

Critique

The basic tenets for this article appear to be the following: “objective” news is possible; that “solely present[ing] facts” equals objectivity; and that “colorblind” news is even a possibility in this society.

An analysis based on the ideal of an objective press assumes that “the media can and ought accurately to reflect the real world, in a fair and balanced way”¹, that in fact the news is, in the old saw, a “mirror of reality.” News is no such thing. Instead, the news is a product of industrial and professional processes that define, select, produce, and sell pictures of the world while insisting to news consumers that “that’s the way it is.” And we must add to the mediation of journalists, journalistic training, news values, and organizational pressures, the fact that language is not a transparent medium, but rather carries within it social values, that is, ideology². This has often been analyzed within news research in terms of how certain peoples, behaviors, events, and movements are labeled and defined³. Similarly, Payne et al. are concerned with the labeling of Jesse Jackson as a black candidate, as a civil rights leader (which they imply, though do not directly claim, is a form of racial labeling and therefore detrimental) instead of as a “Democratic candidate.” They come to the now generally held conclusion that Jackson was never presented by the news media as a serious candidate because of his race, a conclusion I support.

The study, though, and what it could accomplish, is limited by both their theory of the press and their methodology. They ask the wrong questions. They wonder how a candidate might ensure that campaign coverage focuses on issues rather than the “novelty of race, ethnicity or gender.” And as for the reporters, should race be mentioned once and then dropped? Or “is a reference to ethnicity or race throughout the campaign necessary to provide . . . depth. . . ?”

The question should not be “Do the media talk about Jesse Jackson as a black man,” or “Should a reporter use race to describe a candidate,” but rather “How is race signified in American society?” The first possibility for reporters, that race is simply a descriptive term that can then be dropped from coverage, is based on the absurd ideal of a colorblind society. That concept—that race “shouldn’t matter”—not only is unrealistic in a country which always has been and still is racist, but also posits the old melting pot theory that successful racial integration will mean difference disappears (thus, positing, of course, that difference is the problem). Their findings, that the news media covered Jackson as a black man rather than as a presidential candidate, is generally supportable, but Payne et al. missed the most important part of the articles they analyzed: the process by which Jackson’s racial identity was “made to mean” that he was not a serious candidate, that he could not possibly win, and that therefore, did not need to be covered as other candidates were.

This problem results from the authors' use of traditional content analysis. In quantitative content analysis, a method of research with a long history in communications research, categories of content relevant to the research hypothesis are defined by the researchers, and then are used by coders who count the frequency with which the categories (in this case, indicators of bias that the authors have not specified in the article) appear in the news stories. Content analysis thus "assumes repetition . . . to be the most useful indicator of significance."⁴ But repetition is only one way meaning is created in a text. Even one of the originators of content analysis in the social sciences, Bernard Berelson, noted its limitations: "Strictly speaking, content analysis proceeds in terms of what-is-said, and not in terms of why-the-content-is-like-that." As a number of critics have pointed out, content analysis can only deal with manifest content, with denotative signifiers, and not with connotations, the historical and ideological baggage that words carry with them. That is, quantitative content analysis counts the number of times a word appears, but assumes its meaning and assumes that its meaning is constant.

But words have different meanings in different contexts; meaning is social and historical. Therefore, methodologies that take into account the entire text, and the discourses and frames used to construct that text, are more useful in news analysis. They are especially powerful and illuminating when analyzing racial ideologies in the news. An excellent example is Thomas K. Nakayama's study "'Model Minority' and the Media: Discourse on Asian America." Nakayama, using a method of discourse analysis based on the work of Michel Foucault, is able to determine how Asian-Americans have been represented as a "model" to other minorities and to reveal the contradictions in the discourse and their meanings. In addition, his study shows that the discourse of the "model minority" is "a discursive practice of non-Asian-Americans . . . generated from the outside looking into the Asian American community . . . [and] functions to legitimate status quo institutions."⁵

Similarly, while Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States* is not about the news, their definition of "racial formation" as "the process by which social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meanings," the process by which "racial categories are formed, transformed, destroyed, and re-formed"⁶ connects, rather than isolates, the discourses of race that are used in our news media to our social institutions. The methods used by Payne et al. could describe but not explain the situation, and it led them to those perturbing final questions in the conclusion. The questions are disturbing because they reduce the issue of the signification of race to a question of individual reportorial technique and campaign design.

Notes

¹Robert A. Hackett. "Decline of a Paradigm?: Bias and Objectivity in News Media Studies." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. Vol. 1,

No. 3 (September, 1984) 232.

²See especially Gayle Tuchman. *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. (New York: The Free Press, 1978); Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980); Stanley Cohen and Jock Young, eds. *The Manufacture of the News: Deviance, Social Problems, and the Mass Media*. (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1972/1981); and *Ibid*.

³See Cohen and Young; and Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of Ideology: The Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in M. Guerevitch, *et. al.*, eds. *Culture and Society and the Media*. (London: Methuen, 1982) 56-90.

⁴Stuart Hall. Introduction to A.C.E. Smith. *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change 1935-1965*. (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975).

⁵Thomas K. Nakayama. "'Model Minority' and the Media: Discourse on Asian America." *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. Vol. 12, No.1 (Winter, 1988) 65.

⁶Michael Omi and Howard Winant. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*. (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

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The issue of journalistic tradition in campaign reporting of minority candidates is a serious one. The essence of this research article appears to this reader to be one of gradual accumulation of evidence that 'yes,' being a minority (and/or woman) may affect a campaigner's coverage by the newspaper media. The jury is still out, however, as to what extent such coverage influences voters and other media, as well as what effect, if any, such media coverage has on the final election.

The methodology of this study appears sound, but this reviewer would have felt more comfortable if the authors had given more detail on procedures used to train and insure reliability among graduate student