
BLACK NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF RELATIONS WITH ASIAN AMERICANS AND LATINOS DURING THE LA RIOTS

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That news coverage significantly influences the understanding of our changing and increasingly diverse social landscape is almost a truism nowadays. However, news in this context is synonymous with mainstream—i.e., white—newspapers. That these changes in ethnic/racial composition often affect black life first and foremost speaks to a need to understand this new America from a greater number of perspectives. Despite the potential insight these other voices could provide us, they are rarely examined. The information for this paper is pulled from a larger project in which we examine black, Asian American, Latino and general circulation news publications (i.e., white papers) to see how they portray the nature of relations among groups of color. Here I examine through content analysis how 17 of the largest-circulation black newspapers explained the genesis of the conflict between blacks, Latinos and Asian Americans in the Spring of 1992, during the so-called LA riots.¹

In this light it is important to mention several limitations to the data we utilize for this work. This subject matter—relations among groups of color—is rarely the focus of news articles. Thus in using content analysis we are able to analyze very few extended passages, for these relations are usually mentioned in passing, with little in-depth analysis. Second, there is no literature on black newspaper perspectives on interminority relations. Thus, while we look at the most important and largest black papers, we do not claim that their coverage is representative of most black papers. Given our lack of attention to any southern newspapers also suggests how exploratory this project is.

The Black Press

The common assumption made about black and other ethnic community presses is that they are clearly biased for their communities. The literature on the press assumes that these institutions are guilty of a unique parochialism, supposedly foreign to main-

¹ The newspapers included in this analysis are: The Afro-Times, Sun Reporter, Bay State Banner, Michigan Citizen, California Voice, Chicago Defender, LA Sentinel, Philadelphia Tribune, Call & Post (Cleveland), Sacramento Observer, Indianapolis Recorder, Portland (Oregon) Skanner, Chicago Citizen, New Pittsburgh Courier, Big Red News, New Amsterdam News and the Seattle Skanner.

stream publications, that presents an overly biased view in support of their group's position. That is in part why we can talk of a black press while we hesitate in identifying a white press. What is meant by a black press? What is its agenda in regards to reporting on its community? Wolseley (1990), in his book entitled The Black Press, USA, suggests that there are three things that constitute a black newspaper. First, blacks must own and/or manage the publication—they must be the dominant racial group connected with it. It is not enough that the paper be described as popular in black communities. Otherwise papers in cities with large black populations and readership would be considered black. Second, the publication must target black consumers and their particular interests. A black paper is attentive to black, not white, concerns. So long as there are cultural/ethnic racial distinctions in society between blacks and whites, there will be a place for black journalism. Finally the publication must serve, speak and fight for the black majority, a major objective being to fight for equality for blacks in white society. The US black press was founded for the purpose of serving, publicizing, speaking and fighting for the black majority. This makes the black press a special pleading institution, one with a cause, goal or purpose going beyond (or at least as important as) the basic one necessary for survival in the American economy—the making of a profit. Of course, how much the profit line dominates a paper's mission will differ by the paper.

Wolseley also suggests that in this role of protector of/advocate for black communities, black newspapers usually have specific content. First, throughout US history, the primary story line in black papers has been the state of race relations. Whether writing of slavery, lynching, protest, integration, or economic life this idea reflects black newspapers' goal of speaking to issues related to black life in white America. Another typical storyline is one that speaks of achievement. These became more popular beginning in the 1960-70s with rising opportunities, and served to chronicle and compare black to white progress. Since the 1980s, there has been greater focus brought to black leadership in power groups (such as in the arts, sports, and social action). Other frames to black stories are the black-angled story, focusing on blacks taking part in white news events (e.g., Colin Powell), gossip, personal stories that go beyond routine (e.g., weddings, other social news events), and finally, the African stories, revealing our links to Africa. Typically these would involve African dignitaries visiting a community or African Americans who visited the continent and who report on their visit.

Thus black papers have as a primary goal to present black communities in a positive light and act in support of community interests. The question in this context is how does this agenda color coverage of news events of direct interest to black communities and their relations with other minority communities? Is this bias manifested in very subjective accounts of conflict in LA? Does this suggest that black papers are predictably very subjective in their pleading the case for blacks and against nonblacks?

Methods

To identify articles published in black newspapers on this subject, we used the Ethnic Newswatch index. It is a compendium of articles published in a number of ethnic minority papers (including among others black, Asian, Native American and Hispanic papers). Nonetheless, since several significant black papers were not part of this index, we also used microfiche copies of several of the papers (i.e., the Amsterdam News).

From April 30-June 30, 1992, the 17 black weeklies published 129 articles dealing with the LA riots. The range of coverage was pretty broad, on the high end, 27 articles from the Amsterdam News, 13 from the LA Sentinel to, on the low end, 1 each from the Seattle Skanner and the Big Red News and 2 each from the Chicago Citizen and Portland Skanner. We examined articles that at least mentioned in the text something about other groups of color. Even given this lenient requirement, only one-third of the articles included some mention of Latinos or Asian Americans (including subgroups within each of these populations). Within this more restricted context 4 newspapers provided over 60% of the coverage. These were the Amsterdam News (NY) (with 13 of the 44 articles mentioning black-Asian American-Latino relations), the LA Sentinel (6 mention these groups), the Chicago Defender (4) and the Bay State Banner (Mass.) (4). Seven of the 17 papers either have one or no mention of interminority relations. For most of the black papers, that Asian Americans were intricately involved in what happened in LA did not attain any level of significance beyond a mere mention. As we found in previous work, this pattern reflects coverage in white magazines as well (Thornton and Shah, 1996; Shah and Thornton, 1994).

Results

Three major themes (a.k.a. frames) predominate in black papers when describing their communities' relations with Latinos and Asian Americans during the riots: 1- "a war between the haves and have nots.", 2-"You Cannot Understand.", 3-"Buy black."

I. "A war between the haves and have nots."

This most popular theme suggests that what happened in LA was mostly a result of racial minorities sharing a common frustration with institutional discrimination and being locked out of the system. In contrast to the theme of individual or cultural culpability found in white news sources (Shah and Thornton, 1994; Thornton and Shah, 1996), black papers saw interminority conflict as a reflection of a larger set of issues.

Call and Post:

“The underlying rage wasn’t apparent on television, Revish [Jerry, the anchor on WBNS] said. A lot of those people are fed up with the system. A lot of older people, Hispanics and other minorities were involved in those riots, not just African Americans.”

“[There were] a lot of different types of folks, not just blacks attacking Koreans. It wasn’t just African Americans, it was more a war between the haves and have nots.”

Big Red News (NY):

“The Los Angeles riots were a classic example of community frustration. They symbolized lawlessness, but more so, an angry reaction to tremendous feelings of powerlessness and frustration. . . . The current recession increases the feelings of anger and frustration felt by many urban minority citizens, particularly African Americans and Hispanics. The riots in LA were a ‘wake up call’ signaling legislators and policymakers that comprehensive solutions must be developed to stop the economic hemorrhaging occurring within black and Hispanic urban communities.”

II. “You Cannot Understand.”

While most papers argued that people of color are in this together, there were some papers that also incorporated the idea that blacks faced unique circumstances that distanced them from other groups of color. Part of this argument also at times involved the idea that Korean Americans were actually part of the problem.

Chicago Citizen:

“The Korean merchants say that they sympathize with us. They can understand. They came here with the clothes on their backs and with nothing in their pockets. They have struggled and worked hard for what they have and it’s not fair that they were targeted in Los Angeles and around the country. They feel their American dreams have all gone up in smoke.”

“You cannot understand if you were bound for your American dream with a plane ticket in your hands; and our nightmare began with an unwarranted cruise and shackles around our hands and feet. You cannot understand when you get pulled over by a cop for speeding that it may be frustration for you, but it’s a highly-probable-generally-anticipated-holy-hell-butt-kicking for us. You cannot understand if you received a bank loan to start your business in our community and we can’t even get an appointment with the loan officer. You haven’t taken notice of the coincidence that your

businesses are predominantly in the heart of the black community but not in multitude in white neighborhoods.”

“You and all the other sympathizers cannot understand our historical tribulations, psychological raping, the emasculation of our people, the toxic self-hatred or anything. We have fought for the rights and equality of all men—the rainbow wars—and yet still others benefit from the blood we shed.”

LA Sentinel:

“Black people coming together, that was the riots. Watch out you Koreans—You come in the hood and treat us worse than that smell on your breath.”

“Other people of color come to black communities and suck them dry.”

III. “Buy black.”

A third theme involved black papers arguing that instead of aiming our sights on blaming Korean Americans, we should see them as an example of what we should become as a community; they should become our role model for improvement, our “model minority.”

Chicago Citizen:

“Reportedly, another factor contributing to the LA violence, centered around relations between Korean merchants and the black community. When the riots took place, much of the looting and violence was targeted at Asian merchants, who are often criticized by blacks for not treating the black community with respect. Businessman and community activist Napoleon Brown, stated that the issue is larger than Koreans and their relations with the black community. ‘We as black people, should not have to go around burning down Korean stores. We must buy up vacant land and patronize our own stores,’ Brown proclaimed.”

Chicago Defender:

“The riots are not due to the verdicts [of Soon Ja Du and King]. Economics is the underlying factor. Blacks don’t support themselves and have become a race of beggars and leeches. We can blame no one but ourselves. We blame everyone else—Koreans can’t stay in business if you don’t buy Korean—Koreans are more victim than anyone.”

Conclusion

While only shown in part here, these analyses suggest some important revisions to how we view media, and particularly black newspapers.

1. Even major events such as the LA riots are not perceived by all black papers as occurrences warranting inclusion in the papers. Several of the papers devoted one article (and not a long one) to the riots. This may reflect a decision not to publicize a negative event, though this is only conjecture.

2. While typically described as “agenda-driven,” these black newspapers were much more likely than white papers we examined in other research (Shah and Thornton, 1994, Thornton and Shah, 1996) to incorporate a “blended” agenda, in which they extended their idea of community beyond racial boundaries. For some newspapers, like the Amsterdam News, this bond with others of color was envisioned as part of a larger set of social class relations: haves versus have nots. In contrast white news sources drew clear boundaries along racial lines, never even hinting that people of color or working class people had anything in common with each other! While in fundamental ways these remain black publications because their primary focus was still on agendas supportive of black communities, they made room to incorporate other nonwhite populations in their vision of community. Both black and white publications had their own agendas, but despite the stereotype of the “objective” mainstream press, black publications were much more inclusive and offered a broader perspective.

This is not to say that there were no clear biases. In that few papers devoted any space to interminority affairs and much more to black-white relations suggest that much of the discussion was about how blacks remain oppressed by whites; even while the LA riots were also about blacks attacking Asian Americans. Focusing on the black-white angle makes black culpability less pronounced.

3. That they were able to see links between racial communities also speaks to their unique (compared to white papers) take on the role that institutions play in black life. While we found white presses all but ignore the role of structures and institutions in explaining black life, black newspapers spend much more time writing about an (in)justice system (a.k.a. “just us system”), the role that economic restructuring plays in the lives of working class people and people of color and the centrality of racism in the fabric of American society. Thus while the white press places blame for racial inequality on minorities, black papers suggest that while part of our condition is self-inflicted, much more of it lies elsewhere in institutions outside of our control and influence; “coincidentally” places dominated by whites.

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