Race and Ethnicity in Local Television News: Framing, Story Assignments, and Source Selections

Paula M. Poindexter, Laura Smith, and Don Heider

Because local television has become the primary source for news, this study examined race and ethnicity in news stories, story assignments, and source selections. A content analysis of local newscasts found Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans were virtually invisible as anchors, reporters, and subjects in the news. Although African Americans anchored and reported the news in some markets, overall there was segregation in story assignments. Rarely were Latinos, Asian Americans, or Native Americans interviewed as news sources. African Americans were used as news sources more than other racial and ethnic groups when 2 or more people were interviewed.

Although the news media landscape at the end of the 20th century had been filled with an array of news sources, more Americans turned to local television for news than any other medium. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2000), 56% of Americans watched local television news regularly but only 46% read newspapers regularly. Still fewer adults turned to network news (30%), CNN (21%), and news magazines (12%), and three days a week or more, 23% of Americans looked to the Internet for news. Because of its dominance as a news source, local television news may also be a dominant force in influencing perceptions of race and ethnicity in communities across America. By examining the presence and coverage of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans in local television news, it may be possible to identify how this dominant news source may be influencing how people of color are perceived and the implications of those perceptions.

Although the poor track records of the networks in representing people of color

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have been fairly well-documented (Carveth & Alverio, 1999; Entman, 1994; Roberts, 1975; Ziegler & White, 1990), there has been less evidence about local stations. Most studies on local television news have focused on one market (Entman, 1990, 1992; Entman & Rojecki, 2000), or a variety of markets on one given day (Campbell, 1995). What has been missing is a more comprehensive look at local television and its primary product, news. The goal of this study is to examine the presence and coverage of people of color in local television news in different geographic regions and across different newscasts, markets, and time periods.

**News Media Representations of Race**

One of the earliest systematic examinations of the news media’s coverage of race was conducted by the Kerner Commission more than 3 decades ago. In response to riots during the summer of 1967, President Lyndon Johnson appointed the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, which became known as the Kerner Commission, to find out what happened, why the riots happened, and what could be done to prevent riots from happening again. As part of its analysis of the causes of the riots, the Kerner Commission looked at the media’s role in the civic unrest and concluded that the press had failed to adequately report on the underlying problems that led to the riots. The Kerner Commission also criticized the news media for reporting from a White-only perspective and failing to report the history, culture, and activities of Blacks in American society (*Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 1968). Noting that fewer than 5% of U.S. journalists were Black and few were in decision-making positions, the Kerner Commission said the journalism profession had been “shockingly backward” in seeking out, hiring, training, and promoting Blacks (*Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, 1968, p. 384).

Since 1968, there has been little significant change in the news media coverage of people of color. Scholars who study race and television news have found that people of color are often neglected, misrepresented, or stereotyped (Campbell, 1995; Dates & Barlow, 1990; Deepe Keever, Martindale, & Weston, 1997; Entman, 1992, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gandy, 1998; Gilliam & Iyenjar, 2000; Poindexter & Strom, 1980; Roberts, 1975; Wilson & Gutiérrez, 1995; Ziegler & White, 1990). Although researchers have paid comparatively less attention to the topic of race and television news since the 1968 Kerner Commission criticisms, there have been some noteworthy studies.

Roberts (1975) coded network news programs for speaking and non-speaking appearances of Blacks to determine the degree of their visibility. Roberts found Blacks were not very visible and had little voice, especially when it came to world or national affairs. Ziegler and White (1990) looked at how newsmakers were presented in network news shows and concluded Whites were more likely to be newsmakers, and were more likely to be portrayed in diverse roles than were people of color.
In a study of network newscasts, Entman (1994) found that Blacks were associated with negative news and crime; Black leaders were shown criticizing the government and its policies or being accused of a crime. In an analysis of sources used in news stories, evidence of segregation was found. Black expert sources were mostly quoted in stories about Black issues but rarely in stories about non-Black issues.

Daishell (1996) examined network news coverage of the O.J. Simpson murder trial and found that although there was no evidence of blatant racism, network news coverage focused on racial divisions in the makeup of the jury, public opinion polls, and accusations of police misconduct.

In studies of local television news, Black politicians were found to be associated with special interests (Entman, 1990, 1992) and Blacks in general were more likely to be reported on when the subject was crime (Entman, 1990, 1992; Entman & Rojecki, 2000; Gilliam & Iyenjar, 2000). Entman (1992) and Entman and Rojecki (2000) studied local television news in Chicago and found that although an equal number of Black and White perpetrators were covered in the news, there were far more White victims than Black victims in crime news coverage. In addition, news stories on White victims were three times as long as news stories on Black victims. Black perpetrators were more likely than White perpetrators to be shown in a mug shot, and Blacks were more likely than Whites to be shown in jail clothing or handcuffed, grasped, or restrained by an officer. Finally, there was segregation in use of police official sources. Whites accused of a crime were almost always discussed by White police officers; African Americans accused of a crime were discussed by Black officers one-third of the time.

Rather than focus on content, some recent investigators have focused on the gatekeepers, the decisionmakers who determine which content is reported. These researchers found that when it comes to race and news, often those gatekeepers, despite good intentions, continue to replicate coverage that could be characterized as racist (Gilens, 2000; Heider, 2000).

**Theoretical Context**

Although Erving Goffman and Gregory Bateson introduced framing into the social science literature over a quarter of a century ago (Reese, 2001), only in the past decade has this theoretical concept been applied to communication on a systematic basis (Entman, 1993; Reese, Gandy & Grant, 2001; Tankard, Hendrickson, Silberman, Bliss, & Ghanem, 1991). According to Tankard, et al. (1991, p.5), a frame is a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration. Framing is selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

In addition to its development as a distinct communication theory, the convergence of framing and second-level agenda-setting has recently been explored (McCombs, 1997; McCombs & Bell, 1996; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001). Second-
level agenda-setting is distinguished from the first-level because the focus is on the transfer of *attribute* salience from the media agenda to the public agenda while the first-level focused on the transfer of *object* salience (e.g., issues, political candidates, public institutions) from the media to the public agenda. In other words, the first-level of agenda setting told us what to think about; the second-level, as a result of selection, emphasis, or exclusion of attributes, told us *how* to think about the object, issue, individual, event, institution, or even product. According to McCombs and Ghanem (2001, p. 68): “When journalists and, subsequently, members of the public think about and talk about various objects, some attributes have center stage. Others are relegated to lesser roles, and many are absent altogether.”

The convergence of framing and second-level agenda-setting is relevant to this study of local television news coverage of race and ethnicity because it links the framing of news content with the effects of that content—that is, how people of color are covered in local television news may influence how they are perceived in communities across America. According to Gandy (1996, p. 57), the framing of stories can influence how non-Blacks feel about equality, fair play, or affirmative action.

It is important to note that framing is not limited to words. In a review of the literature on race and news, Messaris and Abraham (2001, p. 221) concluded: “Implicit visual imagery is increasingly being used to frame messages that involve the representation of African Americans in news.” Their analysis of news stories found that visual imagery was used to place African Americans in a negative context.

The implications of local television news media framing of racial and ethnic minorities are significant because, as indicated, the audience is unaware of what is happening. According to Tankard (2001, p. 97), “much of the power of framing comes from its ability to define the terms of a debate without the audience realizing it is taking place.”

**Research Questions**

The Kerner Commission criticized the news media for failing to include Blacks and their culture in its coverage and hire Blacks as reporters and decision makers. Subsequent research on news coverage of people of color has found evidence of excluding and stereotyping African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, as well as segregating minority expert and official sources. By content analyzing news stories representing different cities, geographic regions, and time periods, this study documents the presence and framing of people of color in local news and determines if there is segregation by race and ethnicity. By paying special attention to the race of expert and private citizen sources used in the news, this analysis builds on earlier research that found segregation in news sources (Entman, 1994; Entman & Rojecki, 2000). Specifically, this study uses framing as a theoretical framework to answer the following research questions:
RQ1: What is the presence of people of color and how are they framed in local television news?
RQ2: Is there segregation in the assignment of news stories?
RQ3: What role, if any, does race play in news sources and the order in which they are used in the story?

Method

Local television newscasts representing 26 different stations in 12 cities during the years 1987 and 1989 through 1998 were content analyzed. The newscasts content analyzed for this study were part of a larger news archive that was donated to a southwestern university. The larger archive included 12 years of local newscasts from dozens of U.S. cities. In many cases, newscasts were available from more than one station in each media market. Newscasts from 5:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. were also available in the archive. In attempting to construct a sample reflective of local news’ development throughout several years and across various geographic regions, stations, and times of day, the authors selected four newscasts from each of 12 cities. If recordings from several stations in a single market were available, the authors selected newscasts from all stations available. If newscasts were available from different time periods, the authors selected newscasts that reflected coverage at different times of day. The resulting convenience sample comprises 596 news stories from 48 newscasts in the following cities: Birmingham; Cincinnati; Dallas; Denver; Detroit; Greensboro, North Carolina; Jacksonville; Miami; Milwaukee; Phoenix; Pittsburgh; Spokane.

Half of the cities in the sample had a population of at least 30% African-American. Detroit had the highest percentage of African Americans with 76% and Spokane had the smallest percentage at 2%. Of the cities in the sample, the percentage of Latinos ranged from under 5% in Spokane and Birmingham to as much as 66% in Miami (Hacker, 1995; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2003).

Identification and Production Variables

Each newscast was coded for variables such as month, year, city, and time of day aired. As stations in different regions and time zones of the country tend to air their newscasts at distinct times of day, newscasts from 11:00 a.m. to noon were coded as “mid-day” newscasts. Newscasts that aired from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. were coded as “early evening.” Newscasts at 9:00 p.m., 10:00 p.m., and 11:00 p.m. were coded as “late evening.” The anchors for each newscast were coded for gender, race, and first anchor to speak.

Individual stories, including news stories with or without video or graphics, were coded if they aired during the first or second blocks of each newscast. Frequently referred to as the A and B blocks in a half-hour newscast, these two segments generally contain the majority of items produced by a local television station’s news
staff. Sports and weather stories were coded only if they were presented as news developments (versus opportunities for the station to promote or "tease" a later segment in the newscast). For example, if the weathercaster appeared in the A block to give viewers a glimpse at the forecast, this was not coded as a story. If, however, that same weathercaster appeared on camera to talk about a hurricane's progress or a flood in a nearby city, the item was coded as a news story. Similarly, sports stories promoting upcoming coverage were not analyzed, but a story about a local sports franchise moving out of the city (featured as the top story in the newscast) was. Traffic segments and teases at the end of each block were excluded from the analysis.

Each news story in the sample was also coded for order of appearance in the newscast (e.g., 1st, 2nd, etc.), story production type (copy only, voice-over, voice-over with an interview, and reporter package), whether the story was delivered by a reporter or read by an anchor. As local newscasts frequently include stories from around the state, nation, and world, geographic location was also coded.

**Coding Race and Ethnicity**

Race and ethnicity were coded for anchors, reporters, news sources, and perpetrators of crimes. Race and ethnicity were coded when anchors and reporters were on camera, a person was interviewed for a story, or a news story showed video or provided a physical description of a person alleged to have committed a criminal act. In all cases, race and ethnicity were coded as White, African American, Latino/a, Asian American, Native American, unable to determine, and "other."

Finally, if a story was delivered or reported by a reporter, the racial focus of that story was coded. If more than half of the individuals shown in the news story were of one race or ethnic group, that race would be coded as the primary focus. If one race or ethnic group was mostly used to illustrate a story that was unrelated to race, that race would still be coded. If sources and images from various racial or ethnic groups were used to tell the story, it would be coded as "no race focused on." The following examples help to illustrate the coding of this variable. If, for example, a story was about racial profiling and the majority of sources and people shown were African American, the primary focus of that story would be coded as African American. If the story was about traffic congestion on the Interstate and the majority of people shown and sources interviewed in the story were White, the primary racial focus of that story would be coded as White (despite the fact that the subject of traffic congestion was unrelated to race). If the story was about a hot air balloon festival and a variety of people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds were included in the coverage, it would be coded as "no race focused on."

To code news story topic, 36 different categories, including "other," were used. Examples of story topics were crime; education; politics and government; race-related issues such as discrimination, affirmative action, and interracial conflicts; non-crime spot news such as fires, explosions, and accidents.

If a story included interviews with news sources, "source type" was coded using
six different categories for the first four sources in a story: 1) private citizens which included witnesses, neighbors, consumers, students, voters, etc.; 2) politicians and candidates; 3) political activists; 4) expert, authority, spokesperson for a company or organization; 5) celebrity; 6) unable to determine, or other. Although the type of source was coded for only the first four sources in the story, the total number of sources for each news story was coded.

Inter-coder Reliability

After several discussions of the variables and revisions of the codebook to achieve a high inter-coder reliability, the second author coded the majority of the news stories. Inter-coder reliability was assessed after the first and second authors coded 42 news stories, representing one-third of the cities. After comparing the coding, the coefficient of reliability (C.R.) was used to calculate inter-coder reliability (Holsti, 1969, p. 140). The ratio of total coding agreements to total number of coding decisions produced an inter-coder reliability of 93%, which far exceeded the minimum acceptable level of 80% (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998).

Inter-coder reliability for individual variables ranged from 82% to 100% with a modal inter-coder reliability of 98%. When race or ethnicity was coded for anchors, reporters, perpetrators of crimes, sources, and the primary focus of a news story, inter-coder reliability ranged from 95% to 100%. Inter-coder reliability for type of source ranged from 88% to 98%. Inter-coder reliability for topic of news story was calculated at 82%.

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the final coded data. Data analyses included frequencies, means, and cross-tabulations with statistics appropriate for nominal-level data.

Results

Reporters and Anchors in Local Television News

Of the 596 stories coded, 28% were delivered by a reporter. Almost three-quarters (73%) of reporters were White, 16% were African American, and 3% were Latino. There were no Asian American or Native American reporters and the race or ethnicity could not be determined for 8% of the reporters. News anchors voiced over the majority of stories seen on local television news. Both the majority (79%) of anchors to speak first and anchors to speak second (70%) were White. African Americans represented 11% of first anchors to speak and 23% of anchors who spoke second. Latinos represented 2% of first and second anchors to speak; Asian Americans represented 2% of second anchors to speak. Of the remaining news anchors, the race or ethnicity could not be determined.
Story Topics and the Framing of People of Color

Almost three-fifths (56%) of the stories were local and 28% were national. Of 36 possible news story topics, crime was by far the leader, representing 22% of all story topics. Other local television news story topics included: non-crime spot news such as accidents or explosions (12%), politics and government (8%), other (8%), sports (6%), health (6%), economics and business (5%), and weather alerts (5%). Issues specifically concerning race and discrimination comprised fewer than 3% of the stories. Education represented only 2% of the news stories.

The perpetrator's race or ethnicity was reported in 60% of the crime stories, and of those stories, more than half (51%) of the perpetrators were White and 41% were Black. Latinos represented only 2% of the perpetrators and Asian Americans 1%.

At first glance, it appears that White perpetrators dominated crime news coverage, but an examination of the racial focus of a reporter-delivered story revealed that Black-focused stories (69%) were almost two and a half times more likely than White-focused stories (28%) to be about crime ($\chi^2 = 8.196, df = 1, p < .01; \phi = -.312, p < .01$).

Segregated Story Assignments

The reporter's race or ethnicity and the racial focus of the story were used to determine if story assignments were segregated. Fifty-four percent of the news stories had a White focus, 10% had a Black focus, 3% Latino, 1% Asian American, and 1% Native American. In 28% of the stories, there was no focus on race. Although the near invisibility of Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans in local television news coverage made it impossible to examine segregation in story assignments for these groups, it was possible to determine if segregation in story assignments existed between Blacks and Whites. Table 1 reveals that almost 9 out of 10 White reporters' stories had a White focus while slightly more than 6 out of 10 African American reporters' stories had a White focus. African Americans were more than 3 times as likely as White reporters to report stories with a Black focus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial Focus of Story</th>
<th>Reporter's Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>89% (62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>11% (8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\chi^2 = 5.260; df = 1; p < .05.$  
$\phi = .25; p < .05.$
The Impact of Race and Ethnicity on Source Selection

The mean number of sources used in a story was 2.19 with 44% of the news stories using one source and almost one-quarter (23%) of the stories using two sources. An examination of the first source used in a story revealed that private citizen sources (44%) and spokesperson-expert sources (43%) were used almost equally. Politicians represented 8% and “other” represented 4% of the first source used in a news story. Whether the number of sources in a news story was one or four, Whites dominated. According to Table 2, 84% of the first sources were White and 75% of the third news sources were White. If a fourth source was used in a story, the percent increased to 85%. Table 2 also shows that as more sources were used in a news story, the percentage of African American sources increased. Twelve percent of first sources was African American and that percentage increased to 21% by the third source, but dropped to 12% by the fourth source. Latinos represented only 2% of sources.

In analyzing race and source, it is important to examine what happens to this pattern when private citizens, that is, non-official sources were used. Notice in Table 3 that the pattern found in Table 2 remains. Among private citizen sources, Whites dominated and as the number of sources increased, the percentage of African Americans interviewed as sources increased. Once again, only a small percentage of Latino sources was used in the newscasts studied.

Discussion

Because more Americans turn to local television news than any other source, the framing of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans on local television news is important to examine. Although the newscasts, markets, local television stations, and years studied were based on a convenience sample, this content analysis provides a glimpse into more markets than previous studies that have examined how local television news covers people of color. While previous

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>84% (186)</td>
<td>79% (93)</td>
<td>75% (50)</td>
<td>85% (29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>12% (27)</td>
<td>18% (21)</td>
<td>21% (14)</td>
<td>12% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>2% (4)</td>
<td>2% (2)</td>
<td>3% (2)</td>
<td>3% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2% (5)</td>
<td>2% (2)</td>
<td>1% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>100% (222)</td>
<td>100% (118)</td>
<td>100% (67)</td>
<td>100% (34)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SPSS rounds totals to 100%.
Table 3
Race and Ethnicity of Private Citizen Sources and Order of Appearance in News Story

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>1st</th>
<th>2nd</th>
<th>3rd</th>
<th>4th</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>77% (79)</td>
<td>71% (45)</td>
<td>63% (26)</td>
<td>79% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>14% (14)</td>
<td>21% (13)</td>
<td>29% (12)</td>
<td>21% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>2% (2)</td>
<td>3% (2)</td>
<td>5% (2)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8% (8)</td>
<td>5% (3)</td>
<td>2% (1)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>100% (103)</td>
<td>100% (63)</td>
<td>100% (41)</td>
<td>100% (19)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SPSS rounds totals to 100%.

studies focused on one local television market during one time period or many markets on one day, this study examined how 12 local television news markets in different geographic regions of the country framed race and ethnicity from the 1980s through the end of the 20th century, a point in time in which even though an unprecedented number of news sources was available, local television news reigned as the source most relied on for news.

Based on the results of this study, what would a viewer learn from watching local television news? Viewers would learn that Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans were virtually non-existent as anchors, reporters, subjects, and sources, and although a few African Americans were news anchors and some African Americans reported the news, local television news reporters were segregated by race. Viewers would also learn that when it comes to subjects in the news, discrimination as a story topic was rare and African Americans were more likely to be newsworthy because they had committed a crime. Finally, viewers would learn that there were fewer opportunities for African Americans to be a source for the news when a story contained only one source. For Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, there were few or no chances to be a news source.

Because in the past, news directors have promoted the use of minority rolodexes to diversify news sources, it was a surprise that few Latino or Asian American sources were used, and that the use of African American sources increased only when two or more sources were used. This pattern held true for sources that were experts or company spokespersons as well as sources that were private citizens.

This study’s distinction between private citizen and expert sources adds to the literature because previous studies have mostly focused on the use of experts. Future studies should find out why racial and ethnic minorities are less likely to be used as sources, particularly when the source is a private citizen. The focus on the relationship between the number of sources and the use of African Americans as news sources adds a new dimension to the literature. Roberts (1975) found that African
Americans could be seen but rarely heard in the news; this study found that as far as news sources were concerned, African Americans were more likely to be heard if two or three news sources were used. In news stories with only one source, African Americans were less likely to have a voice. This finding is particularly significant because half of the cities in this content analysis have African American populations of 30% or greater.

Dates and Barlow (1990) called the discrepancy between the way Blacks and Whites are covered in media a “split image.” This study found from newscasts broadcast in Birmingham, Cincinnati, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Greensboro, Jacksonville, Miami, Milwaukee, Phoenix, Pittsburgh, and Spokane, that there was evidence of a split system, where Whites were framed one way and other racial-ethnic groups, if covered at all, were framed another way. In these data, racial and ethnic minorities were often missing from local newscasts, and even when covered, were over-represented in stories about crime. News stories on race and discrimination were virtually non-existent.

Although these 596 local television news stories provide insight into the coverage of race and ethnicity, future studies should strengthen the external validity of the results by increasing the number of markets and news stories and randomly selecting local television newscasts from all television stations across the U.S.

Since 1968, when the Kerner Commission criticized the news media for reporting from a White-only perspective and being “shockingly backward” in hiring and promoting Blacks, the number of local television news outlets has grown and the racial and ethnic diversity of the U.S. population has increased. But the results of this study suggest that local television news continues to report from a mostly White perspective and fails to report on the activities and concerns of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. The virtual absence of Latinos and Asian Americans as news anchors and reporters suggests that little progress has been made in employing people of color. Finally, the findings that sources representing people of color were limited or non-existent in news stories and reporters were segregated by a news story’s racial focus provided further evidence that when it comes to race, the news media have not advanced significantly since 1968. Because local television is now the primary news source and media effects theories suggest framing has the power to define the terms of a debate, the results of this content analysis of local television news and race should be cause for concern.

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