

HOLDING NETWORK TV NEWS ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE PERPETUATION
OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STEREOTYPES

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Chapter One Introduction

Racism was not vanquished by the civil rights movement. The abolition of legal racism does not automatically create racial equality¹, and nowhere is this more apparent than in network television news. Despite the absence of legal racism, African American stereotypes are still very much a part of the public consciousness. This is, at least partially, a result of sustained exposure to media messages from TV news which reinforces these myths. The overwhelming majority of African American images on television news consist of suspected criminals, homeless beggars, welfare queens, ghetto-dwelling gang members, or drug addicts².

Certainly, the United States has progressed a long way from slavery and Jim Crow, but racism was merely tempered, not eradicated with civil rights legislation. As Arthur Spears states, racism “is institutionalized into the fabric of all American institutions³.” Cornell West agrees that “overt forms of discrimination have been attacked and forced to become more covert...yet the legacy of white supremacy lingers⁴.”

Despite successful African American politicians and celebrities, the structural position of blacks in America has changed little⁵, and public policy continues to regard African Americans as “a ‘problem people’...rather than as fellow American citizens with problems⁶.” Dating back to the Johnson administration, the “conceptual groundwork” of public policy has been designed to “change ‘them,’ not ‘us’⁷.” Below the surface of legal equality is an undercurrent of prejudice stemming from misunderstanding concerning African Americans.

Television, particularly television news, perpetuates this ignorance. Criticism of television's treatment of African Americans is common, however, the loudest criticism lately focuses on the lack of positive representations in TV entertainment. For example, in 1999, the NAACP called the networks' fall lineups an "outrage" for their lack of minority characters in leading roles⁸. The racial landscape of fictional TV entertainment is an important problem to address, however entertainment is not TV's most immediate problem because of the powerful influence of the news media.

If television is to be a valuable tool for discussions of race, TV news must be reconfigured first. Fictional entertainment, for all of its abilities to appear as a reflection of society, is still fiction. The news is offered as an accurate reflection of the events and social problems facing the nation. For this reason it is imperative that TV news be overhauled.

Television is used neither solely as a medium of entertainment, nor exclusively as a medium of news consumption. As a result, it makes sense to study both to grasp the challenges facing the struggle to reform TV's attitude towards minority groups. Attention is continually focused on entertainment's shortcomings, thus the broader question for research is, by what means, if any, is it possible for fictional television programs to mitigate the negative portrayal of African Americans in television news? This, however, will not be the main focus of this study. Instead, I will examine the less-studied area of news by asking in what manner are African Americans portrayed by

television news and how do these portrayals affect public opinions of African Americans as a group?

As things stand now, it appears difficult for fictional entertainment programs to make a meaningful difference in Americans' attitudes towards blacks. The "truth" represented on TV news overwhelms any chance for entertainment to dismantle the myths. Furthermore, popular TV fiction often prefers to ignore the existence of social problems in favor of cheerful entertainment.

Public opinion is not formed without media influences, and when Americans want to gather information in order to form an opinion (especially in regards to an issue they have little personal experience with), they turn to the news. In fact, a 1991 survey found that 61% of whites say news reports play an important role in influencing their opinions of African Americans⁹. Certainly, entertainment can also influence public opinion, however, it often works in conjunction with news messages instead of as a counterbalancing force.

"The Cosby Show" is representative of TV entertainment's inability to meaningfully counter the negative effects of the news. "Cosby" is the most obvious example of television's bizarre paradox, that the most positive role models in entertainment can actually have a negative effect on public opinion of African Americans as a whole. The image of an upper-middle class black family who never deals with racism implies that the African Americans appearing in welfare stories have no one but themselves to blame for their poverty¹⁰.

“The Cosby Show” possibly reflects TV’s most successful effort at producing a positive representation of a black family. I define “positive” representations as a conscious attempt to avoid typical stereotypes. Situation comedies are the most common genre for a black ensemble cast, and “Cosby” is possibly the most popular sitcom ever aired. The show was consistently ranked first in the Nielsen ratings and at times had a ratings share as high as fifty percent¹¹. In other words, of *every* household in the United States watching television during “Cosby’s” timeslot, *half* of them were watching the show.

Millions of people watched “Cosby” and they received a mixed message about black life in America. The show succumbed to, and perpetuated, a TV legacy of avoiding challenging racial material in an effort to avoid agitating white audiences. Despite the economic uncertainty following the 1987 stock market crash and attacks on Affirmative Action, “Cosby’s” Huxtable family remained happily oblivious to problems outside their family¹².

The mantra of the Huxtable household was “compromise and family teamwork¹³.” Typical “Cosby” episodes discussed domestic issues, while confronting “deeper racial issues [such as] interracial dating, housing discrimination, or ethnic media stereotyping, remained taboo throughout the show’s eight year run¹⁴.” Bill Cosby, the creative source behind much of the show’s material, preferred “a colorblind approach to comedy¹⁵.” According to Cosby, television shows cannot “bring the races together by joking about

the differences between them¹⁶.” Instead, they should “talk about the similarities, about what’s universal¹⁷.”

While a positive depiction of a black family is a welcome addition to TV, the U.S. cannot “afford the luxury of a show that offends only the most overt racists¹⁸.” When race relations are strained, seeing a black family without any problems stemming from their race is unrealistic and unfortunately implies that people who are affected adversely by racism are exceptions rather than the rule. Universal appeal pays off in ratings and advertising dollars, but if TV is to raise awareness of racism, it cannot ignore the problems symptomatic of that racism. Innocuous black family portraits are entertaining, and the “Cosby” characters can be role models, but they are still fictitious.

Entertainment may just be an inappropriate venue to tackle difficult issues. Past sitcoms such as “All in the Family” and its spin-off “The Jeffersons” contradict this; however, the point may not be that sitcoms are incapable of dealing with social issues, but that the current climate in which they are produced is unwelcome for an “All in the Family.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr. believes that the sitcom cannot act as “an agent of social change” presumably because “audiences tune in [to sitcoms] to be entertained, not to be confronted with social problems¹⁹.”

Gates censured “Cosby” in 1989 for reflecting that “there is very little connection between the social status of black Americans and the fabricated images of black people that Americans consume each day [on TV]²⁰.” He laments that TV entertainment, and specifically “Cosby,” implies that “blacks are solely responsible for their social

conditions, with no acknowledgment of the severely constricted life opportunities that most black people face.” “Cosby’s” adoption of an upper-middle class lifestyle “reassuringly throws the blame for black poverty back onto the impoverished.”

Surely, TV entertainment does not need to ask *and* answer all of society’s difficult racial questions. However, simply posing the question could be enough to spark a more serious public discussion. The sitcom myth of racial harmony, highlighted in “The Cosby Show,” excuses viewers from the responsibility of confronting their own beliefs and prejudices. The truncated images in TV entertainment of successful blacks untouched by racial problems leave little room for sympathy in the public’s mind for the images of African Americans seen in television news.

The negative, often out of context, images of African Americans fuel public confusion through misinformation. Television news notoriously depicts blacks as “maniacs, crack-smoking criminals...lazy, shiftless, ignorant, and homeless²¹.” Television news typically treats African Americans disparagingly and white Americans’ beliefs about what it means to be black are often derived from what they see on television²². When those images perpetuate myths and exaggerations, it is hardly surprising that the public maintains misinformed opinions.

“In order to successfully navigate our complex social environment, we make use of stereotyping, group categorization, and other simplifying techniques²³.” In addition, with prolonged exposure to the same media messages, “group-based stereotypes are activated quite automatically in the presence of group-relevant stimuli²⁴.” This is why it

is so important to break the news of its habit of offering truncated, negative images of African Americans.

Representations of blacks in the news media “mold public opinion then hold it in place and set the agenda for public discourse on race²⁵.” The relentless negative TV news images of blacks are not benign. People who report heavy television viewing are more likely to describe African Americans as “lazy and unskilled²⁶.” In race-coded stories such as welfare, images of African Americans are common, but little, if any, explanation will be offered regarding how the individuals became part of the welfare system.

To examine the nature of African American representation in TV news, I have chosen to use network TV news coverage of welfare from 1991-1996. The case of welfare (and welfare reform) represents a larger pattern of news coverage of African Americans, especially of race-coded topics such as poverty, crime, and drugs. The years 1991-1996 were when welfare was most predominantly on the news, as Congress debated reform that would culminate in the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996. Each chapter of this thesis will offer evidence that television news exerts a dangerous influence over public opinion because of its inability, or unwillingness, to progress beyond placing blacks in stereotypical positions in its stories.

Chapter two outlines the norms of news production and how those messages are received, and subsequently influence public opinion. Chapter three discusses, specifically, how African Americans are typically treated in television news.

Chapter four outlines the facts of the pre-reform welfare system, including statistics on who received it and their typical standard of living. The chapter also discusses popular perceptions of the welfare program and welfare recipients, offering evidence through public opinion polls taken from 1991-1996. The results of these polls is a reflection of the media's influence on public opinion and the severely misinformed results of that influence.

Chapter five details the methodology used to conduct the network case study. Twelve CBS evening news segments were analyzed, looking for the stereotypical representations of welfare and were coded as either "sympathetic" (the story treated welfare, and welfare recipients, as a symptom of a larger national problem with poverty) or "unsympathetic" (the story treated welfare as the problem itself and treated welfare recipients as the cause of their own poverty due to irresponsibility). Chapter six outlines the findings of this case study. The results were as expected; ten of the segments were unsympathetic and African American mothers appeared 92% of the time.

When a topic as powerfully stereotyped as welfare is persistently in the news, it is naïve to believe that the presence of black characters on fictional TV shows will single-handedly debunk public prejudice. Based on my research, I will conclude that the one-

dimensional images of African Americans perpetuated by television news not only maintain, but create dangerous stereotypes. These are in turn believed to be true of the entire race (as evidenced by public opinion). The sheer volume of news coverage and the power those images have over the minds of the American public leaves little doubt that any discussion of reinventing television as a racially positive medium must first confront network TV news.

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