
BLACKS IN THE NEWS: TELEVISION, MODERN RACISM AND CULTURAL CHANGE

By Robert M. Entman

Local news may be one vehicle through which television helps, inadvertently, both to preserve and to transform cultural values. Content analysis on the evening news on four Chicago television stations over a lengthy period suggests local television responds to viewing tastes of black audiences. However, data on these Chicago television news programs suggest racism still may be indirectly encouraged by normal crime and political coverage that depict blacks, in crime, as more physically threatening and, in politics, as more demanding than comparable white activists or leaders. Ironically, widespread employment of black television journalists suggests to viewers that racial discrimination is no longer a significant social problem. The mix of these two views of blacks encourages modern white racism—hostility, rejection and denial toward black aspirations—the study argues.



This study explores the possible impact of local television news on whites' attitudes toward blacks. Content analysis of local news in Chicago suggests that, on balance, the medium may help to discourage and delegitimize traditional racist attitudes among white audiences. Yet the data also support the hypothesis that local news contributes to the phenomenon social scientists have labeled "modern racism."

Modern racism is a compound of hostility, rejection and denial on the part of whites toward the activities and aspirations of black people. In part, local television's inadvertent contribution to this phenomenon may arise from its coverage of blacks involved in crime and in politics. And in part, paradoxically, it may arise from the very responsiveness of local news to black audiences. In this way television news appears to be helping to change the shape of whites' racial attitudes to fit the system's current political practices and social realities.

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The change from traditional to modern racism is subtle, but critical to an understanding of mass media's influence on racial attitudes. Traditional racism comprises negative "beliefs about black intelligence, ambition, honesty and other stereotyped characteristics, as well as support for segregation and support for acts of open discrimination."¹ Traditional racism is thus *open* bigotry that endorses "restrictions on interracial social contact... and opposition to equal access or equal opportunity"² Only in the past 25 years or so have expressions of such traditional racist sentiments nearly disappeared from the media and from public discourse generally. Surveys now show only declining number of whites endorsing such traditional racist sentiments as "Black people are generally not as smart as whites" or "It is a bad idea for blacks and whites to marry one another."³

According to social scientists, this reduction in measured racism has two basic causes. First, traditional racist sentiment has actually declined, perhaps in part because of changes in law and public policy.⁴ Second, white Americans now realize that it is frowned upon to assert that blacks are inherently inferior, socially undesirable and therefore deserving of legally-enforced segregation.⁵

In response to the measurement difficulties and the manifest continued significance of race to American society,⁶ social scientists developed the concept of "modern" (or "symbolic") racism. According to Sears, modern racism centrally involves "anti-black affect" combined with attachment to "traditional [American] values."⁷ This orientation leads modern racists to express "antagonism toward blacks' 'pushing too hard' and moving too fast ... resentment toward ... racial quotas in jobs or education, excessive access to welfare, [or] special treatment by government, ...[and] denial of continuing discrimination."⁸ Whites who have modern racist sentiments do not necessarily believe that blacks are inherently inferior or that discrimination should be legal. What many whites with modern racist tendencies do consciously feel is some amalgam of negative affect (especially fear and resentment), rejection of the political agenda commonly endorsed by black leaders, and denial that racism is still a problem.

Modern racist attitudes are measurable, since most whites do not

¹John McConahay, "Modern Racism, Ambivalence, and the Modern Racism Scale," in John Dovidio and Samuel Gaertner, eds., *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism: Theory and Research* (New York: Academic Press, 1986), p. 93.

²David Sears, "Symbolic Racism," in Phyllis Katz and Dalmas Taylor, eds., *Eliminating Racism* (New York: Plenum Press, 1988), p. 55.

³See McConahay, *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁴Sears, *op. cit.*

⁵The standard items used to measure racism became "reactive in that most white Americans knew the socially desirable answers...." McConahay, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁶As McConahay, *op. cit.*, pp. 92-93 points out.

⁷Sears, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

⁸Sears, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

know about the theory of modern racism and do not find the pertinent items in surveys socially undesirable. Whites frequently endorse such survey items as: "Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights" (Agree is the modern racist answer); "It is easy to understand the anger of black people in America" (Disagree); and "Over the past few years, the government and news media have shown more respect to blacks than they deserve" (Agree).⁹ Studies have shown that such items compose a psychometrically valid attitude scale and that scores predict policy attitudes and voting behavior. Many whites who fail to endorse traditional racist attitudes do score high on modern racism and consistently oppose pro-black policies and vote against black or pro-black politicians.¹⁰

Despite empirical support, some scholars attack the concept of modern racism. Some assert that the real explanation for whites' hostility to blacks' striving is group-based conflict over scarce resources;¹¹ others argue that whites may oppose government intervention favoring blacks on conservative ideological grounds having nothing to do with racial animosity.¹² Each explanation may apply to some individuals who score high on instruments measuring modern racism, but the validity of the concept itself appears well-supported. The most convincing evidence is that scores on modern racism scales predict behavior. Measures of individuals' attachment to group interests do not, and, for reasons of social desirability, measures of old-fashioned racist views cannot.¹³

There has also been some discussion of whether the term "racism" should be avoided. A less pejorative description such as "racial conservatism" could be substituted, but that usage obscures the concept's connection with old-fashioned racism as it dishonors conservatism. For now, following the typical usage of scholars studying race relations, "modern racism" seems most appropriate.¹⁴

The previous literature on the portrayals of blacks in U.S. news media has focused mostly on visibility in print. Sentman found relatively low visibility for blacks in *Life* magazine for the period 1937-72, but

Black Portrayal in the Press

⁹Taken from the literature review in Sears, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

¹⁰See McConahay, *op. cit.* and Sears, *op. cit.* Whites may support candidates who oppose pro-black policies because of the politicians' stands on unrelated issues, such as agriculture policy or inflation. The explanation of candidate choice is an enormously complicated task well beyond the scope of this paper, but the literature already cited shows the independent effect of modern racism on voting, controlling for other variables.

¹¹Lawrence Bobo, "Group Conflict, Prejudice, and the Paradox of Contemporary Racial Attitudes," in Katz and Taylor, *op. cit.*

¹²Byron M. Roth, "Social Psychology's 'Racism,'" *The Public Interest* No. 98: 26-36 (Winter 1990); and cf. Paul M. Sniderman, Thomas Piazza, Philip E. Tetlock and Ann Kendrick, "The New Racism," *American Journal of Political Science* 35 (May 1991): 423-447.

¹³See Sears, *op. cit.*, and the many studies cited there.

¹⁴See Phyllis Katz and Dalmas Taylor, "Introduction," in Katz and Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

extending the time period and media sampled, Lester and Smith discovered a pattern of rising coverage, as did Martindale.¹⁵

Since data on local TV news suggest that blacks have now achieved high visibility, the more relevant research concerns the portrayals of the blacks who are visible. Hartmann and Husband¹⁶ found that British news tends to portray many general social problems as dilemmas involving or caused by blacks, thus promoting an image of blacks as sources of threats and burdens to society. Hall and his colleagues in Britain and Van Dijk's cross-cultural research came to similar conclusions.¹⁷ Finally, Gray argued that U.S. news traces failure among the black "underclass" to individual shortcomings. Thus, he concluded, television perpetuates the notion that "racism is no longer a significant factor...."¹⁸ All these works lend convergent validity to the findings reported here, but none connect the theory of modern racism to TV news and American political culture.¹⁹

Methods and Theory

Based on a pilot study,²⁰ two elements of the stories were chosen for close analysis: the visual portrayals of the accused and the allocation of "sound bites," that is, quotes of various actors in their own voices. The specific message dimensions chosen grew out of the research not just on modern racism but on racial prejudice generally. To summarize an enormous literature,²¹ the basic understanding of prejudiced thinking is

¹⁵Mary Alice Sentman, "Black and White: Disparity in Coverage by *Life* Magazine from 1937 to 1972," *Journalism Quarterly* 60: 501-508 (Autumn 1983); Paul Lester and Ron Smith, "African-American Photo Coverage in *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Time*, 1937-88," *Journalism Quarterly* 67: 128-136 (Spring 1990); Carolyn Martindale, *The White Press and Black America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

¹⁶Paul Hartmann and Charles Husband, *Racism and the Mass Media* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1974).

¹⁷Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: The Macmillan Press, 1978). Teun van Dijk, *Communicating Racism: Ethnic Prejudice in Thought and Talk* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1987). Also see John Downing, *The Media Machine* (London: Pluto Press, 1980).

¹⁸Herman Gray, "Television, Black Americans, and the American Dream," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (December 1989), p. 384. Gray does not analyze regular TV news programs, relying instead upon a 90-minute CBS News documentary by Bill Moyers.

¹⁹There is a larger literature on portrayals of blacks in American fictional television. The data suggest that blacks now fill more diverse and less stereotypical roles than they once did, although certain racial biases persist. See, e.g., Carolyn Stroman, Bishetta Merritt, and Paula Matabane, "Twenty Years After Kerner: The Portrayal of African Americans on Prime-Time Television," *The Howard Journal of Communications* 2: 44-56 (Winter 1989-90); cf. J. Fred MacDonald, *Blacks and White TV: Afro Americans in Television since 1948* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1983).

²⁰See Robert Entman, "Modern Racism and the Images of Blacks in Local TV News," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 7: 332-345 (December 1990).

²¹See David Hamilton and Tina Troler, "Stereotypes and Stereotyping: An Overview of the Cognitive Approach," in Dovidio and Gaertner, *op. cit.*; Patricia Linville, Peter Salovey and Gregory Fischer, "Stereotyping and Perceived Distributions of Social Characteristics: An Application to Ingroup-Outgroup Perception," in *ibid.*

that individuals from the disliked outgroup (here, blacks) are homogenized and assimilated to a negative stereotype by the ingroup (whites), whereas those in the ingroup see themselves as individuated members of a diverse group impossible to stereotype. The key to anti-black racism, then, is whites' tendency to lump all or most blacks together into categories with negative characteristics.

Human information processing appears to operate by using stored categories called schemas, which are themselves similar to stereotypes; thus it is easy for people to fall into stereotyped thinking.²² For audiences and journalists alike, this inherent bias of information processing combines with existing social structures and political processes to promote the stereotyping of the black outgroup.

Because old-fashioned racist images are socially undesirable, stereotypes are now more subtle, and stereotyped thinking is reinforced at levels likely to remain below conscious awareness. Rather than the grossly demeaning distortions of yesterday, stereotyping of blacks now allows abstraction from and denial of the racial component. Examples of stereotyped news subjects that might trigger stored information processing categories and associated negative affective responses would be "threatening young black male" or "demanding black activist"; the (unjustified) threat and the (unfair) demand would be the conscious stimuli of the negative affect rather than the racial identity.

Journalists who repeatedly transmit these images may not themselves support modern racism. News personnel shape reports in accordance with professional norms and conventions. When confronted with events or issues that the social structure and political process routinely produce, these journalistic practices yield visuals and sound bites that fit audience stereotypes. Thus, to take one example, when journalists select sound bites for a story about black political activity, they will often choose those that convey drama and conflict. Black leaders produce an ample supply of such quotes because the structures of social and political power often marginalize them, inducing them to employ demanding and emotional rhetoric.²³ Those quotes are not the only things the blacks say, but they are the ones that make "good television" — they convey drama and induce emotion, they provide aural variation in what might otherwise be a dull talking head story. Since similar sound bites have been conveyed frequently over the years, the audience may come to expect them in narratives of black political activity. News personnel know this and, following professional norms, attempt to fulfill audiences' expectations. What reinforces stereotypes from the perspective of the communication theorist is simply following news conventions and audience expectations to the journalist.

²²Hamilton and Troler, *ibid.*

²³Blacks also seem to use emotional communication differently from whites, which may cause whites to feel threatened. See Thomas Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); cf. Entman, "Images of Blacks," *op. cit.*

To find the ways that mass cultural institutions may promote negative stereotypes that are congruent with modern racism, one must now analyze subtle distinctions between visual and verbal representations of blacks and whites. These implicit comparisons of blacks and whites may deny individuation and associate blacks with negative traits, while implicitly individuating and associating whites with more positive qualities. It is in this way that TV can — without manifestly derogating blacks — encourage modern racism.

To test its hypotheses, this paper relies exclusively upon media content. Therefore, like all studies based purely on content analysis, it can only provide inferential evidence as to the effects of the messages it documents; the discussions of how the different images of blacks and whites affect attitudes is inevitably speculative. As always, media images are polysemic, and audience responses may be diverse; it is possible that continuing exposure to local news has no effect on racial attitudes. Based upon current understanding of racist thinking and the content analysis, the paper merely attempts to build a *plausible* case that local news may stimulate and reinforce modern racism, at least among those whites most likely to find that orientation appealing. A definitive case awaits future research.²⁴

Hypotheses

Modern racism is operationalized as having three major components paralleling the dimensions of survey instruments used to measure the concept: general affective hostility toward black persons; rejection of blacks' political aspirations;²⁵ and denial that discrimination continues to be a problem for blacks. This breakdown yields three specific hypotheses about how the typical images of blacks on local TV news may reinforce stereotyping that feeds modern racism.

H 1. *There are consistent differences in portrayals of blacks and whites in crime stories that may stimulate the hostility component of modern racism.* Lewis and Salem write that: “[A]ttitudes of citizens regarding crime are less affected by their past victimization than by their ideas about what is going on in their community—fears about a weakening of social controls on which they feel their safety and the broader fabric of social life is ultimately dependent.”²⁶ Such fears may be compounded and focused on blacks by the reporting practices of local TV news. Local news in Chicago and elsewhere appears to grant high

²⁴The author is collecting large-scale sample survey data to test the impact of exposure to local TV news on racial attitudes.

²⁵ Readers should not infer that all blacks agree on the public policies government pursue; however, blacks are significantly more “liberal” and vote much more heavily for the (more liberal) Democratic Party than whites. See Barry Sussman, *What Americans Really Think* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

²⁶Daniel Lewis and G. Salem, *Fear of Crime: Incivility and the Production of a Social Problem* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1986), p. 9.

priority to crime stories.²⁷ It is thus no surprise that a large proportion of the local TV news featuring black persons focused on crime, most of it violent.

Statistics indicate that young black males are "in fact" involved with Chicago's criminal justice system far more than young whites. In 1989, a study found, 29% of black males between the ages of 20 and 29 spent time in Cook County jail, versus 4% of young whites.²⁸ But there is no inherent definition of news that says crime *must* comprise a major proportion of local television news programming. Nonetheless, TV stations seem to believe audiences for local news want a lot of crime coverage, and judging by the ratings success of the programs, perhaps they do. Thus do news norms, audience expectations, and social structure interact to produce stereotypes that may feed modern racism.

H 2. *There are consistent differences in portrayals of blacks and whites in political coverage that may arouse the second component of modern racism, resistance to blacks' political demands.* A major source of modern racist sentiments is attachment to traditional American individualist values, including suspicion of government intervention in the free market. If local news portrays blacks in politics as more strident and demanding of government favoritism than whites, it may generate or reinforce resistance among those in the majority group who oppose government intercession in the workings of America's meritocracy. So the second hypothesis is that local television's political coverage reinforces a second dimension of modern racism by encouraging a negative stereotype of blacks' political activities.

H 3. *The high visibility of authoritative black journalists communicates messages likely to support the third element of modern racism, denial of racial discrimination.* The third hypothesis concerns the paradoxical function of stations' responsiveness to the interests of the black community. The stations' most visible response is employing African-American anchors and reporters. The hypothesis is that these journalists stand as symbolic affirmations that discrimination no longer impedes African-Americans, thereby contributing to a stereotyped understanding of black progress that undergirds the third component of modern racism. But the prominent black presence in local news may also undermine traditional racist stereotypes.

The study is based on content analysis of approximately 55 days of local television news in Chicago as broadcast by WBBM (CBS affiliate),

Findings

²⁷For evidence from a 36-market study of local TV news, see Robert Entman, *Democracy Without Citizens: Media and the Decay of American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 110-113; cf. Carroll, *op. cit.*

²⁸"29% of young black men jailed in '89, study says," *Chicago Tribune* (September 23, 1990), pp. 1, 18. Note that the study does not appear to establish that all of those black males jailed were residents of Cook County or that individuals did not give different names when arrested repeatedly. The data are thus of uncertain reliability. However the *Tribune* reports a similar study in Los Angeles County that also found a figure of 29% there.

WGN (Independent), WMAQ (NBC) and WLS (ABC), sampled from the period of December 1, 1989 through May 10, 1990.²⁹ The program was the 10 p.m. news for the three network affiliates and the 9 p.m. news for independent WGN. Analyzing data limited to one city allowed intensive exploration of the connections between modern racism and television news in a concrete context for one of America's largest urban areas. Whether the findings can be generalized to other metropolitan areas can only be determined by future research, although there is reason to think local news programming is similar from city to city.³⁰

Local television appears to be a particularly important news medium in Chicago. Half the TV households in the Chicago area watch the late local news (at 9 or 10 p.m.) on the average night. This compares with an average combined rating of 26 for the three network evening news shows (shown at 5:30 or 6:00 p.m.).³¹ Adding impetus to this study, most local news reports originate close to home. The images in all likelihood help to shape the audience's emotional and cognitive responses to community conditions in a way that national news cannot.

As a proportion of the total news time analyzed, approximately 37% featured blacks³² more than incidentally.³³ From this figure it is

²⁹The data are from video recordings of the local news broadcast by WBBM, WGN, WLS, and WMAQ for selected periods from December 1989 through May 1990. The period December 1-7, 1989, was originally the pilot study week (WGN was not included in the pilot). These programs are included in the analysis along with a sample of programming from the next five months. In each month after December, two five day periods were chosen. In an attempt to cover every day of the month, dates were staggered purposively but randomly to cover 10 days from each month: January 10-14 and 21-25; February 6-10 and 16-20; March 1-5 and 26-30; April 21-30; and May 1-10. The word "approximately" is used in the text because of preemptions of the news (usually by sports events) and equipment malfunctions (bad reception or faulty timer settings); some programs in the sample periods were not recorded. The total number of programs included in the sample is 207. The total number of possible programs, had there been no preemptions, would have been 221. With some preemptions, the actual potential number of news shows was about 215. The possibility that the absence of these few programs from the sample introduces any biases in the results is remote; the 207 programs analyzed comprise a large and representative sample of the late evening, local television news in Chicago. Coding was done by the author and by students trained and supervised by the author. Reliability was checked by the author's recoding of 15% of the material. Average reliability was .94 for the crime material and .86 for the political.

³⁰Stephen Hess, "Washington as Seen on Local TV Newscasts," paper presented at the 1990 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, August 30-September 2, 1990; Raymond Carroll, "Market Size and TV News Values," *Journalism Quarterly* 66: 49-56 (Spring 1989); Robert Entman, "Super Tuesday and the Future of Local News," in Phillip Cook, Douglas Gomery and Lawrence Lichty, eds., *The Future of News* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

³¹See A. C. Neilsen Company, *Neilsen Station Index (Chicago Metered Market Service for February 1989)* (New York: Neilsen Media Research, 1989). Some households may watch both WGN at 9 and another station at 10, so that the actual percentage of households watching the late news may be slightly under 50%.

³²The period analyzed included a total of approximately 2,484 minutes of news. This figure was arrived at by taking the total number of programs analyzed, 207, and multiplying by an average 12 minute news hole in each broadcast. The remainder of the 30-minute news show is taken up by weather, sports, banter among anchors, program credits and introductions, and commercials.

³³An example of an incidental appearance would be a black person walking by a news scene on the street.

clear that local television news does not neglect black persons or the black community. Politics comprised the largest single category of stories involving blacks, followed by crime. Together, these two categories accounted for 49.8% of all stories in which blacks appeared. Thus, images of blacks as either acting in politics or as involved somehow in crime dominate local news portrayals of African-Americans. These two areas of news turn out to be critical to the hypothesized role of local TV news in fostering modern racism.

The first hypothesis is that crime coverage, a primary topic for local news, produces differing images of blacks and whites, differences likely to stimulate negative affect among whites toward blacks. In testing this hypothesis, the unit of analysis is the story. During the study period, a total of 429 stories about the breaking of law appeared in which *a person was accused by name*. These were selected for close analysis because they were the stories most likely to provide information on the race of the accused, usually via a photograph or motion video footage of the person(s). The analysis focuses on 321 stories in which the race of the accused was actually conveyed and was either white or black. Of these, 231 or about 72% of the accused named were white, and 90 or 28% were black.³⁴

Because the type of crime rather than the race of the accused could affect differences in coverage, the stories were divided into two categories, those dealing with violent and drug-related crime, including murder, rape, robbery and drug dealing,³⁵ and those about non-violent crime, including fraud and political corruption. All analyses were conducted separately for the two categories to prevent the confounding of racial differences in reporting with differences related to the nature of the crime.

However, even if the explanation for any racial differences is that blacks and whites tend to commit different types of newsworthy crimes, the most salient point for public opinion is that the media convey a divergent pattern of racial images. Therefore, the data are presented first for all stories together without controlling for type of crime.

Visual and aural messages were coded. Visual analysis tested whether blacks accused of crimes were depicted in ways that might tend to make them look more threatening and less individualized than whites, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes. Among the visual attributes that were coded, the following yielded data of interest: whether stories used still photographs of the accused that included a label giving the person's name; whether the accused was shown in motion and whether, if so, the accused was being held physically by a police officer; and how the accused was dressed. The analysis revealed that on these dimensions

White Hostility and Black Crime News

34. For 22 stories, the accused was of another race.

35. Drugs were considered a violent crime because drug dealing is so closely associated with violence, even if a particular story only mentioned the sale or abuse of drugs.

there were differences in visual treatment that may tend to reinforce whites' fears. In other instances the visual analysis revealed no significant racial differences. These included whether the still photo was black and white or color, whether it was framed in color, whether the accused was handcuffed and the locations in which the accused was shown.³⁶

TABLE 1
Percentage of Blacks and Whites Accused of Crimes in Selected Visual Depictions for all Crimes

	Blacks	Whites	χ^2
A. Accused named in still photo	48.9	65.3	2.8
Accused not named in still photo	51.1	34.7	
N	(45)	(98)	
B. Accused shown in motion	52.3	66.3	4.9*
Accused not shown in motion	47.7	33.7	
N	(86)	(167)	
C. Accused well-dressed	45.6	69.4	9.2**
Accused poorly dressed	54.4	30.6	
N	(57)	(160)	
D. Accused physically held	37.6	17.6	7.0**
Accused not physically held	62.2	82.4	
N	(45)	(153)	
* p<.05			
** p<.01			

Table 1 shows the racial breakdown of still photos with and without names for those accused of violent crimes. Blacks were named less frequently: 49% of blacks but 65% of whites were shown with names. Statistical significance (by the chi square test) is at the .09 probability level, short of the standard .05 cutoff, but better than the .10 sometimes used in social research. This is the first of a series of differences that all point toward negative stereotyping; the others are significant below .05 (by chi square), suggesting that this finding is not due to chance. But more research is needed to confirm significance.

At a symbolic level, the absence of naming could be significant. Prejudice is fed by a tendency to homogenize, to assume there are no significant differences among individual members of the outgroup.³⁷ When blacks are not given a name in a picture, it suggests the visual representation can be assimilated to a larger, undifferentiated group, in this case the stereotype of a dangerous black male. The anonymous individual portrait exemplifies the stereotype; the name is not important

³⁶In analyzing visual elements of the coverage, we enter upon largely uncharted territory in social science. Communications scholars are only beginning to recognize and measure the impact of visual images upon audiences (see Doris Graber, "Seeing is Remembering: How Visuals Contribute to Learning from Television News," *Journal of Communication* 40: 134-156 (Summer 1990)), so there is no avoiding the speculative component of the discussion that follows.

³⁷See essays in Katz and Taylor, 1988 *op. cit.*; Linville, *op. cit.*

since the individual simply stands for a familiar category of persons outside the whites' own group.³⁸

This interpretation should not be pushed too far. Large numbers of black stills did contain a name label, and many white stills did not, but the results could suggest an unconscious tendency for those who put together local news shows to disregard the individuality of black accused lawbreakers more than white, in part perhaps because they assume the white majority cares little about the identity of blacks accused. When combined with the other content features documented here, and when exposure is repeated over a long time, this practice could help reinforce stereotyping among white audiences.³⁹

Another element of the visual treatment that may be related to individualization and humanization of the accused subject is whether the person is shown in motion video. To show a person moving is to symbolize that person as a human being, to disclose something about his size, facial expressions, and other elements of his individuality. Table 1 reveals that blacks were significantly less likely to be shown in motion than whites: 52% vs. 66%.⁴⁰

Table 1 also displays data on how the accused shown in motion video was dressed. Well-dressed means the accused had on coat and tie or casual sportswear; poorly dressed means the accused wore street clothes (jeans and T-shirts and the like) or jail clothing. The blacks were significantly more likely to be shown in street or jail clothing. This is not surprising, given the apparent differences in social class of the blacks and whites accused in the news (more on this below). Still, the depictions may contribute to whites experiencing greater threat from the more shabbily-clad blacks than from whites who are accused.

A similar pattern emerges in Table 1-D, which reveals whether the motion video of black and white defendants showed them being physically grasped by police. Symbolically, being held suggests that the person in custody — and perhaps the racial category of persons to which he belongs — is dangerous. If blacks are significantly more likely to be shown in this manner, the message could be conveyed over repeated exposures that they are more menacing than whites. As the table shows, blacks were indeed much more likely to be portrayed in the grip of a restraining officer than whites (38% vs. 18%). This finding may be traceable in part to class differences correlated with race, and here again we see the traces of social structure interacting with news choice: white criminals were more likely to be middle or upper class. With access to

³⁸Every still picture of a black violent criminal was of a male.

³⁹Although possible impacts on black audience members, or on those of other racial backgrounds are significant, they are beyond the scope of the research here.

⁴⁰Meanings of visual images are not always straightforward. Thus blacks shown in motion but being held by a police officer, may stimulate more negative affect than blacks shown only in an anonymous still photo. Classing motion video as humanizing may be inaccurate in some cases. Such complexities await further research.

bail money, whites were less likely to be shown in the physical grip of the police; being free from jail and having money, whites on average could also dress better than blacks.

The visual analysis was extended to the aural dimension with a probe of how "sound bites" were distributed. Stories were coded to determine how much attention was given pro-prosecution and pro-defense speakers, if any; what actor was quoted first in the story; whether the accused himself spoke on screen; and the race of any police officers quoted. There was no statistically significant pattern in quotes given pro-prosecution sources, whether the accused spoke,⁴¹ or in type of source quoted first.

TABLE 2
Percentage of
Blacks and
Whites
Accused of
Crimes in
Selected
Aural
Depictions
for All
Crimes

	Blacks	Whites	%
A. Number pro-defense sound bites			
None	88.8	70.6	11.7**
One	9.0	18.6	
Two or more	2.2	10.8	
N	(89)	(194)	
B. Race of police speaking on screen			
Black police official	32.3	4.0	30.0***
White police official	48.4	94.7	
Both black & white police official	19.4	1.3	
	(31)	(75)	
**p < . 01			
***p < . 001			

But there were two significant findings, displayed in Table 2. Table 2 shows that 11% of stories about blacks compared with 29% of those about whites included quotes from pro-defense actors. The data suggest that stories about black persons accused of crimes were substantially less likely to allow them or their defenders to present information in their own voices. Not only does this suggest that whites were less likely to be subjected to the general pro-prosecution slant that pervades crime news,⁴² on a symbolic level it suggests, once again, less humanized, less individualized treatment of the black accused. If the audience hears directly from the alleged lawbreaker or someone speaking for him, they may be more likely to see the accused as a human being with his own individual story and perspective rather than as part of an undifferentiated mass of miscreants.

⁴¹While for both races the vast majority of accused were not heard speaking, blacks were less likely to speak than whites. About 6% of the black accused and 14% of the whites spoke. The significance level of the difference was .08.

⁴²Cf. Celeste Condit and J.A. Selzer, "The Rhetoric of Objectivity in the Newspaper Coverage of a Murder Trial," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 2: 197-216 (September 1985).

Table 2 also shows the race of police officials quoted on screen about the accused. The table reveals that blacks accused of crimes were frequently discussed by white police officers or by both black and white police officers in the same story. On the other hand, whites accused of crimes were almost always discussed *only* by white police. There is a kind of symbolic segregation of police authority. Blacks are framed frequently by the words of white police, but not vice versa. Symbolically this could suggest to white audiences that blacks are not trusted (and perhaps cannot be trusted) to exert police authority over white persons. This finding probably reflects the residential segregation of Chicago and the practices of the police force in assigning officers of different races to specific neighborhoods. But whatever the underlying social structures, the pattern of images absorbed by the white audience may over time affect their racial attitudes.

One complication in this analysis is the presence of a prominent, continuing story during the period studied. This was the Dowaliby murder trial, involving a white couple charged with killing their own child. The Dowaliby crime received more attention than any other violent crime during the period (41 stories). Much of this coverage was sympathetic to the defendants.⁴³ Therefore, including it could bias the results. However, for the data in Tables 1 and 2, excluding Dowaliby stories only slightly reduced statistical significance levels; all findings remained significant beyond .05.

The data point to the following conclusion. Leaving aside type of crime — grouping violent and non-violent crime stories together, as the news programs themselves do — the images of blacks accused of crimes appear to be different from those of whites. Although on some dimensions there were no racial differences (data not shown), every case of difference appeared likely to stimulate negative emotions toward blacks among white audiences.

Separating out news of the non-violent crimes, Tables 3 and 4 present the data for violent crimes only. In each case, the relatively negative imagery of blacks holds. That is, even when we look only at reporting of violent crime, the blacks accused appear to be treated in a less favorable manner than allegedly violent whites. The statistical significance of the findings changes, however.

For violent crime, Table 3 shows that blacks were less often named than whites; though the finding was not quite significant at the .05 probability level, if we exclude Dowaliby stories (data not shown), the relationship actually does become statistically significant (at $p=.036$); with the Dowaliby's excluded, 43% of the blacks versus 67% of the whites accused of violence have name labels on their still photos.

Blacks and Crime

⁴³As suggested by findings reported below, which show that removing Dowaliby coverage reduces the racial disproportion in pro-defense sound bites.

TABLE 3
Percentage of Blacks and Whites Accused of Crimes in Selected Visual Depictions for Violent Crimes Only

	Blacks	Whites	χ^2
A. Accused named in still photo	42.9	62.2	
Accused not named in still photo	57.1	37.8	3.1
N	(35)	(90)	
B. Accused shown in motion	52.2	67.2	
Accused not shown in motion	47.8	32.3	4.3*
N	(69)	(153)	
C. Accused well-dressed	37.5	59.6	
Accused poorly-dressed	62.5	40.4	5.8*
N	(48)	(114)	
D. Accused physically held	47.2	24.3	
Accused not physically held	52.8	75.7	5.6*
N	(36)	(103)	

*p<.05

Table 3 shows blacks accused of violence receiving significantly less favorable visual treatment than whites on the other three dimensions. However, excluding the Dowaliby stories from these latter three erases the statistical significance of the results (data not shown). For this particular period, the news conveyed an important lesson about white criminal defendants that was significantly less likely to be aired about blacks: they are human beings, individuals who might even be innocent. But in another time period, one without such an extraordinary case, the racial disparity might not have emerged.

TABLE 4
Percentage of Blacks and Whites Accused of Crimes in Selected Aural Depictions for Violent Crimes Only

	Blacks	Whites	χ^2
A. Number pro-defense sound bites			
None	88.9	66.0	
One	6.3	18.5	
Two or more	2.8	15.4	13.8***
N	(72)	(162)	
B. Race of police speaking on screen			
Black	34.5	3.2	
White	44.8	95.2	
Black and white	20.7	1.6	30.3***
	(29)	(62)	

***p<.001

Table 4 displays the sound bite data for allegedly violent blacks and whites. The blacks received much less opportunity to convey their perspectives in their own voices and were much more likely than whites to be discussed by a police official not of their race. On this aural dimension, excluding the Dowaliby defendants did not eliminate the statistical significance of the differences.

Finally, separating stories covering violent crimes from those about

non-violent offenses suggests that a major reason for the comparatively negative imagery of blacks is that they are reported more frequently in connection with violence. For non-violent crimes alone, most racial differences diminished to beneath statistical significance or disappeared altogether.⁴⁴ Of the black alleged offenders in this study, 84% were assertedly involved in violent crimes, compared with 71% of whites (a difference significant by chi square at $p=.03$). Local television's emphasis on violent crime may mean that disproportionately more imagery of blacks will be threatening.

Beyond the emotional hostility that may be bolstered by crime reporting, a second component of modern racism is rejection of political actions or proposals that advance the interests of the black community.⁴⁵ With this in mind, the study looked at stories of blacks and whites participating in politics. The analysis revealed that black activists often appeared pleading the interests of the black community, while white leaders were much more frequently depicted as representing the entire community. News about blacks who acted politically conveyed the notion that they spoke and behaved more than whites to advance "special interests" against the public interest.

In testing the second hypothesis, the unit of analysis is the directly quoted assertion (sound bite) about public policy; the analysis coded every sound bite in every story. Members of both racial groups were heard frequently talking about government and policy issues. Blacks spoke about government policy in 146 stories and made a total of 200 coded assertions; whites spoke in 339 stories, a total of 523 times. Individuals or spokespersons for groups representing other ethnic or interest groups, or for groups representing a mixture of ethnics, made most of the rest of the 862 total assertions relevant to policy issues.⁴⁶

The analysis coded assertions attributed to all those (individuals or groups) criticizing, defending, or making recommendations for action by government or public officials. (Stories about politicians that focused only on campaign details or events were excluded.) The analysis determined the *basis* for each utterance; each explicit or implicit claim that the government was *violating or should be serving an interest* was

White Rejection of Black Politics

⁴⁴Most notable are the aural differences in non-violent crime stories: 7% of stories about blacks, compared with 33% of stories about whites, contained one or more sound bites from a defense-oriented actor. Although this finding is not statistically significant, the difference is large and the reason for the lack of significance may be the small number of stories. The result was similar (though also not statistically significant) for the quotation of police officials. Only one white accused of a non-violent crime was spoken about by a black police official; all the rest of the whites (12) were discussed by white police.

⁴⁵The black community is diverse and may have no single interest any more than does the white community. What the theory of modern racism assumes, however, is that the majority of blacks do have interests in electing African-American office holders and in public policies that redress the results of discrimination.

⁴⁶For some assertions, race could not be ascertained.

noted as a basis. The four possible bases were: public interest (452 assertions were based on this appeal); ethnic self-interest (180 assertions); interest in corruption-free government (181 assertions); and special interests not identified with race, such as gays and lesbians (49 assertions).⁴⁷

Among the ethnic interests asserted, *black* interests were defended 115 times, *white ethnic* interests 43 times, and *other ethnic group* interests 22 times. Thus Chicago local news frequently transmits claims that government is violating, or should be serving, blacks' interests: 64% of all ethnic interests defended in the news study were blacks' interests. It seems likely that exposure to such a pattern would over time feed some whites' resentment of blacks' seemingly demanding stance relative to other groups in society.

Black individuals or spokespersons for black groups themselves made 66 of those 115 assertions seeking government responsiveness specifically to black interests; as a proportion of the 200 total assertions uttered by blacks, this came to about 33%. Thus, fully one-third of the time audiences heard blacks endorsing or criticizing a government action, the blacks were pleading the specific ethnic interests of the black community. In contrast, white spokespersons made 28 pro-white assertions (the other 15 pro-white claims were not made by individuals or groups identifiably white); as a proportion of the 523 assertions by whites, these 28 utterances came to about five percent. Whites appeared much less prone to promoting ethnic self-interest than blacks. This implicit comparison of black and white political actors may further stimulate resistance especially among whites most wedded to the traditional American ideology of self-help and limited government intervention.

Possibly compounding this feeling is that *white* political actors were shown endorsing government service of *blacks'* interests 38 times. This means that whites in politics were shown explicitly defending blacks' interests more often than overtly defending whites' own interests (which, again, they did 28 times). On the other hand, black actors explicitly defended the notion that government should serve whites' interests only one time. White audiences could infer that blacks demand a lot from government and receive quite a bit of support from whites in that quest, but then fail to endorse government action that favors whites. This impression may be accurate; it may be that black activists and elites treat Chicago politics as a zero sum game in which any gain for whites is a loss for blacks. The accuracy of these images is beyond the scope of this study.

⁴⁷For example: a claim was coded as "public interest" if the person endorsed a policy on the grounds it would "serve the people of Chicago." An ethnic self-interest claim would be something like "It is time Mayor Daley stopped cutting aid to hospitals serving the black community." A corruption-related claim would be "The city's restaurant inspectors frequently solicit bribes." And other special interests might be endorsed by a person who said "The city government is ignoring the needs of the gay community."

The other side of this finding is that black political actors appeared disproportionately unmoved by the *public* interest. Most of the time whites spoke about government action, they defended it in terms of the public or larger community interest. The ratio of public interest to ethnic self-interest assertions for whites looks like this: 278 to 28 or a 10 to 1 balance favoring the public interest. In comparison, for blacks the ratio was 64 to 66 or 1 to 1. For every public interest claim, blacks uttered a self-interested demand.

Note that all of these data tap *rhetoric*, not politicians' or political actors' actual goals or thoughts. Political actors frequently rationalize selfish demands in terms of the public interest. The assumption here, though, is that the overt assertions, not the hidden agendas of quoted speakers, shape audiences' perceptions. In this realm of image and rhetoric, blacks were portrayed in ways that may well foster whites' resistance to and rejection of blacks' political goals.

Perhaps most of the time black political leaders do speak up only for black interests; many theories of representation would endorse just such behavior. However, it seems highly unlikely that white political actors are as purely civic-minded as depicted in the implicit comparison constructed by the news. But the whites' halo does reflect genuine structural conditions. To protect white privileges, white politicians need only defend the status quo in general terms (e.g., by invoking "the public interest") or in terms of non-racial values such as meritocracy or low taxes. They do not need to use an overt rhetoric of white power; they need not mention power at all.

Beyond the threatening criminals and demanding political activists, more benign blacks appeared in local news, usually occupying roles of respected authority. They included most importantly the many black anchorpersons and reporters. Authorities that for all practical purposes might as well have been white, their behavior and words on screen were not linked in any way to their racial identities, and indeed denied black identity as it was constructed by crime and politics news. Such images could buttress perceptions that racism is no longer a problem for black persons, and in this way contribute to the third component of modern racism, the belief that blacks no longer suffer from discrimination. In this section, only qualitative data are available; the discussion will be based on these observations.

Unlike criminals and political actors, blacks occupying the role of authoritative spokesperson did not appear threatening, did not talk in angry or demanding tones. They were unemotional, friendly but businesslike. They followed middle class, white patterns of conversational communication.⁴⁸ Black anchors spoke from the same perspective as white anchors; there was no difference between their reporting, which of course is what their job descriptions demanded.

⁴⁸See Kochman, *op. cit.*

The Alleged Disappearance of Racism

Voicing a black perspective would have meant defining the problems covered in the news — such as violent crime — in ways that might be endorsed by a majority of blacks.⁴⁹

Black anchors may be particularly significant to the formation of whites' impressions. A separate study revealed that fully 11 of 13 stations in 13 of the nation's 25 largest markets employed at least one black in a co-anchor role.⁵⁰ The Chicago stations frequently place blacks at the anchor chair. These anchors may provide the images of authoritative blacks most frequently encountered by many white Chicagoans, who typically live in segregated neighborhoods and work for white bosses.

It thus appears reasonable to hypothesize that the positive images of black authority in local news may unwittingly have two simultaneous effects: on one level, black anchors demonstrate that blacks are capable of behaving according to and reporting from the perspective of dominant white values. But on another level, the innocuous black anchors may also reinforce whites' impatience with the poor or demanding blacks who appear so frequently as news subjects. The anchors' very presence suggests that if blacks just keep quiet and work hard, the system will indeed allow them to make progress and even earn more money than most whites.⁵¹ Showing attractive, articulate blacks in such a prestigious public role implies that blacks are not inherently inferior or socially undesirable — and that racism is no longer a serious impediment to black progress. The image that undermines old-fashioned racism may promote modern racism. Ironically, local stations' responsiveness to the interests of black audiences in seeing black role models may produce imagery that bolsters modern racism, even if it also helps diminish traditional racism.

Beyond this, viewing local news featuring a black anchor can symbolically affirm for white viewers that they are not racist.⁵² Modern racists may even feel an unconscious attraction to local news because its content helps confirm their sentiments, while its presentation allows them to deny they are racists. The presentation is made in part by blacks, and the racial messages are subtle. Watching the news may thus protect frequently-ambivalent modern racists from confronting their own racial anxieties, stimulating anti-black feelings that remain unacknowledged and thus unthreatening to a non-racist self-image.⁵³

⁴⁹Blacks may fear crime as much as whites, but their interpretations of crime's causes and cures are, on average, different from those of whites, and those differences could in theory construct a different narrative perspective on crime involving blacks. For example, poll evidence suggests blacks are significantly more likely to see discrimination as a major continuing problem than whites. See Barry Sussman, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

⁵⁰Entman, "Super Tuesday," *op. cit.*

⁵¹For evidence that blacks with college degrees earn much less than whites and that the relative position of middle class blacks actually deteriorated in the 1980s, see Bennett Harrison, *Los Angeles Times*, September 2, 1990, p. M4.

⁵²See Gaertner and Dovidio, "The Aversive Form of Racism," in Dovidio and Gaertner, *op. cit.*

⁵³For many of those with moderate to high modern racism scores, research suggests ambivalence toward blacks rather than outright negativity may be operating (see

Compounding the possible impacts, black anchors and reporters frequently cover crime and political stories that may reinforce modern racism in ways described earlier. That blacks frame the stories may embolden and authorize whites to voice modern racist sentiments without considering them racially charged — after all, blacks themselves provided the information. Legitimizing modern racism as something other than anti-black prejudice may have great political significance because the benign guise makes whites more willing to voice those sentiments in personal conversation. Hearing modern racist ideas openly expressed further legitimizes and spreads the notions, in a kind of reversal of Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence."⁵⁴

It would be absurd to suggest that these potential impacts make it undesirable for stations to employ black journalists in positions of visible authority. The point here, as throughout the paper, is that actions which stations undertake for commercial or even public-spirited reasons, such as hiring blacks and covering their political activities, may inadvertently contribute to modern racism.

These findings should not be misconstrued. The strength of the relationships is mixed, and more research is needed. Every dimension of the news message was not slanted against blacks. In some dimensions, the content analysis turned up no difference between images of blacks and whites. Even on the dimensions of the news that showed statistically significant differences in the *average* treatment of blacks and whites, there were many instances in which news treated blacks and whites similarly. However, where there were significant differences, they were always in the same direction, with blacks covered in ways likely to support negative stereotypes. Hence the data do suggest that exposure over time to local TV news presents viewers with an accumulation of images that make blacks appear consistently threatening, demanding and undeserving of accommodation by government. Again, these are only inferences from news content; empirical confirmation of the effects on racial attitudes awaits future research.⁵⁵

If the hypotheses do prove valid, they would suggest some insights into television's role as a "cultural forum."⁵⁶ While some believe

Conclusions

McConahay, *op. cit.* and Gaertner and Dovidio, "The Aversive Form of Racism," in Dovidio and Gaertner, *op. cit.*) The racially ambivalent whites recognize that it is undesirable to be a racist and when made consciously aware of their anti-black sentiments attempt to convince themselves that these are not manifestations of racism. Depending on the circumstances, such persons may respond in ways that appear prejudiced toward blacks, or in ways that suggest tolerance (McConahay, *op. cit.*, pp. 99-101).

⁵⁴Elisabeth Noelle-Neuman, *Public Opinion — Our Social Skin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); cf. van Dijk, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵Hartmann and Husband, *op. cit.*, empirically demonstrate effects of media portrayals on racial attitudes in Britain.

⁵⁶Horace Newcomb and Paul Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research," in Horace Newcomb, ed., *Television: The Critical View* 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

audience members actively mull contesting ideological readings of society's conflicts, the data indicate that cultural self-examination, tension and change can be played out in television quite unconsciously. Neither the producers nor the viewers of local television news are likely to be conscious of the patterns described here. What follows is a tentative outline of the way that television may come to its role of changing yet preserving racism as a component of American culture. In this view, the key to television's involvement in culture change would be the interaction of elite discourse with the underlying structural realities of American society as reflected in television news.

Traditional American racism identified blacks as inferior and undesirable. But this strand of culture is no longer socially acceptable. Elite rhetoric no longer validates old-fashioned racism. And elites came to a consensus against legally-enforced discrimination and segregation. To some degree, the beliefs of the mass public have changed accordingly. Old-fashioned racism is no longer a central tenet of the American culture, and this alteration in culture is reflected in the content and the hiring practices of local television news programs. No longer are blacks invisible as subjects or purveyors of news, no longer are old-fashioned racist assertions and stereotypes frequently displayed and thereby validated.

Yet we have seen that the news appears congruent with racism in its updated variant. Television news, especially local television, is defined largely in emotional terms: it alerts audiences to threats and provides reassurance.⁵⁷ Black crime and black politics are considered newsworthy because they alert black and white audiences (in somewhat different ways) to possible dangers and sources of succor. And these are not fictions: reflecting the legacy of discrimination, there really are high crime rates among poor blacks and high levels of demand for government services.⁵⁸

But reality alone does not explain the news' constructions of reality; they are framed by elite discourse.⁵⁹ Having outlawed discrimination, white elites have not come to a consensus on who is responsibility for negative conditions in the black community. With the dominant white elites continuing to argue about blacks, there is in essence no settled element of "culture" that directly addresses and replaces the traditional racist view of black-white relations. Other elements of traditional American ideology that white elites do generally agree upon (or at least endorse rhetorically) and that persist within the culture will more consistently shape the news, and audiences' processing of it. These components of culture include distrust of big government and, especially, the assumption that individuals are responsible for their

⁵⁷David Paletz and Robert Entman, *Media Power Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1981).

⁵⁸The racial distribution of government services is a more complicated matter than it appears. To take just one example, the ability to deduct mortgage interest from income taxes provides a large subsidy for middle and upper class housing that probably benefits whites disproportionately.

⁵⁹Cf. van Dijk, *op. cit.*, pp. 360-70.

own fate. Such affirmations help to produce modern racism by denying the history of discrimination whose residue — high crime, high and impatient demands for services — local television so graphically emphasizes. Material sympathetic to blacks and contradictory to modern racism does appear, reflecting some elites' emphases on other American values, such as egalitarianism. Thus the movement of American culture from its dominant strain of traditional racism to its current ambivalent compound of hostility, sympathy and indecision reproduces itself in individuals, in part through television's images.

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