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Jane Rhodes
Indiana University

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“Even My Own Mother Couldn’t Recognize Me”: Television News and Public Understanding

Jane Rhodes*

In January 1994, Vice Admiral Bobby Ray Inman announced his withdrawal as Secretary of Defense nominee amid charges that the news media, in collusion with Senator Bob Dole, conducted a smear campaign against him. This episode prompted considerable soul-searching on the part of the news media about whether public figures are treated fairly, and whether media audiences are getting an accurate picture about the person and the issues involved. On the day of Inman’s announcement, National Public Radio interviewed several public figures who were recovering from their own confrontations with the news media.¹ Probably the most well-known was Lani Guinier, whose comments inspired the title of this paper. Guinier, another failed Clinton administration nominee, who had been named to head the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division, was firm in her assertion that the news media—both print and television—actively distorted her ideas and her public image.² She likened her experience to that of Alice in Wonderland who fell into the rabbit hole and found that she did not recognize herself.³ “Even my own mother couldn’t recognize me in the press coverage that I received,” Guinier observed.⁴ She contended that the results of the priorities and constraints of news practices are that “the American people really are being . . . denied a robust debate about ideas and about policies that might actually improve the lives of many people.”⁵

* Assistant Professor, School of Journalism, Indiana University. B.A., M.A. Syracuse University; Ph.D. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.*

Arguing that media audiences do not get an accurate picture of what is going on in the world, Guinier said that audiences are “viewing a caricature . . . or a sound-bitten version of that person . . . [I]t’s a lens that really distorts what people think in order to be dramatic, in order to make a good picture.”⁶ While there are multiple mitigating factors to the Guinier case, hindsight indicates that the attacks on Guinier and the distortion of her legal arguments were politically motivated, and the response of the White House was poorly managed. One also needs to remember, however, that television, thanks to Ted Koppel, C-SPAN, and other outlets, finally provided Guinier with the public forum she was denied in the Senate. Nevertheless, the news media were generally unprepared to report on the complex theoretical issues in her legal writing—ideas perhaps impossible to reduce to sound bites. Moreover, the feeding frenzy of the Washington press corps meant that the vicious attacks launched by conservatives leaked out to the public through print, and were then ground into the public consciousness through repetition on television news.

Whether or not one agrees with Guinier’s critique, her questions raise a fundamental dilemma for all journalists. Can the media balance the need to attract a large audience through visually enticing and entertaining products, with the need to present information that enhances public understanding and ultimately fulfills the press’ mission? In a world of rapidly changing telecommunications technology, media mergers, and competition, does the news media’s mandate for social responsibility get lost or blurred?

Lani Guinier’s experience as an African-American woman in the press provides an interesting framework for examining the relationship between news media performance and race. It has been almost one hundred years since William E.B. DuBois predicted that the problem of the color line would be the defining crisis of the twentieth century in America.⁷ The portrayal of Lani Guinier by the media bears out this prediction. Recently, she told the *Washington Post* that she “was made to embody America’s worst fears on race.”⁸ Indeed, as the episode quickly fades from our collective memory, of all the media symbols constructed about Guinier, we likely remember her best as the “Quota Queen.”⁹ Few journalists who repeated that label in the midst of the crisis stopped to think—or were even

6. *Id.*

7. WILLIAM E.B. DUBOIS, *THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLKS* 54 (New Amer. Libr. ed. 1969).

8. Dale Russakoff, *Lani Guinier Is Still Alive and Talking*, WASH. POST, Dec. 12, 1993, (Magazine), at 14, 15.

9. Bob Cohn, *Crowning a ‘Quota Queen?’*, NEWSWEEK, May 24, 1993, at 67, 67.

aware of—the historical implications of this very racist tag. Facing deadlines and under intense competitive pressure, few considered the legacy of the Mammy figure—representative of the ideology of slavery—or the more contemporary image of the welfare queen—the updated breeder woman who depends on the welfare state and threatens white middle-class values. Consider the legacy of the term quota in the last twelve years. It is synonymous with the most hated aspects of affirmative action and reinforces the image of the undeserving poor (usually minorities) getting special favors while white males suffer disadvantages. Only a black woman could so perfectly embody these dual roles, and the news media were complicit in their creation and dissemination. Said Guinier about the label “Quota Queen”: “That was a headline looking for a person, and I walked in. And the reason I could be tagged with that headline is that I was writing about race.”¹⁰ “Quota Queen” was a dramatic and useful symbolic device for a story that lacked good visual elements. It probably kept a lot of people tuned in to the six o’clock evening news to see the next installment of the Clinton-Guinier soap opera, but it also capitalized on racism and did little to create an informed public. The impact of such content in the news is most problematic when looking at television.

Broadcasters face a difficult and complex set of expectations from inside and outside their industry in an increasingly competitive and austere economic climate. Yet, a number of factors support the notion that broadcasters shoulder the greatest responsibility for informing the public. Many broadcast journalists readily acknowledge that television is a headline service that is not designed to present detailed and complex information. They suggest that audiences should turn to public broadcasting, newspapers, and magazines for the kind of journalism that promotes “public understanding.” This sentiment, however, simply does not respond to the reality that television *is* the primary source of news for most Americans, dominating the information market. The Roper Group and other researchers have documented that since 1963, television has far outpaced other media as the public’s primary news source.¹¹ The same researchers found that the public considers television to be the most believable news medium, and by the early 1980s, even the college-educated had defected from newspapers to television.¹²

Broadcasters have every right to increase viewership and exploit new markets—that is good business. However, this influential position within

10. David J. Garrow, *Lani Guinier*, PROGRESSIVE, Sept. 1993, at 28, 31.

11. THE ROPER ORGANIZATION, REP. NO. 14, PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD TELEVISION AND OTHER MEDIA IN A TIME OF CHANGE 1 (1985).

12. *Id.*

the news media brings with it greater responsibilities. For broadcasters to suggest that viewers turn to other information sources to compensate for the inadequacies of television is disingenuous. First, broadcasters do not want to lose viewers in this technologically competitive climate. Second, this suggestion ignores the realities of audience choice. Regardless of what recommendations are made, Americans prefer television news for a variety of reasons, including habit, accessibility, efficient use of time, and entertainment value. Simply put, broadcast journalism's plea that the medium's constraints do not allow for more thoughtful and socially responsible reporting rings hollow in today's market.

There is also a legal precedent for this idea of heightened television news responsibility. Historically, the rights of listeners and viewers have been deemed superior to those of individual broadcasters. The dictum "the airwaves belong to the people" has been modified over the years but is still construed as a maxim. In spite of this, broadcasters have rightly asserted their First Amendment rights and have battled government regulation that suggests censorship. The early position that broadcast frequencies are a scarce resource, which provided much of the theoretical underpinning of the "public trustee" model of broadcasting, has been reconsidered and, in some instances, abandoned during the more recent era of deregulation. Nonetheless, the courts have consistently maintained that broadcasters are "public trustees" who are accountable to the public interest.¹³

The Supreme Court had also held that the particularly intrusive impact on the public of the electronic media justifies external monitoring and regulation of broadcast content.¹⁴ This contention has been supported by an array of social science research finding that television can have a profound effect on its audience, particularly in shaping viewers' conceptions of reality. Sociologist George Gerbner, for instance, has conducted studies for more than fifteen years that demonstrate a "cultivation effect," in which television reinforces, validates, and sustains the values and perspectives of frequent television viewers.¹⁵ Some scholars have suggested that the electronic media shape how audiences perceive and interpret reality and that people readily believe what they see on television because

13. *E.g.*, *NBC v. FCC*, 516 F.2d 1101 (D.C. Cir. 1974), *cert. denied sub. nom. Accuracy in Media Inc. v. NBC*, 424 U.S. 910 (1976).

14. Perhaps the best known case articulating this rationale is *FCC v. Pacifica Found.*, 438 U.S. 726 (1978).

15. These numerous studies include George Gerbner et al., *Growing Up With Television: The Cultivation Perspective*, in *MEDIA EFFECTS: ADVANCES IN THEORY AND RESEARCH* 17 (Jennings Bryant & Dolf Zillman eds., 1994); George Gerbner & Larry Gross, *Living with Television: The Violence Profile*, *J. COMM.*, Spring 1976, at 173.

it is such a credible medium.¹⁶ Others subscribe to the theory that television news is more influential in telling people what to think about—the “agenda-setting process.”¹⁷ Regardless of the theoretical slant, the implication of such research is that the public and broadcasters cannot underestimate the power of television.

Broadcasters have been quick to claim that the growing proliferation of new communication technologies will make such concerns obsolete. Implicit in these arguments is that broadcasters will enjoy greater freedom as they increasingly share the burdens of public responsibility with other media outlets. However, this may be an overly optimistic position when it comes to news and public affairs. Today, most cable television subscribers can find additional news sources, but they are invariably local network affiliates or a handful of narrowly-targeted stations, such as Black Entertainment Television or the Christian Broadcasting Network. In most markets, options such as community access cable channels and low power television (LPTV) reach only a tiny fraction of the audience. Moreover, we cannot forget that nearly 40 percent of American homes are still not wired for cable.¹⁸ We can hope that alternative sources of information like *MTV News* will grow and multiply, but for now the vast majority of Americans still get their news from the network television or CNN.

These trends toward increased broadcast competition and diversified media outlets suggest that there should be a greater, rather than lesser, emphasis on responsibility in the news. The “marketplace of ideas” principle supports the prediction that those broadcast news operations that fail to respond to public interests and concerns will eventually lose in the media game. This is particularly crucial as media industries track what is commonly called the “new demographics” or the substantial increases in racial and ethnic minorities as media consumers. African-Americans, Asians, and Hispanics represent the fastest growing segment of the population and are expected to comprise nearly 17 percent of all Americans by the end of the century.¹⁹ In this light, it is more than a bit ironic that David Bartlett, President of the Radio-Television News Directors Association, observed in his presentation that “special interest groups,” which in

16. See G. Ray Funkhouser & Eugene F. Shaw, *How Synthetic Experience Shapes Social Reality*, J. COMM., Spring 1990, at 75, 81.

17. THE EMERGENCE OF AMERICAN PUBLIC ISSUES: THE AGENDA-SETTING FUNCTION OF THE PRESS (Donald L. Shaw et al. eds., 1977); MEDIA AGENDA-SETTING IN A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION: ISSUES, IMAGES AND INTEREST (David Weaver et al. eds., 1981).

18. 140 CONG. REC. H5231 (daily ed. June 28, 1994) (statement of Rep. Markey).

19. UNITED STATES BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, CURRENT POPULATION REPORTS, SERIES P-25, NO. 952, PROJECTIONS OF THE POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES BY AGE, SEX AND RACE: 1983-2080 9-10 (1984).

this case means minority groups, are never satisfied with their coverage on television news. This statement implies that a racial or ethnic minority has a singular interest and unreasonable expectations of the news media. However, these expectations are not and should not be seen as unreasonable or singular. Broadcasters must recognize the pluralistic nature of American society—and the television audience—and see minority groups as interested in the fundamental goals of fairness, justice, equal opportunity, and the pursuit of happiness. Rather than shrugging off various segments of the population as “special interests,” journalists should be engaging them as sources, news subjects, and viewers; minority groups’ expectations are only as unreasonable as the news media’s inability to respond to them.

Indeed, the ability of television news to enhance public understanding may be measured best when considering the nation’s problems in race relations, as Lani Guinier suggests.²⁰ This concern about the media’s lack of sensitivity when it comes to race is nothing new. In 1968, the Kerner Commission (the Commission) found the coverage of the inner city riots of the late sixties to be flawed and exaggerated.²¹ Among other factors, the Commission pointed to the cumulative effect of overblown, and sometimes staged, news accounts of “race riots” as leaving a lasting and damaging impression: “Fear and apprehension of racial unrest and violence are deeply rooted in American society. They color and intensify reactions to news of racial trouble and threats of racial conflict.”²² The study also maintained that the news media had failed to analyze and report adequately on the nation’s race problems, leading to frustration and alienation among African-Americans and other groups.²³ The report called on the news media to “exercise a higher degree of care and a greater level of sophistication than they have yet shown in this area.”²⁴ The Kerner Commission report demonstrated the circular process in which negative reporting breeds mistrust among the underrepresented and the disenfranchised in public institutions, including the press.

The media’s response, in the new era of affirmative action, was to bring more minorities into the newsroom. The prescription was an internal policy of hiring that spawned numerous training programs, internships, and other incentives. But change was slow to arrive. In the 1970s, scholars documented that African-Americans were virtually absent as news sources,

20. Russakoff, *supra* note 8, at 16.

21. REPORT OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COMMISSION ON CIVIL DISORDERS 363 (1968).

22. *Id.* at 365.

23. *Id.* at 366.

24. *Id.* at 365-66.

unless the issue was crime or civil rights.²⁵ Recently, a significant shift has occurred. There is an increased presence of minorities in the news, both as subjects and as news workers.²⁶ Indeed, it is almost a requirement to display diversity among the anchors and correspondents in many markets, which superficially suggests that the news media is effectively grappling with the issue of race. However, it is not clear how well the media have really responded to the Kerner Commission's challenges. The number of minority journalists has increased, albeit slowly, to about 15 percent in television and 9 percent at newspapers.²⁷ Yet, one must examine whether this hiring has really made a difference, and whether the fundamental practices and values of journalism have shifted. The question is whether the news media are doing a better job of dealing with the issue of race, or, as Lani Guinier and other critics suggest, are they simply part of the problem. Some have charged that a system of "unconscious racism" pervades the broadcast news industry, and that minority journalists are consistently denied decision-making positions.²⁸

One way to evaluate this issue is to look at the media coverage of the riots in South Central Los Angeles following the Rodney King trial. More than twenty years after Watts burned and the Kerner Commission dug through the rubble for answers, America watched the entire frightening spectacle of race riots repeat itself on television, fueled by the ritualized viewing of the videotape of Rodney King's beating. But when the dust settled, criticism of the press' performance raged on. Unlike the crisis twenty years earlier, there were some minority journalists on the scene, although many had to be imported from outside Los Angeles to be used as "cannon fodder" on the streets.²⁹ Many black journalists complained that the ultimate decision about how a story was to be written or produced was controlled by whites.³⁰ Perhaps most surprising was that the press pass offered neither white nor black journalists immunity. The ill-conceived notion that African-American or Hispanic journalists might be embraced by "their" communities, was countered by the fact that anyone carrying a

25. See Lee Thornton, *Smilin' Faces Tell Lies: The News Industry*, in *SPLIT IMAGE: AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE MASS MEDIA* 388-420 (Jannette L. Dates & William Barlow eds., 1990).

26. *Id.* at 417.

27. *Id.*

28. See, e.g., *id.* at 388-420.

29. Lisa G. Baird, *That Special Perspective They Say They Want*, *COLUM. JOURNALISM REV.*, July-Aug. 1992, at 27, 27 (quoting Linda Williams, Assistant Business Editor of the Los Angeles Times).

30. Mary Ann French, *Distorted Reflections; Major Media Still Short on Black Journalists*, *WASH. POST*, Aug. 22, 1992, at D1.

camera was fair game for the rioters.³¹ The media, said one African-American reporter who had been attacked by a mob, presents and emphasizes “the white point of view” and so became the object of the rioter’s wrath.³²

The angry people who wreaked havoc in Los Angeles seemed to be saying, “We don’t care so much about *who* you’ve got on the evening news, but *what* you’re covering and *how* you’re covering it.” Ultimately, the issue of newsroom demographics did little to transform the fundamental issue of the news media’s ability to enhance public understanding—in this instance about race relations and the problems of the inner city. One black activist, writing after the riots, angrily complained that “our voices were not called upon by whitestream media to analyze the uprisings in Los Angeles. We are the ‘community’ experts who, because of racism, class, and sex biases, are overlooked; when published or aired, our voices are dismissed because they are not white and connected.”³³

In the 1990s, media analysts have used the concept of modern racism to describe the contemporary dilemma facing television news. Neither wholesale invisibility of racial minority groups in the news, nor old-fashioned manifestations of racism through the use of racial epithets and overt segregation are problematic in the media today. Modern racism, instead, is a far more subtle practice. On one hand, it is manifested in the belief that racism is a thing of the past, and that minorities have equal opportunities in the marketplace. On the other hand, modern racism can be found in the active resentment of whites who believe that minorities are making unreasonable claims about their circumstances. Implicit in this is a general lack of sympathy for the minority position in society. These views are reinforced through the media, as one researcher at Northwestern University found in several studies of local television news in Chicago.³⁴ Typically, the main news stories which featured African-Americans related to crime or violence; stories about political party conflict brought on by black political figures were next; and third were stories about the emergence of black authority.³⁵ The crime stories made blacks appear threatening, while coverage of politics exaggerated the degree to which

31. Stephanie O’Neill, *L.A. Stories: ‘Get the Hell Out of Here!’* COLUM. JOURNALISM REV. July-Aug. 1992, at 23, 23.

32. *Id.*

33. HAKI R. MADHUBUTI, *WHY L.A. HAPPENED: IMPLICATIONS OF THE ’92 LOS ANGELES REBELLION* at xvi (1993).

34. Robert M. Entman, *Modern Racism and the Images of Blacks in Local Television News*, 7 CRITICAL STUD. IN MASS COMM. 332, 343 (1990).

35. *Id.* at 336.

black politicians practiced special interest politics.³⁶ This fueled anti-black sentiment and resistance to blacks' political demands.³⁷ Simultaneously, the presence of black anchors on the news generated an impression that racism is no longer a problem.³⁸ The researcher attributed these contradictory messages not to deliberate or conscious acts of discrimination on the part of broadcast journalists, but to the constraints of the industry, such as competition and time pressures.³⁹

Whether looking at the responses from minority communities, or at the results of research, the evidence suggests that the solution lies in part with altering long-held values and assumptions about what is news, who makes news, and what audiences want. More than fifteen years ago, Herbert Gans called on the news media to shift from relying exclusively on characteristic official or authoritative news sources to news sources with multiple perspectives that would be more representative of the American public and offer a "bottom-up view" of the world.⁴⁰ Gans questioned whose reality was being presented on the evening news, and whether the notion of media objectivity really facilitated fair and accurate reporting, or simply protected reporters from outside criticism.⁴¹ These issues are debated in classrooms, but rarely affect the newsroom. To carry out more responsible journalism, journalists must be willing to relinquish the verbal and visual metaphors that consistently associate African-Americans and Hispanics with the underclass, crime, and social deviance, and that depict Asian-Americans as a clannish model minority. These conceptions rely on historically constructed stereotypes that have remained amazingly resilient. Journalists, indeed all Americans, must be educated about the roots of images like "Quota Queen" and how these images are perpetuated out of ignorance and fear. Emphasizing media responsibility means examining individual prejudices, and stepping back to assess how deeply-ingrained perspectives on the world color the news that eventually ends up in America's living rooms each day. It also means a willingness to share power within news media organizations, so that this new diversity in the newsroom actually influences key decisions and shapes ideas about what is newsworthy and what will sell.

36. *Id.* at 337.

37. *Id.* at 340-41.

38. *Id.* at 341.

39. *Id.*

40. HERBERT J. GANS, DECIDING WHAT'S NEWS: A STUDY OF CBS EVENING NEWS, NBC NIGHTLY NEWS, NEWSWEEK AND TIME 304-13 (1979).

41. *Id.*

Perhaps this is asking a lot of an already beleaguered industry. This transformation is essential, however, to forge a better society for the next century. A recent news story captured the essence of this problem. The lead story on CNN and a top story on each of the networks was an account of the rescue of nineteen neglected children from a tenement in Chicago.⁴² The story had great production values: the children—all black—were shown being carried through the snow by concerned white police officers. Each station had film of the grim circumstances of the tiny apartment where the children and their parents lived. Drugs were alleged to be at the heart of the neglect. The police were surprisingly talkative about how appalled they were at the children's condition, and words like hungry, cold, abused, and squalor were repeated over and over. The story had human interest, emotion, and was a perfect lead-in to the night's more routine news. But why was this a lead story? Why did a relatively minor police call in Chicago make the national news? What underlying assumptions about race and class influenced the attention paid to this event? And how might it have reinforced numerous stereotypes, such as the idea of the dysfunctional black family?

Indeed, the story served to illustrate the national problem of child neglect. But, like the label of "Quota Queen," it also capitalized on fears, myths, and ignorance, presenting a polarized view of black and white America. The coverage of this story blew one incident out of proportion, and may have elicited sympathy for the children, and revulsion and disgust for the parents. Such visceral responses to pictures are considered the components of good television, but the wanton use of such racially-charged images is socially irresponsible. Indeed, child abuse is equally prevalent in white and black homes, but there were no voice-overs or information graphics to illustrate that fact. In the final analysis, journalists have to ask how a story like the neglect case in Chicago will contribute to public understanding. It is up to them to take responsibility for the outcome.

42. *E.g.*, Colin McMahon and Susan Kuczka, *Roaches, Rotten Food, Filth, and 19 Kids*, CHI. TRIB., Feb. 3, 1994, §1, at 4.