



# RACE matters

## Unequal Opportunities within NEWS MEDIA COVERAGE

### Why Equal Opportunity is Important

- Journalists' codes of ethics prescribe what fair news coverage looks like.

American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) Statement of Principles: "Every effort must be made to assure that the news content is accurate, free from bias and in context, and that all sides are presented fairly."

Associated Press Managing Editors (APME) Code of Ethics: The newspaper "should reasonably reflect, in staffing and coverage, its diverse constituencies...The newspaper should guard against inaccuracies, carelessness, bias or distortion through emphasis, omission or technological manipulation."

Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) Code of Ethics: Journalists should: "Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience; Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others; Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status."

- The consequences of unfair news coverage are far-reaching. To the extent that communities of color are stigmatized, they are at a significant risk of being labeled "undeserving." This frame retards their ability to obtain living wage employment, increases their vulnerability to the criminal justice system, and works generally to produce widespread marginalization.
- Embedded racial inequities produce differential portrayals of people of color and Whites. Compared to coverage received by Whites, practices and stereotypes within the news media work against people of color. Simultaneously, the news utilizes primarily Whites as authorities and over-reports Whites as victims.

### Barriers to Equal Opportunity

- Inattention to the multi-faceted ways that barriers to opportunity occur and persist. It is not uncommon for seemingly "non-racial" stories to have important racial dimensions. An example of insightful reporting is a "Nightline" story about a Black woman who was killed by an oncoming car after getting off a bus near a suburban shopping mall. Mall officials did not want a bus stop on mall property because the bus served a largely Black community, and they did not want to encourage Black shoppers at the new mall. What might have been portrayed as a routine pedestrian fatality was instead put within the context of decisions that differentially endangered Black bus riders and shoppers.
- Inattention to White privilege. Stories that explore racial dimensions tend to focus on the problems and issues of people of color rather than how Whites experience, maintain, and accumulate advantage. Both emphases are required for a thorough examination of social issues.
- Inattention to the multi-faceted ways that racial messages are conveyed. Story content is the most obvious way: lack of attention to "code words," narrow subject treatment, and limited story sources can produce insensitive or incomplete journalism. Beyond content, story placement, juxtaposition, headlines, and accompanying visuals can inadvertently send messages that are stereotypical.
- Racial stereotyping. The data cited below indicate that the media, often unconsciously, communicate with stereotypical portrayals and perspectives. While individuals are unlikely to set out to do this, the cumulative effect nevertheless is harmful stereotyping.
- Cultural indifference. The lack of knowledge about individuals, groups, and communities different from one's own can produce incomplete or inaccurate representations of those persons and communities. Further, the lack of diverse sources increases the likelihood that reporting will be less accurate than professional standards demand.
- Lack of diversity in newsroom staffing. Greater staff diversity expands the knowledge base and range of sources so that news reporting can be as fair as possible. In 2003, while minorities were 32% of the U.S. population, they were just 13% of the daily newspaper staffs and 11% of all managers. A full 40% of daily newspapers had no staffers of color.<sup>1</sup> Minorities were 18% of the television news workforce and 7% of TV news directors; radio was even less diverse, with minorities representing only 6% of the radio news workforce and 5% of radio news directors.<sup>2</sup>

1. Entman, R. & Andrew Rojecki. 2000. *The Black Image in the White Mind*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL.

2. American Society of Newspaper Editors. "Minority newsroom employment inches up in 2003," April 8, 2003. [www.asne.org](http://www.asne.org).

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## The Consequences of Unequal Opportunity

- **Coverage segregation.** A 2001 Poynter Institute study “showed that even at those newspapers and television stations known for their work on diversifying the news, people of color appeared mostly in stories about sports, crime, and entertainment.”<sup>3</sup> Rarely are people of color shown making an important contribution to the serious business of the nation (e.g., foreign affairs, economics, or electoral politics).<sup>4</sup>
- **Media mis-representation.** In “Race and Victimization on TV News,” Travis L. Dixon and Daniel Linz found White people were 43% of the homicide victims portrayed on local television news in Los Angeles and Orange County, Calif., from 1995 to 1997, yet just 13% of the actual victims. Black people were 21% of those arrested, but 36% of those portrayed as perpetrators.<sup>5</sup>
- **Media demonization.** Research shows exposure to stereotypical images of people of color (e.g., “illegal alien”, “welfare queen”) has been found to harden public sentiment about minorities and heighten support for punitive policy approaches.”<sup>6</sup>
- **Missed opportunities for coverage.** “The media’s influence encompasses both relevant information they fail to convey as well as material they pass on.” Notable is “the almost total absence... of the recognition that Whites continue to gain from pervasive racial privilege.”<sup>7</sup>

## Strategies to Promote Equal Opportunity

- **Determine if seemingly “non-racial” stories in fact have racial dimensions.** For all important stories, consider how race may operate around the issue. Look for data that disaggregate information by racial groups, ask diverse sources who may have varying vantage points, and consider how policies, programs, and issues may differentially impact different communities or groups.
- **Conduct well-focused content audits for inappropriate racial messages and stereotypes.** Guidance to do this can be found on the websites of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Maynard Institute’s content audit software.<sup>8</sup>
- **Diversify newsroom sources, staffing and leadership.** ASNE’s and APME’s Time-Out program encourages news organizations to better reflect their communities in stories and staffing.<sup>9</sup> RTNDA’s Diversity Toolkit helps with staff and content diversity.<sup>10</sup> The Society of Professional Journalists’ “Rainbow Sourcebook” and Diversity Toolbox provide sources and other diversity information.<sup>11</sup>
- **Broaden the voices used to evaluate performance.** Add minority residents to the content audit team.<sup>12</sup>
- **Celebrate and learn from good coverage.** “Deconstruct good stories. Celebrate some of the best reporting and writing the newspaper has done on matters of gender, class, sexuality, faith, race, and ethnicity.”<sup>13</sup>

3. Poynter Institute. ‘How Many?’ to ‘Why?’ by Keith Woods. <http://poynter.org/column.asp?id=58&aid=62135>, March 8, 2004.

4. Themba-Nixon. 2003. “Race, Racism and Media: Field Notes From the Frontlines” in *Talking The Walk* edited by Hunter Cutting and Makani Themba-Nixon, “We Interrupt This Message,” San Francisco, CA, p.6.

5. Dixon, T. & Daniel Linz. 2000. “Race and Victimization on TV News,” *Communication Research*, vol. 27, no 5; pp. 547–573.

6. Frank Gilliam, UCLA Center for Communications and Community, [www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/ccc/Context\\_Magazine/frank.html](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/ccc/Context_Magazine/frank.html).

7. Radio and Television News Directors Association (RTNDA). “Women and Minorities/One Step Forward and Two Steps Back,” *Communicator*, July/August 2003.

8. [www.asne.org](http://www.asne.org); <http://cas.maynardije.org>.

9. [www.asne.org](http://www.asne.org); [www.apme.com](http://www.apme.com).

10. <http://rtnda.org/diversity/toolkit.html>.

11. <http://spj.org/diversity.asp>.

12. The Freedom Forum. “Best Practices for Newspaper Journalists” by Robert J. Haiman. <http://freedomforum.org>.

13. ‘How Many?’ to ‘Why?’, Keith Woods, [www.poynter.org](http://www.poynter.org).

