

Earlier this week, NBC revealed its blunder. "During our investigation it became evident that there was an error made in the production process that we deeply regret," said the network said in a prepared statement. "We will be taking the necessary steps to prevent this from happening in the future and apologize to our viewers."

It surely helps that NBC has apologized for altering the tape. This should alter how we all view the incident and perhaps we should collectively apologize for prejudging, if not misjudging, the circumstances surrounding divisive episode.

NBC has to answer for its error of "omission" -- omission of a few key seconds from the 911 recording. But so too does the broader news media need to answer for its decision largely to ignore NBC's distortion after having reported heavily on the response.