

CNN Blasted Over Erroneous “Dark-Skinned” Bomber Report

Written by Hazel Trice Edney
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CNN, which has prided itself as a world leader of news and information, has come under scorching criticism after reporter John King, a senior correspondent for the station, erroneously described the Boston Marathon bombing suspect as a “dark-skinned male”.

Both suspects, Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, brothers of Chechnyan descent, turned out to be white-complexioned, a fact that has drawn scorching criticism from civil rights leaders and even fellow journalists who described King’s reporting as irresponsible and racially inflammatory. Dzhokhar is now hospitalized with gunshot wounds. Tamerlan died amidst a gun battle while running from police.

“The false reporting by the media in the Boston bombing case was offensive and inflammatory, including specific references by CNN’s John King who labeled the alleged suspect as a “dark-skinned male” perpetuating a stereotypical characterization devoid of relevant facts about the suspects identity,” said the Rev. Al Sharpton in a statement after criticizing King on his MSNBC show, PoliticsNation. “It was irresponsible and misleading to characterize the suspect by his race and it made every dark skinned male in Boston a suspect. If I reported that a “white skinned male” was being sought after, I would be publicly maligned as a “racial agitator.” The media must be responsible and put facts in proper context.”

The two bombing blasts that took four lives, wreaked havoc in Massachusetts, causing rippling affects across the nation. Memories of Sept. 11, 2001 were quick to return; especially with the uncertainties of the motive for the blast and who exactly had committed the attacks. Also similar was the tendency to falsely accuse people of color even before there is evidence or proof.

The NAACP piled piled on the “inflammatory” reporting.

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“The fact that this information was false is only part of the problem,” said NAACP President and CEO Benjamin Todd Jealous in a statement. “Our concern is that CNN used an overly-broad, unhelpful and potentially racially inflammatory categorization to describe the potential suspect. History teaches us that too often people of color are unfairly targeted in the aftermath of acts of terrorism.”

In the NAACP statement, which described the reporting as “irresponsible, reckless, and counterproductive”, Jealous concluded, “We ask that CNN and all media outlets exercise caution and weigh the potential implications of such categorizations in future reports.”

On Monday this week, CNN had issued no statement in response to the criticism. But King has vehemently defended himself, according to Twitter posts reported by Richard Prince’s Journal-isms. “ ‘Source of that description was a senior government official. And I asked, are you sure? But I’m responsible. What I am not is racist,’ the anchor wrote Thursday,” according to Prince’s report, quoting a story by Erick Hayden of the Hollywood Reporter.

Though King has been apologetic for the error, some of his own colleagues say that doesn’t go far enough. Donna Brazile, a CNN contributor, said the network; not just King, should apologize for the report.

“I cringed when I heard it,” Brazile was quoted in a Prince story covering her during a forum at George Washington University, where she was speaking on “Race and the Race for the Presidency.” She continued, “Without a picture. . . . just putting that statement out. It brought me back to my childhood, when they would always describe the color of a person’s skin . . .I believe an apology is owed, not just to dark-skinned people,” she added.

Typically, when a reporter makes an extreme mistake, the station or news agency will take responsibility for issuing an apology. CNN has not said why it feels exempt from the professional protocol.

Among others, the National Association of Black Journalists also weighed in on the criticism, giving a bit of advice:

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“NABJ in no way encourages censorship but does encourage news organizations to be responsible when reporting about race [and] to report on race only when relevant and a vital part of a story,” the organization said in a statement. “Ultimately this helps to avoid mischaracterizations which might encourage potential bias or discrimination against a person or a group of people based on race or ethnicity.”