

EconoFact Chats: Tracing the Impact of Early Popular Media on Racial Hate in the U.S.
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Published on 2nd July, 2023

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I'm Michael Klein, Executive Editor of Econofact, a nonpartisan, web-based publication of the Fletcher School at Tufts University. At Econofact, we bring key facts and incisive analysis to the national debate on economic and social policies, publishing work from leading economists across the country. You can learn more about us and see our work at www.econofact.org.

Michael Klein

It's common today to hear the argument that pervasive social media has contributed to polarization and even violent behavior. But, as it turns out, this is not a new phenomenon. In fact, viewings of the very first movie blockbuster, the 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*, has been shown to have fueled racial violence and the rise of a hate group, by my guest on Econofact Chats today, Desmond Ang. Desmond is an economics professor at Harvard Kennedy School. His article, *The Birth of a Nation, Media and Racial Hate*, has just been published as the lead article in one of the most prestigious scholarly journals, *The American Economic Review*. Desmond, welcome to Econofact Chats.

Desmond Ang

Thank you so much for having me, Michael.

Michael Klein

Desmond, I know your research interests include the effects of racial discrimination, and in fact, you have a nice Econofact memo on the effects of police killings in minority neighborhoods that we published back in 2020. But how did you get interested in cinema, or at least in the social effects of *Birth of a Nation*, a film that the American Film Institute listed as the 44th best film of the 20th century?

Desmond Ang

Yeah, so I think that there's this big question that we're grappling with today, and you brought this up, Michael, which is, what's the role that media has played, social media, polarized media, et cetera, in the rise of hate crimes and mass violence in recent years? At the same time, even though a lot of that attention is focused on things like hyper-partisan media, if you just look at the stuff on TV – and you know, I watched a lot of TV – or in movies, there's just so many different social norms that are being transmitted through the plots that are on screen, the imagery, the characters, that will reflect, I think, a lot of different stereotypes we have around race, gender, sexuality, et cetera. So that's always really fascinated me. But it's also a really hard thing to think about. How would you identify the effects of that type of media, to be able to say that media is really affecting people's behavior and their racial attitudes, and not just reflecting those things? And so, *The Birth of a Nation* is a super interesting case study for reasons that you brought up, Michael, which is, this is really the first big blockbuster that existed

in America. It's also quite racist, and so it gives us a way of really trying to isolate the impacts of this type of media at a time when media markets weren't so saturated.

Michael Klein

So I want to return to that issue of how you can identify, because you did that in a really clever way. But before we turn to that, for those of us who have not seen this silent film, and I'm included in that group, can you please describe the movie and its plot?

Desmond Ang

Yeah, so the movie is based on this novel called *The Clansman*. The gist of it is that it's sort of like this fictional retelling of the Civil War and Reconstruction, where the little hero of the movie is this Southern guy who forms the KKK in the film, in order to fight his Northern oppressors. So as you might expect, there's a ton of racist stuff in the movie, showing African Americans as predators, and a lot of stuff really glorifying the KKK. And so that's the plot in general. The other thing about the movie was that it was just very well done in the same sense that we think of American blockbusters today. So it was really long, it was three hours long, there were really high production values, lots of action, etc. A lot of the things that people sort of turned out to see today, they turned out to see in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Michael Klein

So I guess it was rated the 44th best film of the 20th century, not because of the content, but the cinematography, and the new use of cinema and the way in which it was presented. Movies today are released simultaneously in theaters across the country, or at a minimum, first in a set of large markets like New York and Los Angeles, and then more widely. But that wasn't the case in 1915, correct? And in fact, that's the identification strategy that you were able to use. Can you describe how *The Birth of a Nation* was released?

Desmond Ang

Yeah, so the film was released at a time when most or a plurality of counties in this country, something like 40% or 50% of counties didn't have a movie theater. And so it wasn't like today when John Wick 4 comes out, and it's shown at all AMCs across the country. There weren't AMCs just everywhere across the country. And so instead, the film's distributor, Epoch Production, took the film on a roadshow where they would go from city to city with the film, the projection equipment, the orchestra, etc. It'd show up in the city for a weekend or a week, and then move on to a different city. And they could only do this in areas where there are big enough sort of like opera houses or existing theaters to be able to show it.

Michael Klein

And then the way in which it was screened sort of sequentially across the country enabled you to do your analysis. As economists would say, it provided you with an identification strategy. Can you explain how you use the sequential showing of *Birth of a Nation* to figure out its effects on racial animosity?

Desmond Ang

Yeah. So by looking at newspaper ads, we're able to figure out exactly where and when *The Birth of a Nation* was shown during this roadshow period. So this lasted about five years. It would go, again, from different cities to other cities. And so in the short run, when you know the film showed up in a given city at a given date, you can leverage the timing of that and the location of that to look at the occurrence of lynchings and race riots, these very heinous acts of racial violence in sort of the immediate wake of when the film showed up in the area. You can compare those trends to other areas sort of around where the film was shown in the same state or further away.

Michael Klein

So Desmond, what did you find about the effects of the screenings of *The Birth of a Nation* on lynchings and race riots? And clearly, by passing the very high bar of having your paper published in the *American Economic Review*, you convinced referees and the editors that this conclusion was valid. How were you able to ascribe these acts of racial hatred to the film, and not because of other reasons?

Desmond Ang

What we find is that when the film showed up in the county, that area is then about four times more likely to have a lynching or race riot in the month after the film was shown there. And again, you know, the way that we're trying to sort of identify this and be able to say that this is about *The Birth of a Nation* having these effects and not just these areas are going to have a lot of racial violence anyways, is by really using the timing and location of these showings. And so we know precisely the date that these things showed up. We know the date of these different lynchings and race riots. And so you can see, you know, before and after in a county, the occurrence of these events. After they received *The Birth of a Nation*, you can compare that to just general trends in the area in the same state for areas that didn't receive *The Birth of a Nation*.

Michael Klein

As you mentioned in describing the film, *The Birth of a Nation* glorifies the Ku Klux Klan, and it led to its resurgence. I found it really interesting in your article, the description of the evolution of the Klan in the 19th century, how it was quashed, and then how it re-emerged in the late 1910s and 1920s. Can you speak a little bit about the path of the Klan?

Desmond Ang

Yeah, I mean, it's kind of a crazy story. So when *The Birth of a Nation* was released in 1915, the KKK hadn't existed for decades, actually. The first KKK, the early KKK, which the film purports to show, was this sort of secret insurgent group that was targeting black leaders and white sympathizers in the Confederate South. And they had actually been wiped out during Reconstruction after the passage of the Enforcement Acts in 1871. But then after *The Birth of a Nation* was released, a few months afterwards, actually, on Thanksgiving Day in 1915, the KKK is revived under new leadership by this Methodist preacher named William Simmons, who was inspired after having heard about *The Birth of a Nation*. And so over the following decade, the

KKK just exploded. At one point, membership reached something like four million members, which was approximately one in every six adult native-born white male in this country as part of the KKK in the 1920s.

Michael Klein

One of the other really interesting points you brought up in your article was how the iconography of the KKK in the film found its way into the actual second birth of that hate group, but was not present in its initial configuration.

Desmond Ang

Yeah, you know, I think the KKK is probably the most well-known hate group in the U.S. – in American history. At this point, I'd imagine most Americans know what a Klan member looks like in terms of the white robes and the white hoods. They also probably associate the Klan with certain actions like cross burning. But the original KKK, the one, again, that the film sort of purports to show, didn't actually wear white robes or hoods, nor did they burn crosses. These were essentially just inventions of the film. So in *The Birth of a Nation*, the Klan members are shown wearing white robes and hoods. They're shown burning a cross after lynching a black man. And all of these things became then packaged and presented as these longstanding traditions of the original KKK, which, again, they weren't. And so that became part of the Klan that was revived under William Simmons. It's part of the Klan that exists even today.

Michael Klein

So it's probably just like D.W. Griffith thought that it made for good cinema to have white robes and white hoods or to have burning crosses. And so people, in fact, then picked up on that, correct?

Desmond Ang

Yes, that's exactly right. So the burning cross was something that was drawn from Scottish traditions by the author of the Klansmen, actually. The white robes and hoods were most likely just like an imagery thing that popped well on film. But then people really just took that to very much associate that with the KKK. And then that just very much became replicated in reality.

Michael Klein

The Birth of a Nation is a racist film, and anti-Black, but the KKK went well beyond this to be xenophobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic. How did this happen? And when did this happen?

Desmond Ang

Yeah, so the KKK, certainly the first version of it in the 1800s, was very much targeted and shaped around anti-Black racism. The early version of the Klan after *The Birth of a Nation* was also focused on that, having drawn from *The Birth of a Nation*, which is really about anti-Black racism. But then over time, as immigration to the United States from Europe sort of picked up, the group began antagonizing other groups, Catholics, Jews, foreigners, Muslims, etc. And that has really just sort of evolved over the past hundred years.

Michael Klein

One article that I read talked about the sort of destruction of the KKK in the, I guess, 1950s and 1960s. And one way that it was destroyed was it made public, the language that it used. And it was kind of ridiculous. And it actually was destroyed by humor in a way, along with, you know, sort of a crackdown on its racist and anti-Semitic and xenophobic and anti-Catholic activities. What did you find subsequently about what happened to the KKK into the 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s?

Desmond Ang

Yeah, so, I mean, you're right. The KKK really had some of its downfall in the 1940s and 50s. You're totally right that a lot of the imagery and the words that Klan members use are pretty humorous from an outsider's perspective. But the Klan still exists today. You know, there's a third iteration of the Klan today that, again, looks like the second KKK. It's just under different leadership. And so what we find in this paper is that, even today, areas that showed *The Birth of a Nation* historically are more likely to have a Klan chapter, they're more likely also to have some other type of white supremacist hate group in those areas – something like 90% more likely to have a white supremacist hate group. And they also experience higher rates of hate crimes, not just against black people, but also against other sorts of marginalized groups. And so again, you know, some of this identification is coming from the fact that *The Birth of a Nation* appeared at a time, and was released at a time when a lot of counties just didn't really have movie theaters. And so that allows us to compare counties that were super similar to each other, same state, similar sort of like historical racism with regards to lynching, slaveholding, etc. Similar sort of economics in the different areas, except one area, by virtue of having a theater in 1915, when the film was released, versus another area that wouldn't get a theater until 1919, after the roadshow, was unable to show *The Birth of a Nation*. And so comparing across those different types of counties, we find these pretty large and dramatic long run effects on racial animus and violence.

Michael Klein

So Desmond, this is really interesting from a historical perspective, but there's that famous saying, history doesn't repeat, but it rhymes. And I started off the interview by talking about the way in which media affects people's views today, and can even lead to polarization and even violence. What does your research about the screening of *The Birth of a Nation*, more than a century ago, tell us about the current situation of how media affects people's views, maybe especially toxic hate views?

Desmond Ang

I think this study really shows that media can have this big effect on toxic hate views, racial violence, etc, in the short run. But then I think perhaps the scary part is that it can also play this role in the establishment of these institutions, in this case, the institution of hate around the KKK. And these things just persist, right, they just kind of go on for some period of time. I think there's a lot of parallels to what you brought up with regards to hyperpolarized media today. I think there's also a lot of parallels with regards to this increasingly blurred line between fact and fiction that we see in a lot of media or news media today. *The Birth of a Nation* was the first film

ever shown in the White House. And afterwards, President Woodrow Wilson was purportedly quoted as saying, "my only regret is that it is also terribly true". And, you know, the movie was obviously not factual, but we can see how, you know, these things can sort of bleed into people's imagination of what is real and what isn't. At the same time, I think that the results really make us think about the effects of popular media, like entertainment media, which we often don't really interrogate too closely. I think today, most people would look at *The Birth of a Nation* and agree that it's super racist. But when it was released, that very much wasn't the case. Social norms were very different at the time. And a lot of the stereotypes are just taken sort of wholesale in that way. And so I think we do need to really interrogate the more subtle messages that TV shows, films today have about race, gender, sexuality, etc. Like what are the things that 100 years from now people are going to look back on and say, you know, I can't believe we put that on screen. And how will those things have sort of affected the shape of society?

Michael Klein

Another thing that I thought was interesting was the way in which you pointed out that this was sort of the first big blockbuster film. And there are a lot of cinemas that could not accommodate the orchestra and so on. So basically, when this went around, there weren't a lot of other outlets, there weren't a lot of other things for people to look at. And so it became very dominant. So after that, you know, TV becomes more dominant, radio becomes more dominant, but there are fewer stations. So everybody was watching, you know, Walter Cronkite. Now, in a way, we've almost returned to that situation because there are so many outlets and so many niche outlets that people can just watch Newsmax or get all of their information from Fox News. And so there is, again, sort of a way in which people can view a very narrow thing, and that's all that they watch. In 1915, that's all they watched because that is all that was offered. In 2023, that's all they watch because that's all they choose to watch. And it's become so niche, they can look for whatever they were going to agree with to begin with, and they're left in a bubble.

Desmond Ang

I think that's totally right. Media markets have just become way more saturated, but at the same time becoming more segmented in a way, right? And people really can select into exactly the type of news media they want, right? And exposure to the exact types of movies and films and TV shows that they're interested in. And a lot of this is also fed to us through algorithms. And so, I think that makes it, on the one hand, from just like an identification standpoint, it becomes a lot harder to think about how you would ever identify long run effects of something you saw on TikTok today, even though that's like what people are looking at all the time, right? Just because there's so many different stimuli that people are facing. And so that's a challenge from us thinking about that empirically. But then I think that there's also this potential effect of these things, you get inured to these things over time, right? So maybe if you see a bunch of violent movies in a row, like the hundredth one you're going to see in your lifetime is not going to have the same effect as the first one. And so in this paper, we're really looking at the first American blockbuster. That's not to say the blockbusters today have the exact same impact or that we would expect that to be the case. But I think it does give us a pretty clean view of how these things can affect society and racial violence, etc.

Michael Klein

And the other perhaps parallel is that people weren't used to seeing movies, as you're suggesting. So it's a very dramatic way, instead of being told a story or something, to have the images and so on. Today, we have ways in which computer generated graphics and so on make fictional things look very, very lifelike. So again, we have this, in a way, a parallel that people are being exposed to things that they had not seen before or seem like things that they've seen before, but in fact are not. And so all sorts of stories can be told, images can be presented that are false, but it's very hard for people to discern whether or not they're false.

Desmond Ang

Yeah, and I think that's totally right. And I think there's, again, a lot of similarities with what was going on with *The Birth of a Nation* in the sense that, you know, 1915 was, you know, 50 years or so after the Civil War. Reconstruction was still sort of a salient thing. Jim Crow was certainly, you know, coming about as a salient thing. And people had ideas of what that was. And they saw *The Birth of a Nation*, and they kind of took it wholesale, that that was sort of a representation of what actually happened during the Civil War, and what actually happened in Reconstruction, etc. And that's very much reflected in Woodrow Wilson's quote, again, where he's essentially like, you know, all this, all this stuff I just saw on screen was like, what actually happened. And that clearly had some influence on how people responded.

Michael Klein

The thing is, Woodrow Wilson was a college professor and college president. He should have known better.

Desmond Ang

He's a well-educated guy. Yeah.

Michael Klein

Yeah. So it's very striking that he himself made that kind of statement. Well, Desmond, thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me today. Congratulations on the publication of this in the flagship journal of the American Economic Association. Thanks for just making this really interesting historical episode more apparent and more clear to many, many people.

Desmond Ang

Thank you so much, Michael.

Michael Klein

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