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Public Understanding, Professional Ethics, and the News

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Public Understanding, Professional Ethics, and the News

Josephine Holz*

Television news deals with events better than with issues, and the coverage of race and race relations in television news is no exception. Because television is primarily a visual and an entertainment medium, complex issues are better dealt with in print, though even the print media do not always do very well. There is no question that when television news does tackle issues, those issues are simplified, perhaps often oversimplified, to accommodate the constraints and conventions of the television medium.

Whether the news media are covering events or issues—and the distinction between these may in fact be an arbitrary one—the media are part of a mass production process: whatever is actually happening out there in the real world serves as raw material that is processed and transformed into easily comprehensible “stories” with coherent narrative structures, and then sent out through various distribution mechanisms to the public. The end product bears some resemblance to the raw material that went into its manufacture, but it also bears the imprint of the people, institutions, and processes that transformed material into news stories. Whether these stories are biased or distorted depends on one’s perspective. The question assumes that there is an objective reality out there, against which distortion can be measured. However, especially in the case of issues as opposed to events, the existence of such an objective standard is debatable.

In fact, the transformation process does not end when the message reaches the audience. Viewers also contribute to the process by selectively choosing what they watch, how much attention they pay to its various elements, and how they interpret those elements. And, of course, the events or issues that serve as the raw material in this process have already been shaped and constructed by the news sources and other people involved in them before the news media arrive. These individuals often try to shape the

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event or issue for the media, so that the resulting news stories will more closely resemble each source's version of reality.

Research has pointed to the existence of a broad agenda-setting effect by the news media, wherein the media can affect which issues seem important to the public. However, this is not a closed system. News sources and audience members also contribute to the process. In the case of controversial issues, the news media essentially serve as brokers for competing definitions of the issue as espoused by competing interest groups. In the process, the media are susceptible to manipulation by the more powerful or skilled group. In Lani Guinier's case, conservative interest groups and a lack of support from the White House helped to shape her unflattering news coverage.¹

Depending on how much background information they already have, audience members do their own selective processing of media content, based on alternative or additional sources of information about the issue, or pre-existing attitudes or opinions that relate to the media content. With little prior knowledge or opinions, viewers are more likely to accept the media's agendas and definitions of the situation as their own.

When it comes to race relations, however, there are very few Americans who do not have relevant pre-existing attitudes and opinions—probably by a fairly young age—and that framework influences how media messages affect them. In a nationwide survey conducted last spring, the Times-Mirror Center for the People and the Press interviewed people for their reactions to the second Rodney King beating trial.² Awareness of the trial was very high, as nearly half the sample reported that they had heard about the trial.³ This is an indication of media agenda-setting, in the sense that the extensive media coverage brought the trial to the public's attention. About one-third of the sample thought news coverage of the trial had been biased, and about equal percentages of blacks and whites held this opinion.⁴ However, most whites who thought the coverage had been biased thought the bias was in favor of the prosecution (i.e. against the white police officers). Most blacks who saw a slant in the coverage believed it was pro-defense.⁵ These findings are quite consistent with other research

1. *See All Things Considered: Two Victims of Washington Nomination Game Speak Up* (NPR radio broadcast, Jan. 19, 1994).

2. Debra Gersh, *Too Much Cult Coverage; Waco, Texas Standoff*, EDITOR & PUBLISHER, May 15, 1993, at 12, 12.

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.*

on how media messages are received by people who have pre-existing attitudes that could affect their interpretations.

NBC News has been trying to improve its reporting on issues such as race. Journalists are always engaged in a balancing act. There is, of course, pressure to draw big audiences, and, unfortunately, sensationalism is an easy way to do that. But most TV journalists still strive to present accurate, fair, balanced coverage, and to inform the public as best they can.

At NBC News, there has been a major effort to promote diversity, both in terms of what is shown on the air and in terms of the people who produce that material.⁶ The result should be better news coverage. In the first place, General Electric, NBC's owner, has instituted mandatory diversity training programs in all its companies, including NBC.⁷ That program led to the establishment five years ago of a Women and Minorities Task Force at NBC News, which set up a series of meetings and workshops for all news staff and produced a training videotape to sensitize the staff to issues relating to news coverage of women and minorities.⁸ As a result of that group's efforts, NBC News has established a database of African-American experts to be consulted for news stories about various issues, so that reporters will not always turn to white male experts. A similar database of Hispanic experts is being developed. In addition, NBC journalists have been making a concerted effort not to always use stock footage of minorities when reporting on crime, welfare, drug abuse, and other social problems. Finally, the president of NBC News, Andrew Lack, has issued a very strong internal statement about the need for more diversity and balance in all news coverage and personnel practices. He appointed a Diversity Advisory Council composed of six highly placed staff members to advise news management on diversity issues, both in the workplace and on the air.⁹

It is misleading and incorrect to hold the mass media responsible for the major problems and conflicts in our society. But, at the same time, the media are a part of this society and do affect what the public knows and thinks. One might be surprised at how aware most television journalists are of their potential impact and the responsibility that goes with it. There has been a substantial increase in the diversity of TV journalists, and that is being reflected on the air. News coverage has in fact improved in many

6. Christine Bunish, *NBC Pushes Awareness, Works to Grow Own News Talent*, *ELECTRONIC MEDIA*, July 25, 1994, at 28, 28.

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.*

9. *Id.*

ways, and hopefully will continue to improve as journalism becomes more competitive.