

Gordon College

Seek the Truth:

How NASCAR and the Media Mishandled the Talladega Noose Investigation

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Sonja K. Foss' book *Rhetorical Criticism* outlines several different methods of application for media criticism. While all of these methods have their own merits to them, Foss acknowledges that the best way to engage in rhetorical criticism, particularly for "seasoned rhetorical critics" (411), is through no single formal method of criticism. This method is called "generative criticism," where the writer builds a more general explanation of the artifact rather than following a previously developed method of criticism. This project will employ generative criticism to analyze the events that led up to the noose investigation in NASCAR driver Bubba Wallace's garage stall at Talladega Superspeedway in June 2020, how both mainstream and alternative media covered the story, how almost every single outlet and media member got some part of the story wrong (whether it be entirely through their own negligence or with the help of a hastily released statement by NASCAR the night of the original report), and how the failure to get the story right proved detrimental to NASCAR, the credibility of the media, and, through no fault of his own, the public reputation Wallace himself.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police while being arrested for allegedly using a counterfeit bill. Video showed officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on Floyd's neck for several minutes, while Floyd pleaded "I can't breathe" before succumbing to the brutality (Brooks). The incident sparked nationwide outrage and protests, which had already been escalating following the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor in February and March respectively. While the world dealt with a viral pandemic in COVID-19, it became clear that the centuries-long pandemic of racism was still active in the United States and around the world.

As part of the protests, professional sports leagues and their athletes began to get involved in the fight for equality and social justice. NFL athletes began announcing plans to

protest during the national anthem again (Schwartz), while the NBA revealed that they would display “BLACK LIVES MATTER” on their courts and allow players to put social justice statements on their jerseys once the league returned from the suspension forced by the pandemic (Brito).

NASCAR had historically been known as one of the more socially conservative sporting organizations in the country, even in recent years. Despite making an effort to ask fans not to display the Confederate flag at their racetracks in 2015, many fans continued to do so (Armus). The sport had also only recently launched a “Drive for Diversity” program, which aimed to increase diversity in the sport with female and minority drivers, crew members, etc.

One of NASCAR’s first graduates of the Drive for Diversity program was Darrell “Bubba” Wallace Jr. Wallace worked his way up through the NASCAR ladder by advancing to the Camping World Truck Series in 2013, when he became the first Black driver to win a NASCAR national touring series race since Wendell Scott in 1963, and only the second ever. Wallace would go on to win a total of five Truck Series races before being promoted to NASCAR’s Xfinity Series in 2015 and eventually the top level, the Cup Series, in 2018.

Flash forward to 2020, and NASCAR had resumed its season as the lockdowns began to ease. After Floyd’s death, Wallace, still the only Black driver full-time in NASCAR’s top divisions, began to become more vocal in the fight for equality. Wallace wore a t-shirt that read “I can’t breathe” before the June 7 race at Atlanta Motor Speedway (Vera). The next day, he called on NASCAR to impose a hard ban on the Confederate flag from appearing at all NASCAR race tracks. NASCAR announced such a ban on June 10, the same day Wallace ran a #BlackLivesMatter paint scheme on his car at Martinsville Speedway (Armus). Wallace’s team, Richard Petty Motorsports (RPM) had failed to secure sponsorship for the race, so the team

suggested to Wallace the idea of running an all-black car with a message to honor the movement. (It is worth noting that this was not a sponsorship, as the organization that happens to go by the name “Black Lives Matter” was not involved in this deal at all.)

Predictably, Wallace’s vocal support of these things was criticized by many of the older generation of NASCAR fans. Eleven days later, on June 21, NASCAR was scheduled to run a race at Talladega Superspeedway in Alabama. The race at Talladega was the first since NASCAR’s return from the suspension of the season forced by the COVID-19 pandemic to allow limited fan attendance, sparking several protests on location. Fans arrived outside the track to proudly display the Confederate flag, while a handful of vendors at the track sold memorabilia featuring the flag. Most notably, a small plane flew over the track before the race was scheduled to begin, flying a banner with the flag and text that read “DEFUND NASCAR” (Rapp). The Sons of Confederate Veterans organization claimed responsibility for the flyover. Ultimately, inclement weather forced the race to be postponed, and it was rescheduled for the following afternoon.

While all of these things certainly caused frustration for both Wallace and NASCAR, a report that was released late that evening sent shockwaves throughout the NASCAR community. At 10:46 pm EDT, Fox Sports’ Bob Pockrass tweeted a “statement on a noose in the garage stall of Bubba Wallace.” The statement said that NASCAR had been made aware “late this afternoon” that a noose had been found in the No. 43 RPM team’s garage stall, while NASCAR stated, “We are angry and outraged, and cannot state strongly enough how seriously we take this heinous act.” The statement continued, indicating that NASCAR would launch an immediate investigation into the matter, while removing the person(s) responsible from the sport and reaffirming their commitment “to make the sport open and welcoming to all.” NASCAR

president Steve Phelps later reiterated that anyone found responsible would be “banned from this sport for life,” adding “I don’t care who they are, they will not be here” (Golden).

It is important to note how NASCAR’s statement was released. NASCAR described the incident as a “heinous act,” condemning it and noting that an immediate investigation was being launched. With that, there is nothing in this statement that would imply any reason to believe that a hate crime had *not* been committed. Very little further context was given besides that statement which had just been released. There were no photographs of the noose, nor was it made clear exactly what was being investigated. It was later reported that a crew member from Wallace’s team had discovered the noose and was the one who told Wallace’s crew chief, Jerry Baxter, before Baxter informed NASCAR of the situation.

The context of the circumstances of the situation combined with the preceding weeks’ events is worth remembering. Wallace is the only Black full-time driver in any of NASCAR’s top three national divisions. Racial tensions in America were continuing to rise following multiple tragedies. Because of these things, Wallace felt obligated to speak up. He had just honored Floyd’s memory with an “I Can’t Breathe” t-shirt at Atlanta. He ran an unsponsored car with the #BlackLivesMatter message to promote compassion, love, and understanding at Martinsville. He had (successfully) pushed for NASCAR to finally institute a hard ban on the Confederate flag from being displayed at NASCAR events and on NASCAR property. And now, in the Deep South, protesters had shown up to Talladega Superspeedway in large numbers, bringing the Confederate flag with them despite NASCAR’s ban. With all of these things in mind, it should not be unreasonable to assume Wallace would be a target for undue hate this weekend.

The following day, June 22, NASCAR and its drivers organized a tribute to Wallace, pushing his car to the front of the grid at the end of pit road before pre-race ceremonies. Wallace was personally greeted by virtually every Cup Series driver as well as his car owner, Richard Petty. The race went on that afternoon without much trouble. It was won by one of Wallace's close friends, Ryan Blaney, while Wallace would finish fourteenth (McCarriston).

As NASCAR had handed the investigation over to the FBI by this point, very little new information was known by Monday afternoon and in the immediate hours following the race. However, this did not stop conspiracy theorists from offering their opinions over social media. Popular conservative YouTuber Mark Dice simply tweeted at 6:36 pm, "Bubba Smollett," in reference to the African American actor Jussie Smollett who was charged with staging a fake hate crime assault in 2019. Other alternative media personalities made similar claims despite there being no evidence to suggest that Wallace was behind the fabrication of a fake hate crime.

The following day, June 23, an FBI statement only further fueled these claims. The FBI had completed their investigation and determined that Wallace was not the victim of a hate crime. They also stated that the "noose" was a pull-down rope for the garage door in Wallace's team's stall, and had been there since at least October 2019, the last time NASCAR had held a race at Talladega (Haislop). Photographic evidence later confirmed that the rope had been tied into such a shape when the No. 21 Wood Brothers Racing team had been assigned the stall the year before, though the Wood Brothers team was cleared of any wrongdoing and was fully cooperative through the investigation. Ultimately, the FBI continued to refer to the rope as a "noose" throughout its statement, saying "Although the noose is now known to have been in garage number 4 in 2019, nobody could have known Mr. Wallace would be assigned to garage number 4 last week" (Haislop). In summary, the entire incident was ultimately a

misunderstanding, as no hate crime had been committed, and the fact that the sport's only Black driver was the one who was assigned that stall was merely an awful coincidence.

When these findings were released, public outcry skyrocketed. Trending topics on Twitter included "Bubba Smollett" and "Fake noose," while many members of conservative and alternative media wrongly condemned Wallace for the incident. However, it is worth going back to NASCAR's original statement to find the source of the problem. Had their statement been worded better, some of the undue outrage towards Wallace could have been prevented, mainstream political media and NASCAR media members would not have been able to run with the story the way they did, and NASCAR would have come out of the situation looking much better.

NASCAR's original statement released the night of June 21 said that the sanctioning body condemned "this heinous act." Because of this (and especially with limited media access for many journalists and organizations due to the pandemic), it was reasonable to interpret and assume that NASCAR's statement was confirmation that a "heinous act" or hate crime had in fact taken place. (Phelps would later admit that NASCAR should have used a word such as "alleged" in their original statement.) Due to the results of the FBI investigation, we now know that, in actuality, the investigation was done to determine what the so-called "noose" actually was, why it was there, how long it had been there, and answers to other basic questions. Ultimately, the following day's moments that came out of the news that night made for wonderful and beautiful displays of solidarity, though they were unfortunately based upon a "hate crime" that was, upon further investigation, simply a misunderstanding. Again, it should be kept in mind that the media had limited access due to the pandemic, making it harder to ask questions and investigate the incident for themselves. They largely only had NASCAR's

statement to work with, and because of its poor wording, they spent a day and a half reporting on an apparent act of racism that was actually a misunderstanding.

While mainstream media and NASCAR-centered media got the story wrong due to the poorly worded press release, many members of alternative and politically conservative media also got the story wrong due to their own negligence and unwillingness to investigate the story in full. PJMedia's Victoria Taft mocked Wallace for "taking the cue" that he had been the victim of a hate crime despite the fact that he was only told what had happened. She also criticized him for appearing on CNN with Don Lemon and expressing his frustration over people on social media attacking his character.

Taft's criticism of Wallace was very little compared to others. Dice released a video on his YouTube channel mocking those who rallied around Wallace as "virtue-signalling" and implying that Wallace should have apologized for the incident rather than appearing on Lemon's show. Former police officer Brandon Tatum released a video entitled "NASCAR Bubba Smollett LIED ABOUT THE NOOSE," which is, again, inaccurate, since Wallace was only told about the situation from his team and from NASCAR. Author Candace Owens also compared Wallace to Smollett, tweeting, "I'm just amazed that so many people actually believed that someone left a noose in Bubba Smollett's NASCAR garage." Author, scholar, and YouTube personality Steve Turley went so far as to accuse Wallace of "racism deception," erroneously reporting Wallace as having engaged in a hate hoax by reporting the noose himself. While these are only a few examples, each of these pundits has hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of followers. Because of this millions of people who were largely unfamiliar with the story now believed that Wallace was "Jussie Smollett 2.0" and had somehow been behind the creation of a fake hate "hoax" for

attention. In reality, Wallace was simply sitting in his motorhome at the track when he received a call from Phelps, who then informed him of the situation.

To further complicate matters, NASCAR did not complete their own investigation until Thursday of that week, June 25. By this time, the story had largely run its course, and the general public had made up their minds depending on what they had heard and the sources from which they had heard it. However, new findings and photographic evidence were released that added important context to the story. A close-up picture of the garage rope was published, verifying that it was, in fact, tied in a knot that resembled a noose. Phelps reaffirmed “the noose was real” and stated, “our initial reaction was to protect our driver.”

Part of NASCAR’s investigation was to look at every track that held NASCAR-sanctioned events to see if Wallace’s oddly tied garage rope was one-of-a-kind or part of a pattern. After investigating all twenty-nine tracks on the NASCAR schedule, a total of one thousand six hundred eighty-four garage stalls, only eleven featured a pull-down rope that had been tied into a knot, while Wallace’s Talladega stall was the only stall where the rope had been tied into a noose. It can be argued whether or not the rope in question was a true “noose” or a garage pull fashioned like a noose (and perhaps not necessarily a “noose” per se). However, because of this part of the investigation, it is inaccurate to dismiss the rope in Wallace’s garage stall as “just a garage door pull.” Of the over sixteen hundred garage stalls investigated, the fact remains that Wallace’s Talladega stall was the only one that had a rope tied in a shape that, at the bare minimum, resembled a noose.

Just under two weeks later, the story was brought back to mainstream attention by none other than the President of the United States, Donald J. Trump. At 8:33 a.m. EDT on July 6, Trump asked on his Twitter account: “Has @BubbaWallace apologized to all of those great

NASCAR drivers & officials who came to his aid, stood by his side, & were willing to sacrifice everything for him, only to find out that the whole thing was just another HOAX? That & Flag decision has caused lowest ratings EVER!” While reviving the subject nearly two weeks after the investigation was completed was strange enough, Trump’s tweet contained multiple statements that are morally questionable at best and simply factually inaccurate at worst.

The first part of Trump’s tweet asks if Wallace had apologized for his role in the incident. In reality, Wallace has nothing for which to apologize. Once again, it is worth remembering that Wallace was only told by his team and by NASCAR that a noose was found in his garage. For his part in this situation, he never saw it in his stall; instead, a member of his team reacted and presented the situation to NASCAR, who then released their initial statement. The only group that ought to be expressing regret in this situation is NASCAR, whose president did indeed admit their statement should have included the word “alleged.”

Trump then implies that Wallace’s fellow drivers and NASCAR’s officials “were willing to sacrifice everything for him,” referring to the pre-race ceremonies at Talladega the day after the initial report. In this tribute to Wallace, NASCAR’s drivers, crew members, and officials stood in solidarity with the only Black full-time driver in NASCAR’s top division. It is hard to understand how these groups of people doing so involves any sort of sacrifice. Given the information available at the time, it was not unreasonable to believe that Wallace may have been the victim of a hate crime. If showing support for Wallace was “sacrificing everything,” Trump’s definition of the word is either skewed to mean something unorthodox, or he believes the sport’s support of their only Black driver was some sort of “sacrifice.”

Next, Trump refers to “the whole thing” as a “HOAX.” The definition of hoax implies that there would have been some sort of malicious deception behind the story or investigation.

Once again, this is simply an inaccurate branding of the event. For multiple reasons, there was genuine concern for Wallace's safety. While the investigation determined that Wallace was not a hate crime victim, calling the situation a "hoax" would only be accurate had someone at NASCAR or Wallace's team used the investigation to intentionally deceive the public. Therefore, "the whole thing" should be referred to as a misunderstanding or a rush to judgment rather than a hoax.

Finally, Trump then implies that the noose investigation and "Flag decision" (referring to NASCAR's Confederate flag ban) were responsible for NASCAR's "lowest ratings EVER." In reality, NASCAR's television ratings have been steadily declining for several years. Reasons attributed to this may include NASCAR's constant championship format changes, the retirements of popular drivers such as Jeff Gordon, Tony Stewart, and Dale Earnhardt Jr., or the decline of sports ratings in general. While NASCAR's ban of the Confederate flag may have turned off a small minority of fans in the Deep South, it also has the potential to bring new fans into the sport as a sign of NASCAR's effort to be more welcoming and inclusive towards minorities.

Later the morning of Trump's tweet being published, Michael Mulvihill, Fox Sports' executive vice president and head of strategy and analytics, tweeted that NASCAR's ratings on the Fox family of networks had increased eight percent since the return to racing following the pandemic. *The Charlotte Observer's* Alex Andrejev also noted, "Despite numerous delays and postponements due to inclement weather since the sport returned amid the pandemic, television viewership and Nielsen ratings have not consistently dropped, nor have any changes been in direct correlation with the flag ban." Additionally, ratings for NASCAR's July 5 Brickyard 400 at Indianapolis Motor Speedway were released the afternoon of July 6 and signaled a forty-six

percent increase over the previous year's edition of the race. While the comparison is not a direct one as the 2019 Brickyard 400 was held in September and faced competition from National Football League games, the 2020 race was also the second-highest rated since NASCAR's return to racing, behind only the first race back at Darlington on May 17, making this the worst possible day for anyone to tweet about NASCAR having their "lowest ratings ever." In summary, Trump's tweet on the subject was filled with misinformation due to his rush to judgment, the very thing he was trying to criticize with his thoughts on the matter.

It is fascinating how this garage door pull rope fashioned as a noose sparked such a wide variety of opinions, analyses, and conclusions. Ultimately, when all the facts are analyzed and every part of the story and investigation is considered, we can conclude that virtually nobody handled the situation perfectly. Rhetorical criticism can be applied to most things, and this is no exception. Perhaps those who rushed to judgment could be forgiven based on NASCAR's errors given the pathos many people were feeling at the time. Racial tensions were (and still are) high in the country, and the emotions of the idea that the only Black driver in NASCAR's Cup Series may have been under attack for the color of his skin is understandably enough to warrant anger and outrage.

Logos is equally as important, however, and this was apparent through NASCAR's initial statement. Because the wording was fumbled to make it seem that the noose was a known heinous act, many people were led to a continued failure to achieve good logos as they branded the situation a "hoax." Pathos cannot override logos. When serious news with serious implications breaks, those in power have to ensure they make every possible effort to get their words right.

Ultimately, when a misunderstanding gets this out of hand, the final mode of rhetorical persuasion, ethos, is damaged beyond repair for virtually everyone. NASCAR's ethos is damaged as their president had to admit their statement should have been worded more carefully. Mainstream media's ethos is damaged as well for being so quick to react to the news and draw their own conclusions. (Of course, the wording of NASCAR's statement did not help matters, but those members of the public viewing audience who tend to already be skeptical of the media only continue to lose trust in the media after a situation like this.) Alternative media's ethos is damaged by making a false equivalence to a real hoax situation. And even the President of the United States sees his ethos damaged for failing to show full understanding of the situation despite having nearly two weeks to gather all the information and form his opinion on the subject.

Unfortunately, the biggest victim in this media misunderstanding is ultimately Wallace. As recently as September of this year, when it was announced Wallace would be leaving Richard Petty Motorsports following the conclusion of the season, Jim Hoft of *The Gateway Pundit* brought the incident back in his article and wrongly branded the event as a "hoax." Additionally, when it was announced Wallace would be driving for a new team owned by NBA legend Michael Jordan in 2021, a right-wing YouTube channel called "Sports Wars" released a video accusing Jordan of "going woke" and again labeling Wallace as "Bubba Smollett." Despite not being the victim of a hate crime, Wallace is the victim of being at the center of a story that was so badly mishandled that an entire branch of alternative media threw him under the bus for perpetuating a fake hate hoax, when nothing could be further from the truth.

When the garage door pull rope fashioned in the shape of a noose was found in Wallace's garage, Wallace, his team, and NASCAR had every right to be concerned, fear the worst and

launch an investigation. But NASCAR's rush to release a statement led to a misunderstanding that further divided the country's view on race relations in an era where tensions are arguably the worst they have been in decades. The major lesson to come out of this story, particularly for people in the media, is the golden rule of journalism: it is better to be right than to be first. When situations like this occur, distrust is sowed in the media, credibility is damaged, and the character and integrity of those involved by association are damaged by many members of the viewing public, whether justified or not. Wallace is innocent in this case and has every right to be furious at those attacking his character. Then again, had NASCAR and the media focused on finding the facts before rushing to judgment, perhaps those unjust attacks could have been minimized or avoided entirely.

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