

**RACIAL STEREOTYPING
IN THE NEWS:
Some General Semantics
Alternatives[†]**

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THE NEWS MEDIA have the power to be catalysts for positive change in many areas of our culture. Among those areas is racial stereotyping. Instead, the media often perpetuate stereotyping.

Many of the images of African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, American Indians, and other "minorities" are shaped by the news media. It is my contention that many of those images are based on stereotypes. A variety of factors promote this perpetuation of stereotypic images. In this work, I hope to explore some of those factors and offer some general semantics alternatives that could help journalists change their role.

Current Studies

First, I will give some evidence that stereotyping does indeed exist. A recent study in the *Newspaper Research Journal* looked at coverage of minorities—primarily African-Americans—in four major newspapers in the country. I will use the findings for the *New York Times* as an example.(1)

The researchers found that during the 1950s the *Times* devoted 6 percent of its coverage of minorities to what was termed "stereotypic coverage." This type of coverage was defined as portraying

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African-Americans in antisocial behavior or as athletes and entertainers. During the 1980s, the *Times* devoted 12 percent of its coverage to stereotypic coverage.

In the 1950s, the *Times* devoted 29 percent of its minorities coverage to "everyday life" coverage—African-Americans involved in careers, community functions, etc. In the 1980s, by contrast, 68 percent was devoted to this type of coverage.

The researchers also found that the *Times* devoted 65 percent of its minority coverage to civil rights issues in the 1950s, but only 20 percent in the 1980s.

The conclusion reached by the researchers was that the changes in "everyday life" coverage were a positive move. African-Americans were being portrayed more often as "regular people" doing "regular things." However, the rise in stereotypic coverage was disturbing, as was the drop in civil rights coverage. The image being conveyed was that African-Americans were engaging in more antisocial action while many civil rights problems had been solved. That reported trend in itself was a stereotype.

My own research, conducted under a Sanford I. Berman Research Scholarship, has shown stereotypic coverage in many of the four hundred daily newspapers included in the study. African-Americans most often are covered when they engage in crime or are on welfare. Photo coverage also is weighted toward portraying African-Americans as criminals, athletes, or entertainers.

One could argue that this evidence is primarily anecdotal, but these studies are only two of many that indicate stereotyping does exist. Thus, I believe the premise is valid.

Why does stereotyping exist? It would be too easy to call journalists racists; it also would be unfair in many cases. I believe the stereotyping can be attributed to four major factors:

1. The lack of ethnic diversity in most newsrooms.
2. The lack of sensitivity or awareness of cultures different from white, middle-class.
3. The business demands and professional values of the news media.
4. The expectations and biases of the public.

The lack of diversity in newsrooms is well documented. Fifty-four percent of the newsrooms in the United States are all white. A total of 7.86 percent of the total newsroom population is African-American or Hispanic; 1.1 percent is Asian. Less than 5 percent of newspaper executives are minorities. This is in a country that

has an overall minority population approaching 25 percent.(2)

These statistics come long after the Kerner Commission study that cited a lack of minorities on news staffs. "Twenty years after Kerner, the newspaper industry remains largely segregated, within its pages and its staffs," wrote Les Payne, managing editor for national and international news at *Newsday*. "All Americans should press for change, because it is they who suffer from a narrow, ingrown, sterile press."

It should be noted that while these statistics are for newspapers only, television and radio stations have not done much better. A variety of factors can be blamed for these imbalances, but they cannot be used as an excuse for the fact that an "old boys" network still exists in the news media—and those old boys more often than not are white.

Lack of Sensitivity

In addition to the lack of proportionate numbers of "minorities" on news staffs, I believe many people in newsrooms lack sensitivity or awareness of cultures and individuals who differ from them.

Almost 85 percent of the young journalists hired today come from journalism schools. I teach at one and believe the education obtained at such schools is essential to produce journalists who can report about our ever-changing and increasingly complex world. However, I also fear that we are creating a middle-class, professional mentality among young journalists that does not include an appreciation for differences and diversity.

Consequently, many journalists don't think about contacting an African-American college professor as an expert source unless the topic of the story is African-Americans. Many journalists don't think to check on how many incidents like the much-publicized Central Park jogger incident happen nightly in Harlem or the Bronx.

Many journalists don't solicit wedding photos from minorities, or run announcements of church dinners and community events. At a recent American Press Institute seminar, such slights were cited as one reason many African-Americans do not find the mainstream news media relevant to their lives.(3)

When we as journalists—I include myself among the "we" because I still am a working journalist—make these insensitive news judgments, we tell members of the minority community that

they don't count as much. We also present stereotypic images to the white community.

Finally, many journalists are not sufficiently aware of the incredible power of their words and the images they create. For example, Milwaukee alderman Michael McGee, a subject of a "60 Minutes" report in November 1990, has formed a "militia" to protest what he feels is poor treatment of blacks. The group wears military garb, and McGee has said that violence is inevitable if conditions do not change. However, the group serves primarily as a fund-raiser for black community groups in Milwaukee's inner city.

That primary role has, however, been lost in the stories on McGee. What has been emphasized is his military image and his more inflammatory remarks. That emphasis transmits a stereotype.

Business Demands and Professional Values

I believe that some of the business demands placed on journalists and the professional values that are stressed in the industry play a role in producing stereotyped images. Prime among these values is what I consider a misguided concept of objectivity. The old mindset of a journalist being a mirror of reality is still very prevalent. Under that mindset, journalists are not allowed to interject themselves into a story for fear of bias.

But journalists must make subjective decisions all the time during the news-gathering process. The mirror image is unrealistic and inaccurate, and can lead the journalist into simply becoming a quotation- and data-collector, without critically examining the input he or she is receiving. What happens, then, when that input is stereotypic? In many cases, it is simply passed on to the readers and viewers.

The timeliness value and short deadlines in the daily news business also can lead to the perpetuation of stereotyping. When a journalist has a half hour to write a story, stereotypes simply can become more convenient. Often the journalist is not given the time to critically examine the image.

Conflict also makes good news copy. Although journalists work with "facts," frequently they must use story-telling devices. Anybody who has taken Creative Writing 101 knows that the protagonist and the antagonist are needed for a good dramatic story. However, when the news media slip into this format, they put forth two-valued, either/or, black/white images that often are

stereotypic and oversimplified.

Another major professional value in news making is the use of credible sources. "Credible" often is translated into official sources—police, elected officials, etc. What happens, though, when the sources communicate in stereotypes? Often their opinions and images are passed on to the public, and because they are in positions of authority their word is taken as the truth.

The news media also often designate spokespersons for groups. Therefore, Michael McGee becomes the credible source for all African-Americans in Milwaukee. Saddam Hussein becomes the spokesman for all people of Iraq. Jesse Jackson becomes the political spokesman for all African-Americans.(4) Yet, can one individual possibly be representative of all members of any group? Not according to the "allness principle" of general semantics.

I also believe the news media fall into an allness trap when they try to define the "mass." I like to call the media's desire to homogenize their audience as the "myth of the mass." What is a mass except a collection of individuals, all of whom have different nervous systems, different personal and cultural backgrounds?

Yet, the news media spend a great deal of money surveying audiences to find out what the mass public wants. That might sound very extensional, and if done correctly can help journalists stay in touch with the public. What often happens, however, is that media messages end up being tailored for the majority of the respondents in a survey. Therefore, people who do not fit into the majority—in regard to political or social opinions or socioeconomic status—often end up being ignored or stereotyped in media coverage.

Another business and professional factor that contributes to stereotyping is the news process itself. A news story is told through sources, who often witnessed but did not participate in an event. A reporter interviews those sources, produces the story, and then passes the product on to a series of editors. A lot of abstracting is going on during what is often referred to as the gatekeeping process. Stereotypes can be added or perpetuated, especially as that story gets further removed from the event itself. In general semantics terms, the map can become considerably removed from the territory.(5)

The Public

Any analysis of stereotyping in the news would be incomplete without a look at the public—the receiving end of the news prod-

uct. Many studies have found that the public selectively perceives the news. Individuals read and watch stories they are already interested in. They bring their own biases and stereotypes to the material. Many do not understand the news-making process and therefore do not really know what they are receiving when they read the newspaper or watch a newscast. Thus, when stereotyped images are transmitted, many members of the public either agree with them or do not critically consider them. Even if care is taken by the journalist not to stereotype, readers or viewers might bring their own stereotypes to the message.

Consequences

What are the consequences of stereotyping in the news? Marilyn Gist of the University of Washington concludes that stereotyping limits the self-images of many minority youth. "To the extent that it is a common practice to portray African-Americans most frequently in a negative light—criminals, drug addicts, etc.—or as positive examples from a negative context, strong signals are being sent to African-American youth about what they can become," writes Gist. "If a youngster wishes a more positive path, which models provide data? Again for most minority subgroups, there are extremely few positive role models in the news; for African-Americans, sports and entertainment are the fare. Might this explain the heightened enthusiasm among minority male youth for music and basketball?"(6)

Dr. Benjamin Hooks of the NAACP addressed the stereotyped images of many minority public officials: "I have the impression that some in the press would have us believe that before blacks assumed control of cities everything ran peacefully, marvelously, and only heaven could do better. There was no abuse of public trust, no robbery, thievery, thuggery, plundering or pillaging, no crooked contracts, no killing."(7)

USA Today found in a 1990 study that urban African-Americans were detained as suspects in drug arrests in numbers far exceeding their involvement. Could stereotyped images, perpetuated by the news media, have an effect on the psyches of officers detaining those people?(8)

Extending the argument to world coverage, how often do our images of other cultures and countries come from stereotyped news coverage? Using the Persian Gulf crisis as an example, how much of the coverage was two-valued, ethnocentric, and stereo-

typed? I believe a great deal of the coverage fell into those traps. Much of the early coverage bordered on outright cheerleading for U.S. military involvement. Little critical analysis of the extremely complex political and cultural situation in that area of the world was conveyed through the news media.

General Semantics Alternatives

I believe knowledge of general semantics principles could help journalists avoid stereotypes and even become agents of change. I also believe the members of the media audience could benefit from some knowledge of general semantics.

How? In dozens of ways, but I have listed ten:

1. First and foremost, I believe journalists could increase their awareness of higher order abstractions, where stereotypes often lurk, and become more conscious of the gap between the map and the territory through the study of general semantics.

2. I believe journalists could become more extensional through studying general semantics. Journalists should be the explorers of our culture and other cultures. They should be out on the streets, talking to people and interpreting events. Surveys, no matter how sophisticated, cannot replace simply getting out in the world.

3. Through indexing, journalists could remind themselves that not all members of any ethnic group are the same. African-American-1 is not African-American-2. Michael McGee or Jesse Jackson are not all African-American public officials.

4. Through "dating," journalists could get more of a feeling for process and could then concentrate less on closure and elementalism. We tend to tell stories piecemeal and break up reality into time segments. If we are in newspaper work, reality is told in twenty-four-hour segments. If we are in television, reality is divided into newscasts at 5, 6, and 10 P.M. Consequently, we have trouble reporting on issues that continue on and on. We don't do a very good job of exploring why racial and ethnic division exists. We simply report it, too often in stereotypes.

5. Using differential calculus principles, as taught by Milton Dawes of Montreal, journalists could learn to differentiate between members of a group. They also could learn to break complex topics into small, understandable parts and then integrate them into a story that tells the so-called big picture.

6. By understanding abstracting, journalists could realize that they produce maps, not the territory. They could avoid allness and

identification traps. They could learn to communicate more in terms of probability than certainty. Members of the public also could benefit by knowledge of abstracting in their news and in their own thinking processes as well.

7. By becoming more extensional, journalists might become more aware of the needs of their audience. Needs often are not the same as desires. The public needs certain information, reported in a manner as free of stereotypes as possible, to be able to function adequately in the world.

8. Through general semantics, journalists could become more aware of our language and its pitfalls. Journalists could become more aware of multiordinality and relativity of terms among individuals and cultures. More descriptive language and operational definitions could be used in stories.

9. I believe journalists could reexamine the concept of objectivity through the use of general semantics. Is "objective reporting" simply reflecting back information in an unchallenged manner, with the premises that we can actually capture the territory and that truth exists "out there"? Or is objective reporting trying to produce a map as accurately and as fairly as possible, even if the process calls for some critical analysis and questioning, while also acknowledging that the map will never be the territory and that truths often are best pursued in an interrelationship between what is "out there" and what is inside our nervous systems? I believe objective reporting can be enhanced by simply asking more questions like "How do you know that?" or "What do you base that on?" I also believe reporting could be improved through better understanding of fact-inference relationships.

10. Lastly, I believe journalists could break out of some old paradigms through the use of general semantics. For several years, the newspaper industry, for one, has been redesigning papers to make them more visually attractive. I find nothing wrong with redesigns, but old wine in a new bottle is not enough. Content also must be made more relevant and less stereotypic

Concluding Remarks

I acknowledge that I have probably fallen into some stereotyping traps during this article. I have used some identification in my language and have lumped "journalists" into a group, when actually we tend to be a very pluralistic bunch. Let me assure you, in terms often linked to racial prejudice, "some of my best friends are journalists." Again, I still am one myself.

Certainly not all journalists go about their business in the same manner. However, there are certain mindsets, methodologies, and values that become dominant in the news media—as there are in any industry. When those go unchallenged or unquestioned, they can lead to stereotypes and, to be frank, inferior journalism.

I shall conclude by quoting Walter Lippmann, journalist, critic, and author, who wrote: "The subtlest and most pervasive of influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And, those preoccupations, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception."

The news media bring images and information about the world to millions of people daily. If we simply perpetuate stereotypes of ethnic groups and individuals, we do a disservice to everybody in our audience. The news media have the potential to provide the "education" to make people "acutely aware." And I believe that knowledge of general semantics principles could help.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Carolyn Martindale, "Coverage of Black Americans in Four Major Newspapers, 1950-1989," *Newspaper Research Journal* (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication) 11, no. 3 (Summer 1990).
2. Ted Pease and Guido Stempel III, "Surviving to the Top: Views of Minority Newspaper Executives," *Newspaper Research Journal* (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication) 11, no. 3 (Summer 1990).
3. Taken from a roundtable discussion of minority coverage held at the American Press Institute Journalism Educators Seminar, in Reston, Virginia, Oct. 12, 1990.
4. Patricia Hastings of a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee has found, in an extensive study of *Newsweek's* coverage of the Jackson campaign, that Jackson was portrayed as the "black candidate" and not taken seriously as a viable presidential candidate. He was also seen as a stereotype of "black candidates" in general.
5. For more on the news process, see Gregg Hoffmann, "Abstracting in the News-Making Process," *Et cetera* 46, no. 4 (Winter 1989).
6. Marilyn E. Gist, "Minorities in Media Imagery: A Social Cognitive Perspective on Journalistic Bias," *Newspaper Research Journal* (Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication) 11, no. 3 (Summer 1990).
7. Dr. Hooks' remarks were made at an Associated Press Managing Editors forum in Dallas and reported in M. L. Stein, "Covering the Black Community," *Editor & Publisher*, Nov. 17, 1990, 16.
8. Sam Vincent Meddis and Mike Snider, "Drug War Focused on Blacks," *USA Today*, Dec. 20, 1990, 1-2.