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Objective News and Other Myths: The Poisoning of Young Black Minds

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INTRODUCTION

Drugs, crime, violence—all are clear threats to the intellectual development and emotional stability of the young African American. Yet when news stories emerge on these topics, rarely do we think that the news itself may lead youngsters down the same treacherous path. Long a bulwark against the abuses of government and corporate power, the American mass media are celebrated for their investigative prowess and integrity. Journalists whose work reaches a particularly high standard of excellence receive the sort of public adulation usually reserved for popular heads of state or the most elite sports heroes. For example, the universal respect shown newsman Walter Cronkite is partly a gesture of gratitude for what was generally perceived as years of accurate, fair, honest reporting to which the nation surrendered its trust.

Careful examination of news coverage of the Black community, however, reveals disturbing biases and patterns of misinformation at the hands of the nation's largest and most respected print and broadcast media. Indeed, some analysts warn that the power that once toppled a president now works the equivalent on the Black community, thwarting Black social advancement by conveying the illusion of impartial reporting while applying vastly different standards to news coverage of Whites and Blacks. Young people, both Black and White, may be at particular risk of internalizing these misperceptions because their inexperience leaves them ill-equipped to challenge news reports. Educators and parents who wish to help youngsters become more critical news consumers can start by recognizing some key myths about race and the news.

MYTH #1: NEWS IS ESSENTIALLY OBJECTIVE, NO MATTER WHO REPORTS IT.

Fact: News reflects the values of the people who produce it.

Item: When a 28-year-old jogger was attacked and gang-raped several years ago in New York City's Central Park by a group of youths, her perilous struggle for survival was chronicled in spectacular media coverage that mirrored the city's sense of outrage. Yet, when a similar incident occurred several weeks before, the media were strangely silent. In the

earlier incident, a 29-year-old woman was attacked on the roof of a 21-story building by two armed men. The pair raped the woman, then forced her to jump from the roof. Miraculously, the naked woman managed to grab a television cable that broke her fall long enough for her screams to alert neighbors, who saved her life (Cose, 1989).

The jogger, a resident of New York's affluent Upper East Side, was White. Her attackers were Black and Hispanic. The second woman was a resident of Harlem. She and her attackers were persons of color. Media analyst Ellis Cose suggests that while the particulars of the two cases differed in important ways, the differential news coverage given the two crimes reflects unspoken judgments of newsworthiness by the affluent managers of New York's predominantly White-owned media. That the assailants of the Central Park jogger were Black and Hispanic confirmed a stereotype and heightened the news value of the story; that their victim was a successful investment banker made the story so urgent that it would have received widespread media coverage even if her attackers had been White. Conversely, while a Black or Hispanic woman may have received the same brutal treatment from the Central Park attackers, her plight would not have received broad news coverage unless she were prominent in the community or possessed at least one other of the attributes the media historically take great interest in covering (Cose, 1989).

Item: On June 13, 1988, syndicated Black columnist Carl Rowan surprised a teenaged intruder in his home and shot him in the wrist. That Rowan, a longtime advocate of handgun bans, owned and used an unregistered weapon sent indignation through both the White- and Black-owned press. An analysis of 23 articles on the incident appearing in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Washington Afro-American*, *Chicago Defender*, and *Kansas City Star* revealed that most stories—11 in number—were negative, expressing disdain for Rowan's apparent hypocrisy and welcoming the columnist to "the nasty world of self-defense." Seven other articles were neutral. Of the 5 articles that gave the incident a positive slant, 2 appeared in *The Washington Post*, Rowan's own newspaper, and three ran in the *Washington Afro-American*, a Black-owned weekly (Dates, 1990). In the face of widespread condemnation, such sympathetic responses are consistent with the personal allegiance a newspaper might be expected to show toward a veteran reporter on the one hand, and the deference one might expect a hometown newspaper to show a veteran "favorite son" on the other.

Item: A 1987 University of Massachusetts-Boston (UMASS-Boston) survey of 3,125 news stories collected at random over a one-month period in Boston revealed striking differences in news coverage from White- and Black-owned media outlets. In the White media 85% of the news about Boston's predominantly Black neighborhoods reinforced negative stereotypes of African Americans as prone to violence and crime, and unable to maintain cohesive families. In contrast, news from the Black media—comprising stories from the same neighborhoods and collected over the same 30-day period—depicted the Black community with more balance, reporting entrepreneurial breakthroughs as well as drug arrests,

high academic achievement as well as classroom problems, and successful campaigns to remedy poor living conditions as well as community malaise. Many of these positive news stories never appeared in the White-owned media.

In a region whose Black community totals 15% of the population (with a 22% Black population in Boston proper), the study also found a persistent tendency for White reporters to seek out White experts for comments, even on such issues of vital concern to the Black community as unemployment. Finally, Boston's White-owned media outlets displayed reluctance to cite racism as an underlying factor in news events ranging from White-on-Black harassment to educational disparities to employment discrimination. The study concluded that while the White media portray themselves through their charitable work and public service announcements as advocating racial harmony, their news coverage perpetuates racism by reinforcing common negative assumptions about Blacks, failing to show positive Black role models, and neglecting to discuss racism as an important social force (Johnson, 1987).

These cases suggest that the news is a product of subjective as well as objective decisions. When journalists report what is new, they simultaneously define what is old and therefore no longer newsworthy. When they report what is normal, they also make an implicit statement about what is abnormal. If they favor the old or new, and if they imply that what they consider normal should be considered normal, they convey preferences—individual, institutional, and societal—in the news they report (Gans, 1979). Thus, reporting is neither a science nor technique. Rather, as Halloran et al. (1970) assert, "It is really an art which is at the fingertips of the practitioner. It depends on many thousands of personal judgments, moods and feelings." "Like it or not," agrees editor James Michael Sullivan (1970), "television is in the values business."

While some values, such as those codified in standards of professional ethics, are explicit, others—such as those that identify a newsworthy story or suggest a way to tell it—are so shrouded that even the men and women who are guided by them may not consciously recognize them (Hartman & Husband, 1974). In the words of Charles Evans (1970), former editorial director for *U.S. News and World Report*, "So many of the judgments become so routine that we forget we are making them."

When these judgments cross into areas of race and class, the potential emerges for distorted news coverage vis-à-vis minorities and the poor. For example, as sociologist Herbert Gans (1979) points out, when journalists universalize the lifestyles of upper-middle-class Americans and project them onto the entire population, they are making assumptions about the nature of reality. In so doing, they leave no room for the reality judgments poor people have about America. Likewise, when the UMASS-Boston study was published, several local media representatives defended their news operations by claiming that many positive stories reported by the Black-owned media but neglected by the White-owned media were insignificant. However, the operative question in this case should be "Insignificant to whom?" Apparently, these editors and producers had neither considered that the African American community

could have values and concerns different than their own nor that those concerns might be as valid as their own.

Experiments by psychologist David Hamilton suggest that people—all people, news managers and news consumers alike—tend to forget information that challenges their assumptions about categories, while searching for and remembering information that affirms these assumptions. “The strength of stereotypes—both innocent and hostile—is attributed to the mind’s natural bent to seek to confirm its beliefs” (Goleman, 1989). To the extent that decisions about news coverage are guided by this human tendency, news reports confirm personal or institutional assumptions about racial groups, and subjective decisions in the newsroom overtake objective reasoning.

MYTH #2: THE PRESENCE OF BLACK REPORTERS ON THE STAFFS OF WHITE-OWNED NEWS OUTLETS SHOWS A COMMITMENT TO RACIAL FAIRNESS.

Fact: Although Black news professionals are more *visible* than in years past, Blacks are still severely underrepresented among reporters. Managerial positions—those that involve real power—remain nearly an exclusively White domain. Even as recently as 1989, Cose reports, “Some editors still debate—in the face of overwhelming evidence—whether Puerto Ricans can write good English and whether Blacks are too damaged intellectually to compete in the nation’s newsrooms.”

After 1967, when the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders laid partial blame for the urban rebellions on inadequate hiring and reporting within the White-owned print and broadcast media, newspapers and radio and television stations took strides to hire more minority reporters. Blacks began to receive newspaper bylines and often prominent placement at local television station news desks. The hiring boom was short-lived, however. By the mid-1970s, when sympathy for civil rights turned into antipathy for affirmative action, the presence of African Americans in the nation’s news media froze at a level higher than during the 1960s but far below proportional representation.

Blacks currently account for about 12% of the U.S. population. During the peak minority hiring period, Blacks comprised only 3% of all network news correspondents (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1979). Similarly, by 1985 only 5% of all newspaper copy editors and 2% of all reporters were Black, many of them on the staffs of Black-owned newspapers (Adams, 1985). Blacks are similarly underrepresented in managerial-level media positions in which critically important decisions are made regarding which stories to report, how much space to allocate for them, and what angle to give them. A 1986 survey by Operation PUSH found that only 5% of the 9,700 top officers and managers of the three major television news networks were Black. PUSH national president Reverend Jesse Jackson singled out CBS for its conspicuous inattention to Black affairs:

Today, there are zero Black or Hispanic station managers at CBS. Zero Black or Hispanic news directors. Zero Black or Hispanic program directors. Zero Black or Hispanic executive producers. Three wars [are] being waged on the continent right now: Libya, Angola, and South Africa. More than one-eighth of the human race, more than 30

million Americans are of African heritage. Yet CBS has no news bureaus between the Sahara and the Cape of Good Hope. (Massing, 1986)

As PUSH was focussing on the scarcity of Black television executives, the National Urban League reported that 97% of all newspaper executives were White (Adams, 1985). Jackson and other critics have repeatedly called upon the White-owned media to bring racial parity to their newsrooms in the belief that as staffs approach the racial makeup of the populations they cover, the media will be less likely to misrepresent minorities. Until that happens, Black and Brown faces seated before the television camera or composition room word processor will likely mean far less than their visibility would suggest.

MYTH #3: THE NEWS TEACHES CHILDREN HARSH BUT IMPORTANT LESSONS ABOUT THE WORLD.

Fact: The news frequently teaches distortions.

In some cases, as we have seen above, editorial decisions reflect the racial and class biases of media outlets. In others, the media mirror the distorted information presented before them. A prime example of the latter is the much-heralded "war on drugs," which the news media typically present as a Black, urban phenomenon. Indeed, 41% of the Americans arrested on drug charges in 1989 were Black, yet Blacks make up only 15% of the drug-using population. According to a *USA Today* analysis, this disproportionate Black arrest rate has increased steadily since at least 1985, when it stood at 20% (Meddis & Snyder, 1990). Given this concentration of drug arrests in the Black community and perhaps a tendency for the media to underreport White drug arrests when they occur,¹ it is not difficult to understand the finding in the earlier-cited UMASS-Boston study of a plethora of news stories on drugs in Black urban neighborhoods. Whatever the cause, news consumers who are unable to determine the accuracy of the impressions conveyed through newspapers and television are presented with a distorted view of current events.

Ironically, even experienced news professionals fall prey to these distortions. For example, Black television producer Tony Batten recalls that when the play "Bubbling Brown Sugar" was rumored to be Broadway's next hit, he approached the White executive producer of WNET-TV news in New York City to suggest a feature story on the behind-the-scenes preparations for the play. The executive producer was disap-

¹During the course of the UMASS-Boston study, while most of the major media news emerging from Boston's Black enclaves concerned drug crime, and a number of news outlets ran a story of two presumably Black pregnant women whose admission to a public hospital was caused by cocaine-induced premature labor, the drug problem touched the White community more than media reports indicated. The director of the Massachusetts Division of Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation explained that when Whites are arrested or undergo treatment for cocaine use, the police and other authorities are often willing to keep the news quiet out of respect for the drug users and their families. If a drug user is poor or a minority, the chance of coming under public scrutiny is much greater (Johnson, 1987).

pointed by the dress rehearsal he attended, but he told Batten the play had given him another idea: a news feature on the drug trade in Harlem (Levine, 1981). "Bubbling Brown Sugar," a play about Harlem's artistic heritage, had nothing to do with drugs, but the play obviously tapped what the executive producer "knew" about Blacks—that they are drug abusers. This news professional, who may have never set foot in Harlem, was probably drawing his point of reference from years of pejorative news reports. As Evans (1971) attests, "the malformed seeds of prejudice [had] been watered by a rain of false statistics and stories." Thus the executive producer was poised to help perpetuate a stereotype by producing yet another news story on a problem that has disproportionate visibility in the Black community.

A more recent example of news professionals succumbing to such preordained conceptions was evidenced in Boston during the recent Charles Stuart murder case in which the news media and many public officials quickly accepted a fabricated account of the death of a pregnant White woman at the hands of an unidentified Black assailant in a Black neighborhood. After racial tensions reached a boiling point and civil rights leaders complained about police officers randomly strip-searching hundreds of Black male suspects, the dead woman's brother-in-law confessed to police that his brother—her husband, who committed suicide rather than face trial on suspicion of murder—had killed her and then schemed to pin the blame on a person from a community with a reputation for crime. This scenario had long been suspected by many in the Black community.

Media coverage of the Stuart case shows the strength of common misperceptions of the Black community. Even in the face of facts (such as Stuart's purchase of excessive life insurance on his wife shortly before the murder) that shed doubt on the veracity of Stuart's story, most news outlets adhered to a version of events that confirmed prevailing White stereotypes about Black people. Shortly after the killing, in response to a local headline on the story ("No Wallet, So Killer Opened Fire"), Boston's *Christian Science Monitor* had marched in lockstep with other media outlets in the city, terming the grisly murder "both banal and barbaric" ("Crime, tragedy, and the media," 1989). After the case was resolved, however, the paper admitted that "[t]he readiest script, the racial one, should have been the most suspect" (Cattani, 1990).

MYTH #4: TODAY'S YOUNGSTERS ARE SOPHISTICATED ENOUGH TO DISTINGUISH MEDIA IMAGES FROM REALITY.

Fact: Without adult guidance, most youngsters are ill-equipped to understand how and why news reporting is flawed.

As Dorr (1983) reports, not until age eight do most children understand that televised *entertainment* programming is fabricated. It would follow that the sophistication required to understand far more subtle racial subtexts in news images is also lacking at early ages. Indeed, one study of 77 youngsters found that 10% of kindergarten students, 37% of second and third graders, and 57% of sixth graders confirmed that they perceive the format of news programs as a cue that information being

presented is real. In other words, the mere sight of a reporter speaking into a microphone was a signal for these children to believe whatever followed (Filipson, 1978). Very young children, whose lives are a mixture of vivid imagination and reality from the start, may thus have particular difficulty distinguishing reality on television.

Unfortunately, teachers are not always encouraged to help students understand racial or class biases on news reporting. In the otherwise commendable *Teaching Reading Skills Through the Newspaper* (Cheyney, 1984), the International Reading Association advises teachers to help students distinguish facts from personal opinions. Then it labels news stories (along with death notices and court announcements) as "factual," while terming advertisements, editorials, and other items "personal opinion." Ironically, this simplistic designation follows a lengthy discussion of the importance of developing critical thinking skills.

MYTH #5: VERY YOUNG CHILDREN ARE OBLIVIOUS TO RACE, SO THERE IS LITTLE NEED TO FEAR THAT BIASED MEDIA IMAGES WILL AFFECT THEM.

Fact: Children typically acquire the cognitive skills needed to become aware of racial differences at age three (Comer, 1989). By age five, Black children in day care centers were found to integrate the residents of a make-believe neighborhood, while White children segregated the playgrounds, schools, and churches. When shown pictures of Whites and Blacks and asked, "Who is rich?" most children selected a White person (Johnson, 1990).

Perhaps the most famous indicator that racial awareness starts early came from the pioneering research by Kenneth and Mamie Clark (1947), who found that Black children prefer White dolls over Black dolls. The finding, which was interpreted as clear proof of the harmful influence of segregation on Black children's self-esteem, was influential in the 1954 Supreme Court decision that desegregated the nation's schools. A recent replication of the study 40 years later found the same results (Fairchild, 1987), although one researcher suggests that selecting a White doll as the "pretty" one reflects Black children's understanding of the world around them rather than their opinion of themselves (Spencer, 1989). In light of mounting concern that children learn racial cues at a very early age, the Children's Television Workshop has incorporated into its award-winning "Sesame Street" new characters including a Black teenage entrepreneur and "Muppet" skits that for the first time explicitly address issues of racial harmony and stereotyping (Johnson, 1990).

DISCUSSION

Much of the research on the psychological effects of the mass media ignores minorities and the poor. One 1975 analysis of 2,300 studies on the effects of television found that only 7% dealt with these two populations (Comstock & Fisher, 1975). The information that is available, much of it regarding television, suggests that media images may have a significant impact on the self-esteem of Black youngsters and on the racial attitudes of White youngsters.

The socialization indeed begins early. As noted above, children learn to distinguish skin color and other racial differences by age three. According to Greenberg and Atkin (1978), by the time Black children reach late elementary and junior high school they report turning to television expressly to learn how different people behave, talk, look, and dress. Further, young Black adolescents report that television gives them a substantial number of cues regarding job roles (Greenberg & Atkin, 1978; Atkin et al., 1977), sex roles (Gerson, 1966), and overall behavior patterns (Atkin et al., 1977).

The media's impact on the racial attitudes of White children may vary depending on the degree of contact the latter have with Blacks. A 1977 study of nearly 1,000 White children found that some 40% identified television as their main source of information about Blacks. Sixty-eight percent of the rural White children in the study, compared to only 20% of urban White children, claimed television as a major source of information about how Blacks talk, look, and dress—presumably because most urban children are surrounded by real-life cues from African Americans (Atkin et al., 1977).

To appreciate the possible impact of media images in these children's lives, it is important to understand how racism and racial attitudes come about. Any parent who has watched a racially mixed group of small children playing happily together understands that racism is not instinctual. It is a learned behavior. At some point in a youngster's socialization cues about racial superiority and inferiority begin to compete with the child's natural intuitive sense that people are inherently equal. Youngsters may feel in their hearts that all people are equally deserving members of the human family, but somewhere between the ages of 8 and 12, when children begin to place themselves within a larger social context, they start to internalize the messages they hear about their place in the world. When the racial messages they hear from parents, neighbors, and friends are one-sided generalizations, children become less sure of their inner convictions. When they turn to such authoritative sources as newspapers, radio, and television and see reporters and anchors—persons celebrated for their purported objectivity—broadcasting images that reinforce these same simplistic impressions, the child's inner flame—his or her innate sense of justice and equality—grows dimmer still (Comer, 1989).

Adolescence may be a particularly crucial period for the development of racial biases. For White adolescents, the tumultuous search for identity and the need to establish one's ground in the social hierarchy may find nourishment in the denigration of minorities (Bettelheim & Janowitz, 1965). For Blacks, a growing awareness of the intensity and universality of such denigration, both interpersonal and institutional, can frustrate the formation of a positive racial identity (Comer, 1989).

Widespread negative images of Blacks can also plant seeds of self-doubt within the soul of the Black youngster, a point illustrated in a thoughtful commentary about another American minority group by syndicated columnist William Raspberry (1985). Raspberry notes the contrast between the abundance of gifted Chinese table tennis players and the scarcity of Chinese professional basketball players and wonders: "Might

it be that Chinese youngsters, seeing no one like themselves doing well on the [basketball] courts, saddled with assumptions that their talents lie in other directions, and embarrassed by their awkwardness the first time they try basketball, simply choose not to compete?" His point is that while the expectation of success encourages Black youngsters to sacrifice countless hours honing their basketball skills, the avoidance of and eventual failure at other forms of competition—professional, educational, and intellectual—is rooted in the expectation that Blacks cannot succeed in nonathletic endeavors. When they do fail, the notion of Black success as an unrealistic pipe dream is reinforced for both Blacks and Whites; Blacks become the images projected of them, stereotypes are reinforced, and a new cycle of racism is perpetuated.

The African American child lives in a world of often dizzying stresses. At home, in the classroom, and even on the playground, race-based social conditions and attitudes are constant threats to a Black youngster's healthy emotional development. The media are poised to help break this downward spiral. The presence in the media of positive role models and a more balanced and realistic view of the contributions of African Americans to the world at large would seem intuitively beneficial for these youngsters. Fairer, truer news images of the African American community might serve a dual function: simultaneously reducing the likelihood that urban Black youngsters will assume that a life of drugs or crime is among their few realistic future options, while increasing the probability that the negative, stereotypical perceptions of White news consumers will be challenged and dismissed.

Clearly, however, the mere existence of more even-handed media images of Black Americans is not the entire salvation of Black youngsters. Spencer (1989) recounts an ABC television documentary featuring a 13-year-old Black youth who had survived a shooting, lost an eye, and candidly admitted his inability to think of even one man in his neighborhood whom he admired. Against an environment of pervasive and violent stresses the child had the same aspiration, to be a physician, as millions of more affluent youths, but the huge probability is that his counterparts will see their dream come true and he will not. The thwarting of his ambitions will not be a result of a differential in ability—the youngster is an honors student—but while he and children like him may have no difficulty imagining their dreams, the crucial elements in their cases are not the lack of media images of Black doctors. The key is the means, the guidance, the resources, and the encouragement needed to set in place the process for transforming their dreams into something closer to reality.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

One way to bring about fairer Black representation in the news is to alter the racial balance of those who produce it. In cases where station managers, editors, general managers, and other media executives are reluctant to move on their own, communities can find success by taking matters into their own hands. When "Street Cop," a critically acclaimed PBS documentary on street crime, aired on Boston's WGBH-TV several

years ago, some community residents who were seen on camera were outraged. They charged that the producers of the program perpetuated racist stereotypes by bypassing White neighborhoods, which are also affected by street crime and drug offenses, to film entirely in the city's Black community; by portraying virtually every Black or Hispanic resident as a victim or perpetrator of drug crime; and by filming from the sole perspective of the police, thereby neglecting to show the community's own efforts to combat drug crime.

After a position paper was drafted and signed by hundreds of city residents including city council members, state legislators, religious and civic leaders, and many school children, community representatives met with WGBH executives and presented a list of recommendations ranging from increased minority hiring for decision making positions to the sponsoring of racism awareness activities for station employees. The producers of "Street Cop" were reluctant to cooperate and refused to return the activists' phone calls. Community residents then took their complaints to the station's president and to its advisory boards charged with overseeing program content. Within weeks WGBH hired a Black producer for the prestigious "Frontline" documentary series and sponsored a two-day racism awareness workshop for 60 station executives—only the first steps, according to WGBH president Henry Becton, of an ongoing campaign to address the Black community's concerns (McCabe, 1987; Martins, 1987).

WGBH's Community Advisory Board played an important role during the "Street Cop" controversy. As community residents struggled to make their voices heard from outside the station, board members worked for change from within. Many media outlets employ such boards to ensure that the concerns of the community are reflected in their operations. Educators and parents concerned about the fairness of media images of Blacks can serve an important role on such boards, from suggesting which stories to cover and which persons to interview, to critiquing news coverage and even screening sensitive stories before they are released. If a local news outlet lacks a community advisory board, educators can help lead the initiative to establish them.

In the classroom, educators can help youngsters become more critical news consumers in a number of ways:

- *Encourage students to critically analyze news reports.* A first step might be to guide students in discussions designed to illuminate some of the shortcomings of media reports and why they occur. For example, class discussion of a local crime story can start with an analysis of the classic "five W's": who, what, when, where, and why—with an emphasis on why. Oftentimes, asking enough "why" questions (e.g., "Why did this man rob a bank and risk being killed instead of simply taking out a loan?" "Why did the judge give him a sentence twice as long as another man convicted for the same crime last week?") will help students begin to understand that standard news coverage often fails to report germane information.

If coverage strikes students as deserving of praise or critique, they should be encouraged to register their feelings by letter to an editor or station manager. Media outlets often place a premium on being

responsive to their constituents, and the exercise will help students understand that they can choose to be interactive partners with the media rather than mere passive consumers.

- *Assign students to compare coverage of the same story by different news outlets.* The differences can be striking; Black- and White-owned newspapers often have distinctly different ground rules for what constitutes a news-worthy story and how that story should be reported. These differences can be spotlighted by asking one group of students to analyze a news story appearing in a White newspaper and asking another group to analyze coverage of the same story in a Black newspaper. Each group must arrive at a separate consensus summary of 5 or 10 important facts presented by their assigned article as well as identify several pertinent inferences a reasonable consumer might make based on the news story. Comparing these lists can drive home the point that news content is rarely value-free but is affected by prevailing attitudes about race and class.

If students show particular interest in exploring how subjective factors shape the news, class discussion can be expanded to examine additional influences. For example, *The Powers That Be* by David Halberstam (1979) documents in encyclopedic detail how the personal agendas of individual publishers have historically driven the editorial agendas of the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time* magazine, and other powerful media giants. Similarly, in *The Media Monopoly* (Bagdikian, 1983), the dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of California–Berkeley argues eloquently that the news is increasingly influenced by America’s largest banks, insurance companies, oil and gas companies, and other (non-media) corporations whose direct ownership of media outlets, and presence on the board of directors of these outlets, presents the news media with unprecedented conflicts of interest. In both cases, the result is that, unbeknownst to consumers, important news stories are slanted and sometimes buried outright so as not to offend personal or corporate sacred cows. These analyses may be a useful adjunct to a discussion of race and the media by presenting the case for another set of unacknowledged and dangerous influences on the content and thrust of today’s news.

A serious inquiry into the causes of deficiencies—and occasional bright spots—in news coverage might explore the limitations imposed by news reporting formats. For example, television is dependent on visual images and brief sound bites to tell a story. On the other hand, newspapers are limited only by the conveying power of the written word and have the luxury of thousands of column-inches. The contrast in sheer amount and quality of information reported in the two media is usually extreme. Even within the same format there are noticeable variations in the quality of news reporting. The thoughtful and culturally sensitive reporting evidenced on National Public Radio’s “All Things Considered” and other public radio news and public affairs programming, and the *Christian Science Monitor*’s efforts to place each day’s headlines in historical context, produce distinctive news reports. Gans (1979) discusses format-oriented influences in some detail. By comparing parallel stories as reported in print and broadcast media, or

among several news outlets within the same format, students can begin to become attuned to gradations of quality in news reporting and be further reminded that all news is not alike.

- *Teach students to consider alternative vantage points.* Assign students to watch a documentary or news special about a pressing public affairs issue such as street crime, prison reform, homelessness, or Middle East politics. Ask them to view such programs with an eye toward identifying the point of view from which the story is reported. In class discussion or written reports ask students to speculate about how the program might have differed had the vantage point changed (for example, a program on prison reform produced by prison inmates). This exercise helps students ask imaginative "what if" questions that often counter the sometimes depressing reality of standard news coverage. It may also plant seeds of inspiration in any aspiring young reporters.
- *From examining the media, students can move to examining themselves.* Ask students to compile individual lists of 10 of their own honest impressions about people of another race. The lists should not bear the students' names. The list can include students' beliefs about what people of other races do for a living, how they like to spend their free time, how their families interact, what they like to eat, and so forth. Then ask the students to note the source of each impression. Collect the lists, then tally the number of impressions that came from the media. A discussion of the accuracy of certain images, and the reasons for their portrayal in certain ways, can follow.

Teachers should be forewarned that the classroom discussions described above may threaten students because they challenge institutions and ideals that most students may have never before challenged. As a result, students may react defensively or angrily at first. Encouraging students to devise solutions to the problems they discover, however, can channel these often difficult emotions in constructive directions. For example, students can be assigned an essay question such as "If you were a television news producer, what steps would you take to ensure that your reporting is fair?" or they can be encouraged to compile a list of 10 ways they would improve local news coverage. The list can then be presented to local media outlets for discussion or local media representatives can be invited to speak to classes to give students a chance to voice their questions and concerns. In these ways students can hear firsthand how real-world constraints may frustrate the good intentions of even the most conscientious news professionals.

CONCLUSION

While the mass media are a pervasive influence on American race relations, much of their power originates in the silence that greets their news reports. Implicit value judgments, subtle decisions about newsworthiness, the effects of news items on youngsters' self-image, and other potentially harmful influences are rarely recognized and even less frequently discussed among news consumers. Educators have the opportunity to prompt a dialogue whose effects may extend from local classrooms

to local newsrooms and beyond. By breaking the silence that surrounds these issues, and encouraging critical discussion and the development of innovative action plans, educators play a vital role in efforts to improve the national climate of race relations. In recent years that climate has been threatened by reversals in affirmative action mandates, challenges to minority scholarships and financial aid, a presidential veto of civil rights legislation, the proposal of "parental choice" as an alternative to busing, and other events that derive their inspiration, at least in part, from prevailing White attitudes about Black people—attitudes that are shaped to a significant extent by the mass media.

Ultimately, however, our attention to the misrepresentation of the Black community is an act of self-love. While it is important to educate the White community about its racism, the key to the healthy development of each new Black generation rests in the hands of the Black educator. Whether teacher, parent, grandparent, or concerned neighbor, those of us who envision a community brimming with pride, self-respect, and endearing love for ourselves will scrutinize our portrayal by a system that broadcasts messages of doubt and suspicion, and whose influence on our community requires only that we trust it.

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