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# Press Coverage of Interethnic Conflict: Examples from the Los Angeles Riots of 1992

Hemant Shah\*

News media are an important source of cultural production and information. Their representation of the social world provides explanations, descriptions, and frames for understanding how and why the world works as it does. In media studies, “frames” refer to the perspectives on, or interpretation of, current events provided by news coverage. Frames are complex and overlapping, existing in a single news article or within an entire body of news coverage. Multiple and opposing frames may exist simultaneously. Frames are built up from the choices reporters make in terms of language use, source selection, and story organization.<sup>1</sup> In their coverage of race, news media are animated by certain, usually unstated, assumptions and expectations related to perceived racial differences. Collectively, these assumptions and expectations represent a common-sense understanding of racial difference often referred to as “racial ideology.”<sup>2</sup>

Racial ideology informs news media coverage of interethnic or interracial conflict. But mainstream and minority news media typically view, and therefore cover, race and race relations differently. This paper draws on previous research to compare mainstream and minority newspaper coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riots that followed the acquittal of four police officers accused of beating Rodney King.<sup>3</sup> Using examples related to the use of language and the attribution of blame, this paper shows the different ways in which race and race relations are depicted by the *Los Angeles Times* and four minority-oriented newspapers: the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *La Opinión*, *KoreAm Journal*, and *Korea Times*. Based on this comparison, two approaches to reporting are summarized and evaluated for their potential to contribute to diminishing conflict.

## I. BACKGROUND: LOS ANGELES, 1992

Several factors contributed to an environment in which the acquittal of the four police officers led to several days and nights of arson and violence. Among the most important of these factors were recent immigration trends, existing inter-

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1. See Claes de Vreese, *News Framing: Theory and Typology*, 13 INFO. DESIGN J. 51, 51-62 (2005); Robert Entman, *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm*, 43 J. COMM. 51 (1993); Zongdang Pan & Gerald Kosicki, *Framing Analysis: An approach to News Discourse*, 10 POL. COMM. 55 (1993).

2. Stuart Hall, *The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies in the Media*, in SILVER LININGS: SOME STRATEGIES FOR THE EIGHTIES 28-52 (G. Bridges & R. Brundt eds., 1981).

3. See HEMANT SHAH & MICHAEL C. THORNTON, *NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF INTERETHNIC CONFLICT: COMPETING VISIONS OF AMERICA* (2004).

ethnic tensions, and the historical role of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) in policing minority communities.

### *A. Immigration*

Beginning in about the 1970s, Los Angeles began to experience significant demographic shifts. Southeast Asians, many of them refugees displaced in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, migrated to the Los Angeles area. Later, Korean immigration also spiked, with many ending up in Los Angeles. Between 1980 and 1990, the Asian population in Los Angeles County increased by one hundred percent. Although Los Angeles has always been home for a significant number of Mexican immigrants, starting in about 1980, other Latinos began to migrate to Southern California. People displaced and made homeless by a civil war in El Salvador—which eventually spilled over into Honduras and Guatemala—began to head for Los Angeles. The United States had backed oppressive regimes in the region to the tune of \$4 billion between 1980 and 1992. Combined with the Mexican population already there, the new immigrants from Central America drove the Latino population into majority status in Los Angeles County by 1990. At the same time, the white population decreased between 1980 and 1990 by 8.5%.<sup>4</sup>

### *B. Interethnic Tensions*

One consequence of the changing demographic mix was rising tension between “old” and “new” minority communities. Established communities of African Americans and the newer communities of Latino immigrants (often with support from established Mexican residents) competed over a variety of resources such as social services, housing, bank loans, etc. The relationship between African Americans and Asians was also tense. Many Asian immigrants entered the retail niche and owned a large number of groceries, liquor stores, and “swap meets” (small convenience stores selling a dizzying variety of goods). Blacks believed Asians, especially new Korean immigrants, unfairly benefited from links to white financiers, who were reluctant to deal with black entrepreneurs. In addition, Blacks believed Korean shop owners were, at best, insensitive to customer concerns, and, at worst, racist. Black-Korean tensions peaked when Soon Ja Du, a Korean grocer who shot and killed Latasha Harlins for allegedly stealing a \$1.79 bottle of orange juice, was fined \$500 and sentenced to 400 hours of community service.

### *C. Los Angeles Police Department*

A small, technologically sophisticated, predominantly white force, the LAPD had a reputation for brutality, especially against minorities. Many members of minority communities viewed the LAPD with a combination of fear and disgust, perhaps with good reason. In 1982, for example, the department was heavily

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4. *Id.* at 100.

criticized for employing choke holds that resulted in the deaths of several Black youths. Between 1986 and 1990, citizens lodged 2,044 complaints of police brutality against the department. None of the cases is as well-known as the beating of Rodney King. In early March of 1991, four LAPD officers were caught on videotape beating a prone Rodney King with boots and batons. The videotaped evidence led to an indictment of the four officers. The trial began March 4, 1992, and on April 29, 1992, the jury returned verdicts of not guilty on all counts but one (on which they were hung).

The jury returned the verdict at about 3:15 p.m. By about 6 p.m., residents of a predominantly black neighborhood at the intersection of Florence and Normandie began hurling rocks at passing cars, pulling drivers out of cars, and beating up white or Asian pedestrians and passersby. In an incident caught on video by a local television crew, white truck driver Reginald Denny was pulled from his truck and severely beaten by a group of black men. Three days of rioting ensued during which 58 people died, more than 2,500 were injured, and 17,000 were arrested. Property damage amounted to \$785 million.

Local press coverage was extensive in both the daily mainstream newspaper and in the weekly minority newspapers. The Shah and Thornton study examined many dimensions of the coverage, including thematic emphases, representations of heroes and villains, and how the idea of "nation" intersected with notions of "race." This paper will summarize just two points of comparison between the mainstream and minority newspapers: word choice and assignment of blame.

## II. WORD CHOICE

The selection of words and labels describing the events can reveal how racial ideology pushes news coverage in certain directions and not others. For reporters at the Los Angeles newspapers, race was the lens through which they understood the events. However, mainstream and minority newspapers depicted the events—and the role of race—in different ways.

On the very first day of the riots, the *Los Angeles Times* labeled the incidents as "race-related violence."<sup>5</sup> Subsequent stories also framed the disturbances primarily or only in racial terms, but a range of equally important issues were either ignored or marginalized by the insistence on attaching the "race" label to the events. For example, there was little talk in the initial mainstream press coverage about economic inequality, legal injustice, or police brutality, until the media shifted to an analysis frame weeks after the events. Conceivably the mainstream newspapers might have credibly used the label, "injustice-related violence." There was, of course, racial violence over the three days of violence, but the terminology used by the *Los Angeles Times* ignored the political and economic history of race relations in Los Angeles. Without such context, the news coverage might lead readers to infer a causal connection between race and violence—specifically, that black men are violent because they are black.

Typically, the minority newspapers provided explanations (however vague) for the violent behavior of minorities. For example, an early story about the riots in *La Opinión* reported that "Blacks and Latinos violently attacked a system that

5. Mark Lacey & Shawn Hubler, *Rioters Set Fires, Loot Stores*, L.A. TIMES, Apr. 30, 1992, at A1. Published by University of Missouri School of Law Scholarship Repository, 2007

didn't give them equal opportunity or legitimacy."<sup>6</sup> This passage also identifies the race of rioters, but provided a short explanation (later elaborated) that clearly separates the actions of the individuals from their race. Blacks and Latinos acted violently because they were marginalized by the "system," not because they are Black or Latino.

In another example of word choice difference, the *Los Angeles Times* (but also sometimes minority press) very frequently used the simple shorthand "U.S. courts" or "U.S. court system" when referring to the LAPD trial or more generally to the legal system in the U.S. This usage seems straightforward, neutral, and unproblematic. In contrast, more emotive, expressive, and ultimately revealing of racial ideology, was the way in which the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, especially on its editorial page, referred to the U.S. courts. In nearly one-third of the items analyzed, the newspaper used the phrase, "the injustice system," to describe U.S. courts.<sup>7</sup> The phrase often served as a sharp signaling device, leading into an analysis of the LAPD officers on trial for beating King, a discussion of the Soon Ja Du case, or a more general discussion of perceived biases in U.S. jurisprudence.

In a similar example, the ways in which the trial and verdict were described indicated a subtle, but revealing, shift in terms of who was on trial. The *Los Angeles Times* typically described the court case of the police officers as the "Rodney King trial" or the "Rodney King case." Both phrases suggest that King was the aggressor in the case and that it is he who is on trial. On the other hand, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* consistently referred to the case as the "LAPD trial." Not only is this phrase more accurate than the phrase "Rodney King trial," the labeling choices also reveal different racial ideologies. The choice made by the *Los Angeles Times* perhaps indicates—by suggesting through word choice that Rodney King is on trial—seemingly unconscious and unreflective acceptance of the long-standing stereotype that connects violence with black men.

### III. ATTRIBUTING BLAME

All the newspapers engaged in a process of assigning blame for the outbreak of violence and arson following the not-guilty verdicts. Shah and Thornton separated the various assignments of blame into three broad categories: individual-level blame, institutional-level blame, and structural-level blame. Individual-level blame pointed out people or groups of people responsible for causing the disturbances. Institutional-level blame suggested that institutions such as the police department, mass media, schools, the then-Immigration & Naturalization Service, etc., caused the unrest. Finally, structural-level blame focused on social distribution of resources, poverty, unemployment, and the like. Among the stories that discussed blame, the breakdown of among these three categories for each newspaper category is listed below in Table 1.

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6. Giovanni E. Reyes, *Legal is Not Always the Most Just*, LA OPINIÓN, May 9, 1992, at 15A.

7. SHAH & THORNTON, *supra* note 3, at 177-78.

### Assigning Blame

| Level of Blame | Los Angeles Times | La Opinión | Los Angeles Sentinel | KoreAm Journal & Korea Times |
|----------------|-------------------|------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Individual     | 36.1              | 15.0       | 30.2                 | 11.0                         |
| Institutional  | 21.7              | 24.4       | 4.6                  | 18.4                         |
| Structural     | 21.7              | 16.5       | 79.0                 | 31.2                         |

Table 1

The *Los Angeles Times* is the only newspaper in which individual-level blame for the disturbances predominates. Blame for the rioting was pinned mainly on individuals (in about 40% of the stories). Institutional and structural level causes for the rioting were each mentioned in about 20% of the stories. For the three other newspapers, institutional-level or structural-level blame are more frequently mentioned than individual-level blame. An especially striking finding was that nearly 80% of the items that discussed blame in the *Sentinel* talked about it at the structural level. Also, the relatively lower percentages in the Korean newspapers reflected a greater emphasis on reporting cooperative efforts at reconciliation rather than on assigning blame. In general, these numerical breakdowns suggest that the minority press was less willing to lay the blame for the violence and arson at the feet of individuals, even though it was individuals who carried out the specific acts. The minority press seemed more committed to explaining causes of the rioting in the broader terms of institutional and structural factors by which individual actions might be contextualized and explained (though not excused). A few examples of how these differences manifested themselves will provide a sense of the different approaches taken by the mainstream and minority press.

Some typical examples from the *Los Angeles Times* citing individual-level blame include the following: A resident of south-central Los Angeles, the epicenter of the riots, said, "If [Koreans] had more understanding and patience, it never would have happened. . . . I felt they brought it on themselves."<sup>8</sup> In this passage the resident blames Korean storeowners in particular for creating the racial tensions, which were a major ingredient among the circumstances that led to the disturbances. In another passage, one of jurors in the LAPD trial blamed Rodney King himself for causing the rioting. The juror said, "Mr. King was controlling the whole show,"<sup>9</sup> suggesting that he had resisted efforts to arrest him peacefully, which led to the escalating police violence, ultimately causing the rioting. Finally, George Bush, in the middle of a presidential campaign, implied that people who have no "respect [for] other people's rights and property" created the problems leading to the rioting.<sup>10</sup>

Attribution of blame in the minority press took on a different cast than in the *Los Angeles Times*. The minority press often cited the mainstream media as a

8. Kim Kowsky & Bernice Hirabayashi, *Tensions Add Awkwardness to Everyday Encounters*, L.A. TIMES, May 4, 1992, at A1.

9. Richard Serrano & Tracy Wilkinson, *All 4 in King Beating Acquitted*, L.A. TIMES, Apr. 30, 1992, at A1.

10. David Lauter, *Political Leaders' Analysis of Crisis Varies*, L.A. TIMES, May 1, 1992, at A4.

major contributor to the violence. In an unsigned editorial, the *KoreaAm Journal* noted that:

[I]f the media had played its role of reporting responsibly, most of the damage done would have been structural, something that some government generosity and community solidarity could have repaired. Instead the media inflamed the racial tension between the African- and Asian-American communities, and aggravated what could have been minor wounds that the riots inflicted on both. There is no excuse for having . . . every incident involving people of different races portrayed as a skirmish in a race war.<sup>11</sup>

Another level of blame was discussed in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, which quoted a south-central resident about “the power structure”: “I feel they—the power structure—are constantly reminding us that they do not consider Black folks equal to them and they’ll do their best to make sure we’ll never become equal.”<sup>12</sup> By including this particular quote, the article clearly suggests that the cause of the riots was not black individuals losing control or minorities with criminal pathologies. The *Korea Times* was more racially specific about the role of institutions and power holding in Los Angeles. In a column, the writer noted, “[t]he processes that maintain dominant control of Whites over non-whites are built into the major institutions. These institutions either exclude or restrict the full participation of minorities by rule, laws and/or popular convention.”<sup>13</sup>

Taken together, these articles, and others that tended to appear more frequently in the minority press than the mainstream press, recognized that the causes of rioting were not only, or primarily, located in the failings of individuals. These articles suggested that a more complex set of circumstances, involving structural and institutional factors, were to blame for the disturbances.

#### IV. TWO MODELS OF REPORTING

The examples of the differences in the way mainstream and minority press covered the Los Angeles riots of 1992 perhaps make the distinctions a bit sharper than they actually are. Nevertheless, there were real and important differences in approaches to mainstream and minority press reporting. Shah and Thornton concluded that, in general, the difference between the mainstream press and minority press could be summarized as the difference between a “traditional” and “alternative” approach to journalism.<sup>14</sup> The following chart summarizes characteristics of these approaches in terms of several dimensions of news stories.

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11. *Media Bias Aggravated Riot Damage*, KOREAN J., June 1992, at 7.

12. *Where Do We Go From Here*, L.A. SENTINEL, May 13, 1992, at B6.

13. Jung Min Choi, *The L.A. Story: The Product of Institutional Racism*, KOREA TIMES, July 1992, at 27.

14. SHAH & THORNTON, *supra* note 3, at 233-37.

*Approaches to Journalism*

| <i>Story dimension</i>     | <i>Approach</i> |                         |
|----------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------|
|                            | Traditional     | Alternative             |
| <i>Focus of story</i>      | Events          | Processes               |
| <i>Primary sources</i>     | Officials       | Ordinary people         |
| <i>Writing style</i>       | Factual         | Interpretive            |
| <i>Basis of legitimacy</i> | Science         | Grounded knowledge      |
| <i>Purpose</i>             | Description     | Explanation/orientation |

Table 2

In the “traditional” approach, the emphasis is on providing factual accounts of seemingly disconnected events drawing upon the words of officials and the legitimacy of science (experts, polls, statistics, etc.) as evidence to support the account. The primary purpose is to describe the event by recounting the who, what, when, and where (and less frequently the why and how) of the story. In the “alternative” approach, the emphasis is on understanding the meaning and significance of the facts rather than on letting them “speak for themselves.” To understand the subject they are reporting the journalists rely not only on officials and experts, but also on ordinary local people and their ground-level knowledge about the situation. The purpose of their work is to provide an explanation of why the news is relevant and to provide a cognitive map that attempts to illustrate the significance of current events.

Despite the shortcomings of the traditional approach to journalism, the conventional wisdom is that it yields the best reporting and writing, and that the general circulation press is its prototypical practitioner. The general circulation press, with its White, male, and middle class biases, has been criticized from many perspectives for its shortcomings, but it remains the benchmark for excellence in many quarters. Based on an examination of mainstream and minority newspaper coverage of three interethnic conflicts, the traditional approach does not always effectively examine the complexity of interethnic conflicts.<sup>15</sup> The type of news produced by the application of the traditional model of journalism may do little to facilitate the kind of deliberation and discussion required to serve conflict resolution.

## V. SO WHAT?

The two sets of examples—use of words and labels, and attribution of blame—show differences in the way the mainstream press and minority press in Los Angeles covered the 1992 riots. What are we to make of these differences? Can we make any judgment about whether a “traditional” or “alternative” approach to journalism might represent a better way of covering interethnic conflict? Robert Manoff, director of the Center for War, Peace and the News Media at NYU, provides a number of ideas or criteria as to what roles the news media could

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15. *Id. at passim.*

assume when covering conflict.<sup>16</sup> The criteria are extrapolated from an examination of hundreds of media initiatives taken to minimize conflicts in the communities they covered. In the coverage of conflicts, Manoff says the media could (among other things):

- Educate communities about the history, values, and interests of each party to a conflict.
- Frame the issues involved in a way that they are more susceptible to management.
- De-objectify and re-humanize conflict parties to each other.
- Provide an outlet for the emotions of the parties, the expression of which may be therapeutic.
- Provide early warnings of impending conflicts.

In the case of Los Angeles newspapers' coverage of the Los Angeles insurrection, both mainstream and minority newspapers accomplished some of these tasks, but the Shah and Thornton research indicates that minority newspapers seemed to do so more regularly.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Journalists do not make a conscious or special effort to apply racial ideology in their coverage of interethnic conflict. Instead, racial ideology finds its way into news coverage as part of journalistic routines that are absorbed through newsroom socialization and are then incorporated into day-to-day professional practice. The result in the mainstream press seems to be that news stories about interethnic and interracial conflict have within them imagery, narratives, explanations, etc., that perpetuate stereotypes, oversimplify underlying problems, ignore relevant history and context, and so forth, which may exacerbate tensions and may prevent reconciliation.

The minority press, while it is not free of problems, uses racial categories too, but seems less susceptible to explaining actions and events in terms of race. In addition, the minority press, more often than the mainstream press, takes a more historical outlook, considers a broader range of explanations for conflict, and seems to pay more attention (especially the Asian American press) to efforts at cooperation and reconciliation. To better cover interethnic conflicts, news outlets might consider incorporating some of the practices of minority publications.

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16. Robert Karl Manoff, *The Media's Role in Preventing and Moderating Conflict*, U.S. INSTITUTE OF PEACE (1997), <http://www.usip.org/virtualdiplomacy/publications/papers/manoff.html> (last visited April 6, 2007).