

**The Iron Cage of Culture:  
Some Reflections on the Complexities of Race,  
Racism, and the Mass Media\***

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In organizing this conference Michel Vieviorka asked, “is the concept of racism as pertinent as in the past to account for contemporary experiences?” The answer in the United States with respect to the mass media is clearly “no.” In arguing this I suggest that the U.S. mass media has gone (broadly and loosely, to be sure) through three stages: (1) overtly racist; (2) color-blind; (3) affirmative efforts.

In the first stage the press was notoriously racist in its treatment and non-treatment of African-Americans. Its sins were of commission and omission. It symbolically and cognitively demeaned and it reinforced racial inequality as Myrdal documents in *An American Dilemma*.

In Southern newspapers, blacks were referred to by their first names (the terms “Mister” and “Miss” were not used) and their photos were rarely shown. Editorial and news items supported a belief in their biological inferiority. Blacks were not employed as reporters or photographers let alone as editors or executives. They were absent from advertising. The occasional news about them was usually negative—dealing with crime and social problems. In the North some of the nastier symbolic slights were not as apparent, yet African-Americans were largely invisible or visible in a negative way.

This pattern of either ignoring blacks or treating them negatively continued into the first half of the Twentieth Century. A number of studies have documented this. For example, a 1929 study of 17 major newspapers found that only 2% of the news was devoted to coverage of blacks and the majority of that dealt with crimes committed by blacks.

A later study of four major newspapers in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s found increased coverage of blacks in the 1970's—but much of this dealt with criminals or entertainers.<sup>1</sup>

In a second stage which gained momentum after WWII, the press became more color-blind and tried to be race neutral. More attention was given to news about blacks and the obvious symbolic slights and explicitly racist editorials became less common. Yet “habits of the heart” (in Tocqueville's lovely phrase) are deeply ingrained and often tacit. The implicit perspective was white given the backgrounds of those who owned, advertised and produced the news.

Negative (or at least the absence of positive) racial outcomes were institutionalized—woven into customary, unreflective practices. Media gatekeepers play a vital role in creating the news and filtering it through their perceptual frames.<sup>2</sup>

A third stage became evident following the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* in 1968 which called attention to racism throughout American institutions.<sup>3</sup>

In this stage efforts go beyond obvious discrimination and an effort to be “color-blind,” to more active efforts to overcome past problems. This has involved a variety of actions from consciousness-raising and sensitivity training to affirmative efforts to see minority groups represented in all phases of the media process.

\*English version of “La cage de fer de la culture. Réflexions sur le problème complexe de la race, du racisme et des mass media.” In M. Wieviorka (1993), *Racisme et modernité*, Paris: Editions la Découverte, pp. 60-77. Presented at International Symposium on Racism, Paris 1991. Thanks to Jerome Aumente and Oscar Gandy for assistance.

For example, Gannett, the United States' largest newspaper chain with 88 daily papers, has a clear policy of greater inclusion of minorities in all aspects of the news creation process. Through active efforts 11% of its news staff are minorities. Reporters are given lists of minority group persons to use as sources and attention is given to racial representativeness in news production. Reporters and photographers are encouraged to include minorities in all stories, not just those involving racial matters and to seek out stories and photos that put minorities in a favorable light. The front page of *USA Today*, for example, usually shows a photo of minorities and minorities are included in general and specific news stories.

Of course, the U.S. has only haltingly moved toward becoming a post-racist society with respect to the mass media, as seen in laws and public pronouncements of media elite. In a conference on racism, such as this, a term such as "post-racist" is likely to be viewed skeptically. Intent and outcome, formal and informal, are not necessarily equivalent, nor are the media homogeneous.

The U.S. is hardly a multi-racial paradise, yet compared to its own past or much of Europe, it has, at least at the level of public discourse, denied legitimacy to overt racism and taken some steps beyond color-blindness to overcome it. Yet neither the absence of virulent racist communication, nor the presence of color-blind, race-neutral passive policies, nor the presence of affirmative efforts, have been sufficient to guarantee racial equity (whether at the level of culture or social structure) and harmony. The media in the United States remain an area of racial contention. For overlapping (and some distinct) systemic reasons involving cultural, social, and psychological structures and sometimes random contextual factors, problems continue—even if they are less serious than the problems of a blatantly racist press.<sup>4</sup>

My concern is with these subtler aspects. One could call this article "Racism Isn't the Only Cause, Good Intentions Don't Guarantee Good Outcomes."

My observations will generally be restricted to race, to the dominant groups' print media<sup>5</sup> and to the United States. But I think that my ideas also apply to other societies where the media are of good will and whether the issue is one of differences involving gender, social class, life style or television, movies, radio or other forms of electronic communication.

I will consider 5 categories of complexity which vary in generality:

- a) Audience resistance
- b) Value conflicts between universalism and particularism, race and gender; economic and civic concerns
- c) The kernel of truth in some stereotypes
- d) The opaqueness of culture
- e) Unintended consequences

### 1) *The Audience May Resist the Message*

There is a sense in which neither the medium nor the message is the message—instead the audience is the message. A message which is clearly intended to be non- or anti-racist will not necessarily be seen that way. It is easy to fall into the error of thinking that all members of an audience are simply passive reactors of good will who will reach the right conclusions about the problems of racism if given a clear message. It is easy to exaggerate the power of the media.

Contrary to popular beliefs, seeing is not necessarily believing. Selective perception is common. This was vividly brought home to me as a graduate student when I encountered a social psychological study that measured subject's degree of prejudice. They were shown a picture of a white person holding a knife facing a black. When asked afterwards what they had seen, many of the more prejudiced “saw” the black person holding the knife.

The satirical American TV program, “All In The Family,” was designed to combat prejudice and intolerance by poking fun at them. The leader character, Archie Bunker, is a crude, bungling, uneducated bigot. But research in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands found that many prejudiced people completely missed the point. They identified with Archie and he served to legitimate their prejudices. It is a sociological truism that where you stand depends on where you sit, not only on “objective reality.” Those with strongly held prejudices are unlikely to be changed by a well-intentioned media.<sup>6</sup>

### 2) *Value Conflicts*

We will consider three types of value conflicts—between economic and civic concerns, universalism and particularism, and race and gender. The conception of the mass media as a profit-making enterprise may mean actions that hurt minorities, apart from overtly racist intentions. For example, the Los Angeles Times in an effort to increase profits from advertising was perceived to have given increased coverage to suburban news and less to central city news.

Increased suburban subscriptions is a legitimate business goal, but the fact that minorities disproportionately live in the cities may then mean less attention to them.

There may be a conflict between doing well and doing good, between economic concerns with profit maximization and civic concerns with social responsibility. As long as in principle there is unlimited print access (unlike the limited number of air waves) there is no “fairness doctrine” and government will not seek to regulate print behavior. As long as media are treated as private property to be used as their owners see fit, there may be a clear value conflict between actions in pursuit of profit and the press' pursuit of broader civic goals.<sup>7</sup>

A second example involves the eternal conflict between values of universalism and particularism implicit in the discussion at this conference regarding the nation, the state, ethnic groups, and individuals. There are paradoxes for ethics, public policy, and empirical analysis in the fact that subordinate groups are both the same and different from the dominant group.

How should a society committed to tolerance and equality and the idea of universal citizenship deal with this? To treat minority group members in the media differently can be seen as “typecasting” and stereotyping and may further divide the society.

It may inhibit critical thought regarding the socially constructed nature of ethnicity and the synthetic and changing nature of human culture. It can mirror the racist's assertions of differentness and be seen as a type of discrimination.

In a “damned if you do, damned if you don't” situation, well-meaning dominant group members may be attacked for treating minority group members the same as everyone else.

This can involve cultural imperialism and insensitivity to a group's genuine differences or needs. Or, they may be attacked for treating them differently.

The Buffalo News (New York) offers an example. In a recent case it broke with its usual policy of not showing photographs of persons arrested for serious crimes. The case involved five black police officers arrested on drug charges. The editor of the paper noted that they had been hired under a controversial federally imposed affirmative action process which the paper supported. He believed that to run the pictures would imply that the program was a failure and he noted that black youths need positive role models. The editor notes, “I was practicing discrimination by not running those pictures and I wasn't happy about that. But it was the right decision at the time.” Many persons would support his decision, but it comes at a cost of violating another value.

Apart from how stories are treated in the newsroom, should minority group members primarily or exclusively be given assignments writing about their own group? On the one hand insiders may have an understanding, sensitivity, access, and legitimacy that dominant group members lack. There are grounds for treating the former differently. But does that also imply they can/should not do “general” or “white” stories? There is also the argument that “insiderness” may be a drawback because one is too close, or too much a part of, the topic. That can affect objectivity and questioning of the taken-for-granted- world. Minority group personnel may believe they have been tracked or side-tracked—slotted into a “ghettoized” position and face marginal career possibilities. Yet to rigidly adhere to a policy of universalism may have obvious costs from a standpoint of the sociology of knowledge—losing the unique insights and sensitivities minority group membership may bring. It may also mean a failure to change entrenched patterns of racial stratification.

A third value conflict may be seen between race and gender. Actions taken on other grounds in pursuit of a goal such as fighting sexism may have negative consequences in combatting racism. An example of this lies in a story of a courageous rape victim who decided to tell her story in the Des Moines Register in Iowa.

She read a column by the Register's editor encouraging rape victims to make their stories known as a means of helping the public understand the horror of the crime. Her story was powerful and moving. The rapist was black and the victim was white.

In reporting the story, the stereotype of brutish black criminality may have been reinforced for the unreflective reader. That was clearly not the paper's intention. In an opinion column the editor noted that in the U.S. only 4% of rapes involve a black man and a white woman and expressed regret that reporting the story perpetuates a stereotype that is contrary to the facts.

One black journalist observes:

If I had been involved in the decision-making process, I would have argued that it was irresponsible for the paper to run—as its first account by a rape victim; in fact, the first such account ever to appear in an Iowa newspaper—a story that is admittedly unrepresentative... [The editor's] statement to this effect does not undo the damage done by reinforcing a stereotype.<sup>8</sup>

This involved a factually accurate case, but not a factually representative case of the broader statistical category. It also supported a negative racial stereotype that was not in accord with the aggregate factual pattern.

Analysis and judgments are complicated by the presence of three variables: (1) whether the case reported is factually accurate, (2) whether the broader aggregate pattern reflects positively or negatively on the minority group, and (3) whether cultural stereotypes of the minority group accurately or inaccurately reflect the aggregate empirical pattern of number 2 above. Combining these yields 12 types with varying implications for images of minority groups and ethics.

The easiest situations from the perspective of anti-racist, journalistic integrity are those where the case in question is accurate, where the case is representative of the aggregate pattern, and where the cultural stereotype is positive (for example, a story about the scholastic achievements of a Chinese-American.) Also easy in terms of a decision not to publish the story would be a questionable empirical account, not representative of the broad pattern, which supports a negative stereotype. The difficulty is most real world cases are mixed and often muddied and won't clearly fit the extremes. There is a great deal of room for disagreement and pulls in opposing directions. The factually correct cases which support a negative stereotype are obvious examples.

### 3) *The Kernel of Truth in Some Stereotypes*

The above discussion relates to what can be called the kernel of truth in some stereotypes. To the extent that there is aggregate empirical correctness to a stereotype for the media to accurately report information on it may mean furthering the stereotype. Yet to fail to report it (assuming it is “newsworthy” by standard criteria) is to lose credibility.

We must confront the difficult issue of “where do stereotypes come from?” Of course, we exclude manipulative efforts to propagandize and scapegoat. Yet, popular beliefs often reflect actual social differences whether the stereotype is positive or negative or neutral. Thus Irish-Americans and Native-Americans do have higher rates of alcohol use than many other groups.

Jews do show higher rates of endogamy. Japanese-Americans are economically more successful than most other groups. As judged by participation in the National Basketball Association, blacks are better at basketball than whites.

A recent case involving a Cuban American journalist nicely illustrates the issue. He enraged Puerto Ricans in his comments in Spanish on why they were less-well off. He noted that female-headed families were associated with poverty and that 31% of Puerto Rican families, 16% of Mexican American families, and 14% of Cuban-American families had female heads. He stated:

There's probably more than one explanation, but the one that seems the most important to me is this: because there is a grave family problem in the Puerto Rican ghettos of the United States, where there are thousands of single mothers, very young, who try to escape poverty through welfare or through new partners who then leave, and leave behind other children to worsen the problem.<sup>9</sup>

This provoked an intense reaction. He was accused of being racist and sexist. A coalition of 25 Puerto Rican organizations pressed for his resignation and urged advertisers to withdraw support. The commentator apologized. While said in an insensitive way and open to misinterpretation, he offered his remarks in a qualified way, noting that there are other explanations; he expresses sympathy for victims of poverty and he could even be seen to view them as engaged in an active (if misguided) search for escape. This is hardly the ugly racism of the American past.

A Puerto Rican leader said, "Freedom of speech is not the right to insult a community."

This highlights the complexity. A society that does not permit a member of a minority (or majority) group to say things that may reflect negatively on another group is in trouble. But so is one in which free speech is abused.

The remark also ignores the question of (outside of obvious extremes) "when has a community been insulted?"

In a point related to the opaqueness of culture, another Puerto Rican reporter observes "What appalls me even more is that the station and this gentleman are Latinos and should be *interpreting facts correctly and intelligently.*" [emphasis added.] This, of course, assumes that there is one correct way to interpret the facts and that it will be a way that does not reflect negatively on the group.

But as we move from "facts" (assuming we can agree on how they are to be measured) to explanations and evaluations, "correctness" becomes less of a scientific issue. There is certainly no easy answer, but the media must make it clear when they are dealing with matters of ostensible fact, when with issues of explanation, and when with issues of evaluation. Even when dealing with matters of fact, they must be alert to choices about conceptualization and measurement and not treat these as "naturally" embedded in the phenomena, just waiting to be discovered. Of course whether the average person will tolerate this degree of specificity, rather than treating possible explanations as established truth, or will reject evaluations that are inconsistent with their prior beliefs and the careful qualifications and tentative statements required by the social scientist is another issue.

#### 4) *The Opaqueness of Culture*

The opaqueness of culture means that one who says culture says politics, and hence there is the possibility of conflict over subjectively based choices. Judgments about the media's behavior are always potentially contentious because of a lack of an objective standard for judging what is news. Even when that is not at issue, as noted questions of explanation and evaluation are always waiting to be disputed. That the same objects or words may have different symbolic and historic meanings to various groups also means sensibilities can easily be offended (e.g., the confederate flag of the Southern States symbolizes slavery to blacks and historic regional pride to many whites.)

The media, like many elements of culture, have an opaque or Rorschach-like quality which offers “room” for alternative interpretations, contrary to what may be the non-racist intentions of those who produce it. This is especially the case for the words chosen to describe behavior, as we move from description of empirical patterns to explanations and interpretations to evaluation.

What, for example, should we call the behavior of young minority group members in Watts, Brixton in England, and Vaulx-en-Velin in France who break store windows, steal goods, turn over cars, start fires, and then throw rocks at police—rebellion, anti-racism, protest, demonstrations, events, riots, urban violence, crime, anarchy, hooliganism? What should we call the response of the police—repression, racism, brutality, military occupation, “maintien de l'ordre,” efforts to restore order, the protection of persons and property, self-defense, law enforcement? Persons with diverse ideologies may agree on the behavioral events—but not on their meaning—whether in social science or evaluative terms.

When the behavior is consensually seen to be undesirable for any group, the prejudiced can call upon racist theory as an explanation. Lower educational and economic achievements and higher arrest rates of a racially distinct group can be seen not as a result of conditions of social structure, but as a result of race as such. Even when non-racial theories are drawn upon the imprecision of our measurements and the complexity of the phenomena mean that there is often room for experts to disagree as well. For example, to what extent is minority group poverty a function of structure or culture? The former places the blame on society, while the latter on the victim.

Robert Merton captures this well for evaluative terms when he notes:

The very same behavior undergoes a complete change of evaluation in its transition from the in-group Abe Lincoln to the out-group Abe Cohen or Abe Kurokawa... did Lincoln work far into the night? This testifies that he was industrious, resolute, perseverant, and eager to realize his capacities to the full. Do the out-group Jews or Japanese keep the same hours? This bears witness to their sweatshop-mentality, their ruthless undercutting of American standards, their unfair competitive practices.<sup>10</sup>

There is a very human tendency to fall back on the conceptual shorthand offered by stereotyping. It is hard to remember that our statements about race correlated behavior are probabilistic—“on the average the rate for group X is higher for Hispanics than for Anglos.”

The evaluation issue can also be unclear to persons of good will. In their study of how U.S. newspapers portrayed African-Americans and whites in Congress, Barber and Gandy found that “Afro-Americans were more likely to be quoted on local and

racial affairs, whereas whites were more likely to be quoted on congressional, international, national, and country affairs.”<sup>11</sup>

How should this finding be evaluated? Does it reflect particularistic racial stereotyping by the media in which blacks are assumed to be experts on their own group and locality and nothing else? Does it reflect a broad difference in patterns of expertise—whether by choice or exclusion? This pattern is certainly preferable to the traditional one of ignoring blacks as sources. A variety of outcomes can be imagined, from permitting one to predict nothing about race and coverage, to the traditional exclusionary pattern, to the pattern above.

#### 5) *Unintended Consequences*

Unintended consequences are always an issue in complex interventions. The inability to think broadly about longer range consequences and excessive zeal may create new problems. In the worst case, efforts to identify and extirpate racism and sexism may ironically result in copy-cat effects and faked incidents, witch-hunts, illogic, stifled spontaneity, the elevation of form over content, impoverished and chilled communication, wasted resources, a decline in tolerance, backlash and humorlessness.

The media's heightened consciousness of racism may create new opportunities which some will choose to exploit. It may do this by way of suggestion. Thus coverage of racist incidents may serve as a model which others copy. Following the attention given to desecration of a Jewish cemetery in the French town of Carpentras other incidents occurred. Such ripple effects have also been noted in the United States.

The media may be taken in by faked events. Some exploiters will try to take advantage of the media's willingness to report racist attacks. When faked events are revealed, it can create cynicism about the authenticity of genuine cases of victimization. This was the case in the Tawana Brawley affair in New York, in which a young black woman's claim to have been horribly abused by several white men (including a police officer and a prosecutor) was not supported by a grand jury investigation. In another example the former president of the Jewish Students' Union on a campus of the State University of New York was charged with printing anti-Semitic slurs near a Jewish sanctuary. He then led a vigil and was quoted in the student newspaper as saying, “does it take an incident like this before Jews and everybody else get together to do something?”

Some anti-racist actions involve a faulty theory of intervention and a misunderstanding of education and of racial and ethnic identity. They may come to reflect and parody the very thing they attack and wish to change. Efforts by the media to do good may backfire, damaging their credibility and minority images. Their actions may be seen as reverse discrimination.

The policy of the largest United States media company, Gannett, of requiring quotes from minorities may mean some readers will disregard this to the extent that they think white sources are chosen because of their expertise and blacks because of their skin color. One Gannett reporter believes that his paper's policy of requiring the use of women and minorities in articles and photographs is “clumsy and becomes almost cartoonish. You start to select sources by how they look, if they wear a skirt, or if they're black. It is an insidious form of racism.”<sup>12</sup>



Joseph Conrad once remarked that “women, children, and revolutionaries have no sense of humor.” I think he was wrong about the first two categories (although the three aren’t always mutually exclusive.) But a sense of humor is often lacking among revolutionaries who police communication for racism and sexism.

Note a proclamation from the University of Connecticut which bans “inappropriately directed laughter.”

Let us consider some recent examples from college campuses. Nina Wu, a student on the University of Connecticut campus got in trouble for violating the student behavior code and was forced to move off campus and forbidden to set foot in any university dorm or cafeteria. Her offense was to put up a sign on her dorm room listing “people who would be shot on sight.”

Included were “preppies, bimbos, men without chest hair, and homos.” She faced charges of violating a student behavior code which prohibited “posting or advertising publicly offensive, indecent or abusive matter concerning persons and making personal slurs or epithets based on race, sex race, ethnic origin, disability, religious, or sexual orientation.”

When some students at Mt. Holyoke College in Massachusetts responded to a “Lesbian/Bisexual Awareness Week” by proclaiming a “Heterosexual Awareness Week,” they were criticized by the college’s president for violating the spirit of community.

One hundred and twenty-five U.S. campuses now have codes to regulate hate speech. A University of California administrator has attempted to ban phrases such as “call a spade a spade,” “a nip in the air,” and “a chink in his armor.” In other settings these slang words can be expressions of prejudice. It has even been suggested in jest that 9-year-old “girls” be referred to as “pre-women.”

At Smith College the Office of the Dean of students gives students a list of ten kinds of oppression to avoid in which judgements are made about people based on things such as:

- a. “Ableism”—oppression of the differently abled by the temporarily able
- b. “Ageism”
- c. “Looksism”—includes the construction of a standard for beauty/attraction
- d. “Heterosexism”—oppression of those of “sexual orientation other than heterosexual... this can take place by not acknowledging their existence.”

A 1989 *Dictionary of Cautionary Words or Phrases* assembled by a group of journalists from leading newspapers lists a number of phrases to be avoided.

These include:

Banana: An offensive term referring to Asian Americans who allegedly have abandoned their culture. Objectionable because no person or group can appropriately attach judgmental terms to others. Just as objectionable: Coconut for Mexican-Americans and Oreo for black American.

Beauty: Avoid descriptive terms of beauty when not absolutely necessary. For instance, do not use “blond and blue-eyed” unless you would also use “brown-haired and brown-eyed” as a natural measure of attractiveness.

Beefcake: Objectionable when referring to male physical attractiveness.

Burly: An adjective too often associated with large black men, implying ignorance, and considered offensive in this context.

Buxom: Offensive reference to a woman's chest. Do not use. See “Woman.”

Codger: Offensive reference to a senior citizen. See “Senior Citizens.”

Dear: A term of endearment objectionable to some. Usage such as “He was a dear man” or “She is a dear” should be avoided.

Dutch treat: To share the cost, as in a date. Implies that Dutch people are cheap.

Fried chicken: A loaded phrase when used carelessly and as a stereotype, referring to the cuisine of black people. Also applies to watermelon.

Illegal Alien: Often used to refer to Mexicans and Latin Americans without visas; the preferred term is undocumented worker or undocumented resident.

Inscrutable: An adjective often carelessly applied to Asian Americans. Avoid all terms that stereotype entire groups.

Jew: Refers to people of the Jewish faith. Some people find use of Jew alone offensive and prefer Jewish person. Not a synonym for stingy. Always used as a noun, never a verb.

Oriental: Unacceptable to some Asian Americans. Use Asian American or Asian(s), the specific term.

Rubbing noses: Allegedly an Eskimo kiss. However, Eskimos don't rub noses and object to the characterization. Do not use.

Senior citizens: Do not use for anyone under 65. In general, avoid ageism by giving ages where relevant.

Do not describe people as elderly, senile, matronly, or well preserved. Also do not identify people as grandparents unless it is relevant to the story. Do not use dirty old man, codger, coot, geezer, silver fox, old-timers, Pop, old buzzard. Blue-haired is objectionable when used to characterize older people.

Sweetie: Objectionable term of endearment. Do not use.

Ugh: A guttural sound used to mimic American Indian speech. Highly offensive.

Woman: The preferred term for a female adult. Girl is appropriate only for those 17 years old and under.

Avoid gal and lady. Also avoid derogatory terms for women such as skirt, broad, chick, bimbo, bumbo, babe, ball and chain, and little woman. Also avoid adjectives describing female attributes or mannerisms such as pert, petite, foxy, buxom, fragile, feminine, stunning, gorgeous, statuesque, or full figured.<sup>13</sup>

### *“The So What?” Question*

In summary, the social science evidence supports the hypothesis that, good intentions and even power, may not be enough. We increasingly see the complexity of social phenomena such as racial and gender inequality, particularly at the level of culture. We must combat overt racism, but fighting the good fight doesn't guarantee cultural equality or dignity. New solutions may create new problems. The image of Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill only to have it roll back is not a perfect metaphor since much progress has been made. Yet progress can create resistance and have other costs. A better image might be a series of boulders linked by gears such that pushing some up seems to push others back or creates an equilibrium.

In organizing this conference Michel Vieviorka asked participants to consider “what do we learn from the implementation of various anti-racist policies?” It is to that question, in what in the American bottom-line, pragmatic tradition is called the “so what?” or “where's the beef?” question that I now turn. I will note the need for more research; for clarity and sensitivity; and will identify eight race-media fallacies to be avoided.

In good social science fashion, there is a need for more research on how the media present and effect racial attitudes and behavior, and in turn are affected by advertisers and audiences.<sup>14</sup>

We need to know more about gatekeepers and their often unrecognized perceptual frames.

How does the dominance of white males effect news selection, collection, processing, and display? How does this change (both as a result of individual effort and composition effects) when people of color, women, and those with non-traditional backgrounds and attitudes are involved? Apart from news producers, there is clearly a need for more research on audiences and on the conditions under which the media effect racial attitudes. When are positive racial messages received as producers intend? When do they backfire? When do the media reflect, rather than shape? More comparisons between media are needed. Do the same conclusions hold for radio, television, and cinema? How does the media's treatment of, and impact upon, race compare to its treatment of gender, class, and other forms of differentiation?

Those working in the media need to be detectors of subtlety and to be highly self-reflective. Both with respect to the big issues of what is defined as news and to the “little” issues involving timing, placement, juxtaposition, and the perceptions of *diverse* audiences. They must attempt to keep description, explanation, and evaluation separate and inform readers of this. The tyranny brought by the sociology of knowledge (or at least intellectual narrowing) can only be controlled by a pluralism of perspectives. Operationally this means minority input at *all* stages of the news process. The media often makes “judgment calls.” There is nothing wrong with that—if it is done with humility and feedback is sought. The question must constantly be asked “how will this story, as presented in this way be seen by a heterogeneous audience?” The different meanings of the past to various audiences must be considered in the contemporary presentation of a story.

Above all, sensitivity is needed. An effectively anti-racist media involves a continual process and constant vigilance. It does not involve a one-time battle or formulaic solutions rigidly applied. In the words of a Gannett executive, “we have no rules as to

how it should be done. Not by numbers and not by ratios. But we're going to do more than what comes naturally.”

It is important to be aware of the expectations we have for the mass media and of the possible positive and negative consequences of our preferences. It is important to be clear about goals and when they conflict to prioritize them. For example, which of the following three views does one hold?

1. The media should be thought of as a science and adhere to norms of objectivity, neutrality, and empiricism;
2. The media should be thought of as instruments of instruction/education whose goal it is to uplift and shape public awareness and values in the struggle against racism (much as the advocacy minority owned- oriented publications have always done.)
3. The media should be seen simply as a business and the exclusive property of their owners, whose obligation is to make money for stockholders. As private property and consistent with the right to freedom of expression, they may use it to pursue whatever editorial practices they wish.

Finally, it is important to avoid eight race-media fallacies which, however emotionally or ideologically pleasing, are wrong—empirically, logically, or ethically. These are subsets of some more general fallacies regarding public policy.

1. It is certainly a fallacy to always blame the victim, but there is a counter-”knee-jerk” fallacy of automatically blaming an ideology of racism, or racists, or members of the dominant group who benefit from the racial status quo. Racially undesirable outcomes may occur independently of racist motives.
2. The fallacy of racial and ethnic identities as biologically determined, homogeneous, unchanging, and unchangeable categories, rather than as socially constructed, heterogeneous, changing, and changeable categories which are, and ought, to be a function of the choices an actor makes.<sup>15</sup>
3. A related fallacy is that membership in a subordinate group necessarily gives one greater empirical insight or moral superiority in mass media production, and that membership in the dominant group necessarily precludes this.
4. The fallacy that racism is a property of the actor, not the act and the derivative fallacy that members of subordinate groups cannot be racist. Racism must be defined by form and content, not by the identity of the actor. It is a property of behavior and setting, not the “behave.”<sup>16</sup>
5. The fallacy of the free lunch or painless dentistry, or that problems have cost-free solutions. This involves a view of public policy interventions as a “zero-sum game” rather than as a series of trade-offs which may involve competing “rights.” This is related to the failure to anticipate unintended consequences and to at least ask whether at some point the “solution” might become the

“problem.” It fails to see the value conflicts that are present. As Edward Shils observes, “civil politics require an understanding of the complexity of virtue, that no virtue stands alone, that every virtuous act costs something in terms of other virtuous acts.”

6. The fallacy that culture (whether expressed through mass media or elsewhere) is merely a tool of power. This is to fail to see the wisdom that (to paraphrase John Dewey) “the aim of culture is partly to enable individuals to pursue more culture.” It is inhuman and banal to reduce all questions of culture whether found in newspapers, archives, or museums to instruments of power.
7. The fallacy of heavy handed overkill or cracking a nut with a sledge hammer—in which there is disproportionality between infractions and sanctions. In cultural matters, that tolerance which is imposed rather than learned and which does not emerge out of negotiation/dialogue, is unlikely to endure beyond the coercive setting and may engender resistance.
8. The related fallacy of fighting too many little battles or making mountains out of mole hills. This is related to the fallacy of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic when you should be looking for icebergs. We shouldn't support bad manners, but it is not clear that we can, or should, outlaw them. We can't police everything and must use our limited resources judiciously.

In conclusion, it is certainly better to have the “problems” or “issues” I describe than the virulently racist media of the United States' past. I strongly disagree with Paul Goodman who said the choice between “the lesser of two evils” is not a choice between half a loaf or a whole one, “but between a more or less virulent form of rat poison.”

I certainly do not offer these observations as justification for undesirable outcomes, nor as rationales for complacency.

Quite the opposite. But good results require more than good intentions and slogans. If we are not to become cynical and disillusioned about efforts to create a better world, we must have realistic expectations and knowledge of the complexity of the conditions we seek to change.

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## *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> As reported in T. Lieb, "Protest at the Post: Coverage of Blacks in the Washington Post," paper presented to The Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, National Convention, Portland, Oregon, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Tuchman, G., *Making News* (New York: Free Press, 1978) and Fishman, M., *Manufacturing News* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> I am, of course, speaking in general ideal typical terms and of the elite media. There are many newspapers and many dimensions for assessing racial aspects (e.g., characteristics of employees, news sources, the way a story is treated, use of words and phrases with negative connotations, timing, advertising, use of photos, etc).

<sup>5</sup> We thus ignore the hundreds of minority oriented and owned media.

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<sup>6</sup> Simpson, G. and Yinger, M., in Racial and Cultural Minorities (New York: Plenum, 1987) offer a good summary of the literature on these aspects.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, it could also be argued that coverage of minorities in a fair way will increase sales to them and others concerned with equity.

<sup>8</sup> Linda Wright Moore, "Can the Press do the right thing?" *Columbia Journalism Review*, July/August 1990.

<sup>9</sup> *The New York Times*, December 31, 1990.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/31/us/comments-on-puerto-ricans-embroil-hispanic-network.html>

<sup>10</sup> Merton, R. Social Theory and Social Structure (New York: Free Press, 1968.)

<sup>11</sup> Barber and O. Gandy, "Press Portrayal of African-American and White U.S. Representatives." In *The Howard Journal of Communication*, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> *The New York Times*, November 27, 1988.

<https://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/27/us/gannett-stressing-minority-groups.html>

<sup>13</sup> As listed in *The New Republic*, February 18, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> For a comprehensive summary, systematic research and suggestions for the multiple dimensions in need of assessment, see Teun A. Van Dijk, Racism and the Press (London: Routledge Press, 1991).

<sup>15</sup> Intellectuals and students must especially be on guard to resist automatically accepting inherited and imposed social categories. This is a license for mindless conformity and a denial of the role of chance in allocating social identities based on birth.

<sup>16</sup> This is not to deny power differentials and relative costs. The social consequences of minority group racism are less harmful in the aggregate and in the short run. This is related to the fallacy that the pursuit of noble ends excuses the pursuer from conventional morality. It denies the warning from the Pogo cartoon strip of some years ago that said, "we have met the enemy and he is us."