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# Long ago and far away

## How US newspapers construct racial oppression

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines how US general-circulation newspapers construct and convey the idea of racial oppression. A Nexis database search found 146 news items published between 1990 and 2001 prominently using the phrase ‘racial oppression’. Content analysis numerically coded the ‘facts’ of racial oppression (that is the ‘who, what, when, where, why, and how’) and a number of other structural features of the articles. Interpretive textual analysis considered the use of words and phrases to characterize the process of and those involved in racial oppression. The study found that the US press constructed racial oppression in fairly narrow ways. In the news stories, forms of racial oppression typically occurred in the past. The stories focused on apartheid, slavery and the confederate flag, depicted the process as involving almost exclusively blacks and whites and emphasized narratives related to Mandela as hero, white guilt and absolution, bounded empathy and race and rationality.

**KEY WORDS** ■ content analysis ■ journalism ■ race and news ■ racial formation ■ racial oppression ■ Robert Blauner ■ textual analysis

In summer 2001, the eminent American sociologist Robert Blauner published a book titled *Still the Big News: Racial Oppression in America*. The publication was a follow-up to his similarly titled 1972 book *Racial Oppression in America* in which he described significant social, economic and political inequities between whites and non-whites in America. He used the phrase ‘racial oppression’ to describe the creation and defense of group privileges that, in the United States, account for the domination of non-whites by whites. In the 2001 book, Blauner shows that racial oppression – still characterized by white privilege and domination of racial minorities – is ‘still the big news’ as America moves into the 21st century.

In *Still the Big News*, Blauner was, of course, writing about *sociological* ‘big news’. But given the pervasiveness and sociopolitical relevance of news, it is

important for several reasons to examine the extent to which and the ways in which racial oppression is *journalistically* constructed and conveyed as news. News depictions of social issues help establish the terms and parameters of discussion, debate and public understanding of those issues (see Iyengar, 1991). The influence of media coverage may, in fact, provide discursive guidance or closure (see Ferguson, 1998) on a given topic, providing the news media with enormous agenda-setting capabilities. In addition, media studies research indicates that many people learn about various forms of race relations through the news (see Gandy, 1998; Entman and Rojecki, 2000). Thus, stories in which reporters prominently use the phrase racial oppression are likely to have effects on the way news consumers understand and respond – both at the level of individual action and public policy – to social problems related to unequally distributed racial privileges and inequities. The potential impact of this category of news stories on public opinion, policy-making and social practice has not, however, prompted studies on how the press discusses and depicts the idea of racial oppression. Previous research has examined news coverage of issues related to racial oppression such as blacks and crime (Campbell, 1995), affirmative action (Gamson and Modigliani, 1987), social risk for racial minorities (Gandy, 1996) and poverty (Gilens, 1999). However, news stories in which journalists prominently discuss the concept of racial oppression, the idea that conceptually binds together specific processes that create and maintain racial inequity, have not been studied.

In this study, we are interested in the issues, events and circumstances that reporters believe constitute racial oppression. We examine news stories in which journalists prominently use the phrase racial oppression to describe what they are covering and we catalog the language, images, facts and figures reporters use in these stories. Consequently, this study is not about whether or not reporters cover specific forms of racial oppression such as racial discrimination and racial violence – we know they do. It is also not about how well specific forms of racial oppression are covered – we know there are some shortcomings in this coverage. This study, instead, is about how reporters construct and convey the concept of racial oppression itself: when journalists determine that they need to use the phrase racial oppression to describe what they are reporting, what are the characteristic features of those stories? How do reporters talk about the processes and consequences of creating and maintaining race-based inequities? We take this approach because if Blauner is correct in saying that racial oppression remains sociologically significant and if the reading of news stories has important social and political consequences, then it is important to understand what kind of information newspapers are distributing under the label racial oppression and what, therefore, readers may be learning about the process. Without an adequate understanding of racial

oppression as the general process that explains the distribution of power and privilege to whites, news consumers may view various racist actions and policies as discrete and isolated incidents or issues requiring only remedial or short-term anti-racist solutions.

In this research, then, we read news articles in which reporters deploy the phrase 'racial oppression'. We examined several structural and narrative features of these articles as well as how articles employed a basic convention of journalism – the 5Ws and H (who, what, when, where, why and how) – to convey the 'facts' about racial oppression.

### **Racial formation and news**

A useful framework to help us understand the role of news in coverage of race-related issues is racial formation (Omi and Winant, 1994). Racial formation refers to 'the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed' (Omi and Winant, 1994: 55). An essential element of racial formation is racial projects, which may be understood as attempts to manipulate racial categories in ways that mobilize specific meanings and accomplish certain social and political goals. Racial projects link cultural representations that identify and give meaning to race and social structures that organize human bodies and resources along racial lines. Thus, racial projects are 'simultaneously interpretations[s], representation[s], or explanation[s] of racial dynamics and efforts . . . to organize and distribute resources along racial lines' (Omi and Winant, 1994: 24). This relationship between culture and structure provides racial projects with an element of representational coherence. Once a racial project makes a choice about how the link between culture and structure will be conveyed, a narrative chain follows logically and effortlessly (Fiske, 1990).

The activities of racial projects are guided, to a large extent, by racial ideology. Ideology refers to a set of beliefs, values and meanings articulated in texts and everyday practices, perhaps arising from a set of material interests, that reflect and justify the worldview of a given social grouping (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1991: 24). According to Hall (1981: 35), racial ideology articulates and defines what race is, circumscribes what meanings the imagery of race carries and suggests ways to classify the world in terms of racial categories. Racial ideology has a life of its own, providing a vocabulary that enables people to interpret and evaluate events, people and issues within existing racial frameworks. These frameworks are rooted in ideas about intellect, sexuality, emotional disposition and so forth and they permeate the processes

of cultural presentation and structural organization (Shah and Thornton, 1994).

One of the most important racial projects in contemporary society is news media, which form an important source of cultural production and information. Their representations of the social world provide explanations, descriptions and frames for understanding how and why the world works as it does. As with all racial projects, the news media are animated by racial ideology (Hall, 1997). However, the perpetuation of racial ideology is not a conscious effort on the part of journalists and their news organizations. In fact, it is often incorporated into day-to-day journalistic routines as conceptions, assumptions and definitions of the normal (Gray, 1989). For example, using the journalistic convention of the 5Ws and H to convey the facts of a news story, journalists select certain issues, events, actors and sources for coverage and emphasis over others. These choices help construct narratives about race and race relations.

### **Research methods**

Using the Nexis US newspapers database to identify items for analysis, we examined US general-circulation newspaper articles published between 1 January 1990 and 31 December 2001. We selected this time frame in hopes of assembling a manageable sample size because we were doing both a numerical *and* an interpretive analysis of the articles. But also, we felt that a decade worth of stories was adequate as a first foray into examining how reporters construct and illustrate the idea of racial oppression and exploring patterns over time. An initial full-text search using the key words 'racial oppression' yielded 509 articles. In a very large proportion of these items, however, the phrase was mentioned in ways unrelated to the subject of the story. In addition, the 509 items contained dozens of duplicate items. To ensure that the articles in our sample were ones in which reporters prominently focused on the idea of racial oppression, we limited our search to items using the phrase in the headline or first several 'lead paragraphs' (as delineated by Nexis). We also eliminated the duplicate items from the study. The final sample of 146 articles represents a snapshot of how reporters for US newspapers constructed and illustrated the general concept of racial oppression over roughly a decade. In the final analysis, we examined the articles using quantitative content analysis and interpretive textual analysis.

One way journalists construct news stories is by employing a device known as the '5 Ws and H', describing the basic facts related to the event or issue being reported (see Manoff and Schudson, 1986). The content analysis

employed the same '5 Ws and H' convention to deconstruct how the news represents these 'facts' of racial oppression. For each news item, the following information was recorded (the 'who' element actually has two parts):

- Who is the oppressor (e.g. police, employer, government, etc.)?
- Who is the oppressed (e.g. specific groups, specific individuals)?
- What is the context of racial oppression (e.g. economic, political, legal, cultural, social, etc.)?
- When does the racial oppression take place (past, present, future)?
- Where does racial oppression occur (specific country, state, city, etc.)?
- Why does racial oppression occur (e.g. racism of oppressor, pathology of oppressed, etc.)?
- How does racial oppression get carried out (e.g. hate crimes, police brutality, segregation, etc.)?

Responses to each question generated a list of answers. Each non-redundant answer in the generated lists was assigned a unique numerical code for subsequent analyses. For some subsequent analyses, some responses for some questions were compressed into more general categories.

In addition to the '5 Ws and H' coding, other basic structural features of the news report such as date line (date, place), length of report, author of article (staff, wire service), article form (feature news, hard news) and article type (news, editorial, column, letter to the editor) were recorded.

Finally, textual analysis of the source material was undertaken to (a) identify themes and how they are woven into news narratives or storylines; and (b) consider how language might be employed to emphasize, legitimize or delegitimize certain people, perspectives or actions related to the process of racial oppression as represented in the news. This close reading revealed important details about the depiction of racial oppression. For example, by closely reading sections of stories that discuss 'who is oppressed', one can discern whether or not all oppressed people are treated identically. The language used to describe the oppressed may suggest that some oppressed people are worthy of sympathy while other oppressed people are not. Close reading can reveal how reporters understand and convey racial oppression. For example, one reporter may explain racial oppression with a narrative of 'tough love', while another emphasizes an 'against the odds' scenario in which an oppressed person with great determination triumphs over a powerful oppressor.

## Results

The first part of this section presents the basic numerical results related to the structure of news articles and the 5Ws and H 'facts' of racial oppression.

(Holsti's coder reliability coefficient for the structure of news articles was .97, while the coefficient of reliability for the 5Ws and H 'facts' of racial oppression news was .94.) The second part of this section presents the textual analysis of racial oppression news.

### **Numerical analysis**

Six newspapers – *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Times*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* – accounted for 62 (42.5 percent of the total) of the articles analyzed. Thirty-three other publications accounted for 57.5 percent of the articles.

The 146 stories were distributed fairly evenly over the 12-year period of analysis – about an average of 11 per year. Some other basic structural features of the coverage include the following:

- The length of the articles ranged from 51 to 3326 words.
- Staff writers produced most articles: most of these (88 of 108 or 81 percent) had bylines.
- Most articles were identified as news items (58.2 percent), followed by reviews (15.1 percent), columns (14.4 percent) and editorials (6.2 percent).
- Most articles (46.6 percent) were identified as features (including reviews), followed by opinion pieces (including editorials, columns, and letters to the editor) (27.4 percent) and hard news (26.0 percent).

Aside from these structural features, several content-related patterns emerged. For example, the South African government and US society were the racial oppressors most often depicted while South African society and the US government were rarely mentioned as oppressors. In fact, about 40 percent of the articles did not address the question 'Who is the oppressor?' at all.

About 93 percent of the articles identified Blacks in the United States and South Africa as the oppressed group. Though only about one-half of the articles addressed the question 'Why does racial oppression take place?', nearly 94 percent of these articles cited the racism of the oppressor as the primary reason.

Quite often the subject of news stories was the legalized systems of racial segregation known as apartheid in South Africa and Jim Crow in the United States. Consequently, the context in which racial oppression was most often depicted was the legal (see Table 1). Second most frequently coded were articles about racial oppression in social contexts involving day-to-day human interactions, including instances of discrimination and various forms of activism.

Racial oppression takes place most frequently in the past (66.1 percent of the articles), according to US newspapers. The place where racial oppression occurs most frequently is the United States but most of the articles about the

United States are printed in the 1995–2001 post-apartheid period after Mandela is elected President of South Africa (see Table 2).

In other words, the US press barely focused on racial oppression in its own back yard while South Africa practiced apartheid. But even during the 1995–2001 period when the US press covered racial oppression more frequently, a primary focus was on the legacy of apartheid in areas such as education and the arts in the United States *and* South Africa. However, as Table 3 shows, the coverage of racial oppression in the 1995–2001 time period also focused on ‘new’ issues in the US such as the movement demanding reparations for slavery and the political controversy over flying the confederate flag over statehouses in the South. As Table 3 also shows, almost 14 percent of the articles covered mechanisms of racial oppression involving actions labeled ‘white racism’ in the 1995–2001 time period, as opposed to 5.1 percent in the 1990–1994 period.

**Table 1** The contexts of racial oppression news

Context	Number of articles	Percentage of articles
Legal	45	40.0
Social	30	26.5
Political	14	12.4
Cultural	13	11.5
Economic	3	2.7
Education	3	2.7
Sports	2	1.8
National security	2	1.8
Multiple	1	.9
Total	113	100.0

**Table 2** Place of racial oppression in apartheid and post-apartheid periods

Place	Period	
	Apartheid (1990–94)	Post-Apartheid (1995–2001)
United States	36.0%	67.9%
South Africa	64.0%	32.1%
Totals	100% ( <i>n</i> = 50)	100% ( <i>n</i> = 84)

$\chi^2 = 12.9$ , *d.f.* = 1, *p* < .001.



**Table 3** Method of racial oppression in apartheid and post-apartheid periods

Place	Period	
	Apartheid (1990–94)	Post-Apartheid (1995–2001)
Apartheid/segregation	79.5%	37.9%
Politics	10.3%	13.6%
White racism	5.1%	13.6%
Slavery	0	16.7%
Multiple	2.6%	15.2%
Cultural insensitivity	2.6%	3.2%
Totals	100% ( <i>n</i> = 39)	100% ( <i>n</i> = 66)

$\chi^2 = 23.79$ , *d.f.* = 5, *p* < .001.

### Textual analysis

A close reading of the news articles revealed a number of themes in the coverage. Table 4 shows the frequency with which 12 themes appeared (news articles can contain multiple themes). The most frequently coded theme was 'remembering racial oppression', which included historical references to apartheid, US segregation and slavery, in addition to references to victims of racial oppression and heroes of past anti-racist struggles. Often, this theme appeared concurrently with 'racial oppression ridiculed' (the second most frequently mentioned theme) and 'racial oppression activism' (the fourth most frequently appearing theme). Articles coded as containing the 'racial oppression cultural products' theme were those featuring films, theatrical productions, books, television shows, museum exhibits, etc., related to racial oppression. 'Race relations improving' and 'race relations worsening' were themes typically related to articles assessing post-apartheid South Africa, and controversies over the confederate flag, affirmative action and reparations for slavery (the latter two topics also were coded in the 'compensation for racial oppression' theme).

Many of these thematic threads were woven together in various combinations into the following four central narratives related to racial oppression as conveyed by US newspapers: (1) Mandela the hero; (2) white guilt and absolution related to racial oppression of blacks; (3) bounded empathy for the victims of racial oppression; and (4) black and white rationality and irrationality.

### *Mandela the hero*

One of the clearest narratives in the news coverage, since articles about South African apartheid dominated the coverage, was about the heroic persona and

**Table 4** Themes in racial oppression news

Theme	Number of articles in which theme appears
Remembering racial oppression	56
Racial oppression ridiculed	50
Racial oppression cultural products	34
Racial oppression activism	21
Race relations improving	20
Race relations worsening	15
Racial oppression and international relations	13
Minority intersection of experience/interests	9
Racial oppression rationalized	8
Compensation for racial oppression	6
Racial oppression and political correctness	5
Racial oppression and gender	3

actions of Nelson Mandela. This dramatic trajectory takes the following form: Mandela endures 27 years of imprisonment; Mandela emerges from prison and forgives his oppressors; Mandela leads the transition from apartheid to multi-racial democracy in South Africa.

The narrative begins by praising ‘the man whose every waking moment has been devoted to African liberation’ (‘The Authorized Nelson Mandela’, *Los Angeles Times*, 15 April 1990, Book Review: 10) and whose ‘27 years in prison epitomized the sacrifices of his generation for a free South Africa’ (‘South Africa Passes the Torch to New Leader’, *Austin American-Statesman*, 17 June 1999: A2). Mandela ‘is a martyr who’s still with us’, one newspaper reported during his visit to Atlanta (‘Mandela Honors King in Georgia’, *Newsday*, 28 June 1990: 7). Another article reported that Boston city officials planned to ring all the church bells in the city and ‘do everything possible to make sure people get to see [Mandela]’ (‘Boston to Ring a Welcome For Mandela’, *Boston Globe*, 23 June 1990: 1).

Mandela was deemed to be ‘perfectly suited to working the miracle of reconciliation’. His moral authority is enhanced after he is released from prison and refuses to publicly express animosity toward South African whites: ‘A former prisoner, he forgave his captors. As president, he shared lunch with the prosecutor who succeeded in getting him sentenced to life in prison. He paid a courtesy call to Betsie Verwoerd, the widow of Hendrik Verwoerd, the main designer of apartheid’ (‘A Nation Takes Step in the Long Walk to Freedom’, *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 26 May 1999: 1A). And, the press reported, ‘he won international acclaim for persuading black South Africans not to exact reprisals for the odious system of racial oppression they had

endured under 340 years of white minority rule' ('Life After Mandela', *The Times Union*, 30 May 1999: E1).

Finally, the news coverage conveyed Mandela's personal accomplishments and South Africa's move toward democracy as closely linked. Reported one newspaper, Mandela's is 'a remarkable life that catapulted him from small-time lawyer to leader of the war against apartheid, from jailed 'terrorist' to national conciliator, from political prisoner to president of Africa's richest but most troubled nation' ('Life After Mandela', *The Times Union*, 30 May 1999: E1). And in the moment of his personal triumph, when he is about to be inaugurated as South Africa's first post-apartheid president, one newspaper noted the symbolism of his travel itinerary and emphasized once again the parallel tracks of personal and social transformation:

Mandela was elected president Monday in Cape Town by the first South African parliament to include members of the black majority. From that triumph on the shores where Dutch merchants first landed 352 years ago, Mandela flew to Pretoria to be inaugurated. He formally assumed power in what was the bastion of white supremacists and Afrikaner nationalists. ('Mandela Hails Time For Healing', *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 11 May 1994: A1)

In this passage, Mandela's personal journey from a victim to vanquisher of apartheid and the national victory over racial oppression are depicted as one and the same.

### ***White guilt and absolution***

There were few explicit references to white guilt per se. An article about growing political rifts among South Africa's white community reports the sense of deep regret felt by some Afrikaners. Wilhelm Verwoerd, the grandson of Henrik Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, says in the article: '[The surname] is a personal cross I must bear. It is something I cannot escape. I have to confront the ghosts' ('Afrikaners Shed Image of Solidarity', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 17 October 1993: 4B). Another article in which white guilt explicitly appeared was a review of a museum installment on the Middle Passage. The white writer said that as he walked through the exhibit 'shame, rational or not, flooded over me', as he realized the depth of inhuman treatment white slave traders meted out to Africans ('The Middle Passage', *The St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 1 February 1998: D1).

White guilt was more strongly conveyed by inference in articles foregrounding absolution for the role whites might have assumed in racial oppression of blacks. Several articles related to South Africa's apartheid policies clearly show this narrative. For example, in an article about white South Africans denouncing apartheid, the writer reports that Piet Koornhof, the former Minister of Black Affairs, the government agency that enforced apart-

heid laws, had 'abandoned his wife and family to take up with a young mixed-race woman' and

[I]n the ultimate act of racial atonement Koornhof confessed to being the father of the young woman's baby and wants to marry her – both of which would have landed him in jail a few years ago under the race purity laws of the government he served all his life. ('Afrikaners Shed Image of Solidarity', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 17 October 1993: 4B)

By engaging in actions he once had to punish, the article seems to say, Koornhof is shedding himself of the guilt he felt as an official of the South African government.

Another thread in this narrative is in articles about white South Africans who did not support apartheid in the first place. Such articles suggest collective white guilt that can be assuaged by stories of individuals' resistance to racial oppression. In one such article, Johnny Clegg, a white South African musician, is depicted as resisting the state's attempts to muzzle him. As a teen he hung out in areas zoned for blacks and was repeatedly arrested and thrown in jail. As a performer he hired black musicians to join his band at whites-only venues. At one concert he was interrupted by shotgun-wielding police. As a musician he blended African and Western styles, which was not allowed under apartheid laws. The article goes on to relate how he persevered under these conditions to push for cultural transformation in South Africa that would accompany political change ('A South African Bruce Springsteen Blends Zulu With Rock', *The New York Times*, 15 April 1990, Section 2: 27).

Yet another thread in the narrative of white absolution is related to slavery in the United States. In one article, the white mayor of Richmond, Virginia, issues an apology for slavery. As he addressed a group of pilgrims retracing the journey of the Middle Passage, the article reported, Timothy Kaine disagreed with President Bill Clinton's and Congress's refusal to apologize for slavery. Kaine is then quoted:

As a white person in a city built around the institution of slavery 'I offer you, as proxy for the ages, an apology from the city of Richmond.' ('Mayor Offers Pilgrims an Apology for Slavery', *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, 25 July 1998: B-1)

Clearly, the apology recognizes the role of whites in perpetuating slavery and Kaine acknowledges the guilt he feels for living in and leading a city with a central role in the history of slavery.

While the previous example shows white absolution through acknowledgement of and apology for racial oppression, another way whites may be absolved is by displacing blame from whites or enlarging the range of actors that can be blamed for white oppression of blacks. The best example of this perspective is in a movie review of the film *Andangaman*, made by an Ivory

Coast film-maker Roger Gnoan M'baa. The film shows the 17th-century slave trade as practiced by Africans and the reviewer claims African Americans could not have made such a film because it would damage their 'racial self-esteem'. The reviewer further claims that Americans have an unsophisticated view of racial oppression because they view it as

[P]rimarily an interracial affair with whites, as usual, holding all the cards and dealing injustice from a perch somewhere outside of history, far beyond the influence of a century's worth of slow, agonizing racial progress. This hoary cliché continues to resonate throughout our culture, even with folks who should be smart enough to reject the idea that their pigment determines their fate. ('Slavery Not Just a 17th Century Kind of Thing', *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 13 July 2001: C-1)

This passage provides several indications that whites need not feel guilt about racial oppression represented by slavery. First, the writer suggests that the construction of slavery as a black–white relationship with whites holding a monopoly on power is not completely accurate so whites need not shoulder all the blame for slavery. Second, the idea that 'racial progress' has been slow and agonizing because of white racism is couched as a cliché, thereby suggesting an opposite reading – that there has been adequate racial progress and whites have not resisted it. Third is the suggestion that whites need not feel guilty about white power and black oppression because it is not 'pigment' that determined this relationship: since Africans practiced slavery and collaborated with white slave traders to sell other Africans into servitude, whites need not feel guilt about it.

### ***Bounded empathy***

The third main narrative in news about racial oppression is bounded empathy for victims of racial oppression. Associated with the mainly implicit reference to white guilt were explicit expressions of empathy. However, there are clearly expressed limits to the empathy whites felt for the black victims of racial oppression.

A South African example of bounded empathy is the way in which the US press depicted the emergence of post-apartheid South Africa and its leaders. Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned for 27 years by the apartheid regime, is hailed in 1994 as the first democratically elected leader of the nation. However, the praise is tempered by criticism for his

[U]nbridled support for Cuban leader Fidel Castro, Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi and Palestinian Liberation Organization chief Yasser Arafat . . . Mandela says he won't criticize their human rights records because they've been strong backers of the anti-apartheid movement. ('Mandela Encouraged by Reception', *The Bergen (NJ) Record*, 25 June 1990: 4)

In another article, Mandela is also accused (without rebuttal) of 'throwing in his lot with killers' because he had never called for an end to violent opposition to racial oppression in South Africa. This article highlighted a letter from Boston University president Jon Westling, who chided Chelsea school superintendent Diana Lam for citing Mandela for his devotion to human rights ('Speaking for Himself', *The New York Times*, 25 February 1990, Section 4: 7).

In the United States, an example of bounded empathy was found in support expressed for flying the confederate flag over federal buildings in the South. In one column, a writer, while agreeing that slavery was 'indeed unfortunate and in no way could have, or ever should have, been morally justified', said that the confederate flag symbolizes 'honor, courage, valor and bravery' and not slavery because 'an overwhelming majority of antebellum white Southerners were not slave holders, nor wealthy landowners but poor dirt farmers struggling to exist in a backward, agrarian economy' ('Rebel Flag Symbol of Courage, Not Slavery', *Chatanooga Times*, 28 August 1999: B7). A second representative article begins by noting that many blacks in Mississippi compared the confederate flag to a 'badge of slavery'. Then, the article prominently quoted the Mississippi Assistant Attorney General who said, in defending the State's right to fly the flag, 'the flag has nothing to do with racial ill will or with discrimination . . . The design and display of the flag or other emblem by a public body does not constitute injury' ('Miss. High Court Joins Dispute Over Confederate Flag', *The Advocate* [Baton Rouge, LA], 28 July 1999: 7).

Both articles about the confederate flag acknowledge the potentially offensive symbolism of the flag. Yet both articles also reveal the bounds of empathy for those who oppose the flag on moral or political grounds. The first article suggests the flag should not be considered offensive because only a handful of whites owned slaves and the second article suggests the flag should not be linked to racism at all.

### ***Race and rationality***

In the construction of this narrative, whites and blacks were considered more or less rational depending on their orientation to racial oppression.

*White rationality:* White opponents of racial oppression were often framed as rational, reformed racists or heroic anti-racists. In one article, George Wallace, who once declared as governor of Alabama 'segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever', is praised for his denunciation of racism late in his life ('Wallace's Life Akin to South's Upheaval', *Albuquerque Journal*, 15 September 1998: A6). An article about political divisions among Afrikaaners in

post-apartheid South Africa reports that Wilhelm Verwoerd, grandson of the architect of apartheid, has joined the African National Congress and denounced his grandfather's policies ('Afrikaners Shed Image of Solidarity', *St Louis Post-Dispatch*, 17 October 1993: 4B).

*Black irrationality:* In contrast, blacks who explicitly point out racial oppression and act in ways that bring attention to their claim are often depicted as irrational. For example, the story of a black male on trial for assault who based his defense on 'cultural insanity' brought on by years of first-hand experience with white racism is treated as an interesting, unusual human interest story rather than an issue to be taken seriously ('Man Who Abandoned "Cultural Insanity" Defense Gets 13 Years', *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 27 July 2000: B-6). In the same vein is an article about Heidi Brooks, a black state legislator in Tennessee who refused to pledge the US flag. She claimed that the flag did not represent her history: 'When the flag was designed, they did not have black people in mind.' Rather than analyzing this claim seriously, the reporter highlighted the reaction of one of her colleagues, Jim Boyd, who said she was 'pandering to the lowest and most vile and traitorous elements of our society' ('Black Leader Refuses to Pledge Allegiance to the Flag', *The Washington Times*, 22 June 2001: A1).

*White irrationality:* In contrast to white anti-racists, whites engaging in clearly racist activities are signified as irrational actors. For example, an article about a Ku Klux Klan rally in Maryland depicted the marchers as a crazy, lunatic fringe of whites: '[They wore] long flowing capes, and masked hoods . . . dark jeans and black t-shirts, with bandanas covering their faces. "White Power!" they chanted along with racial epithets' ('Boardwalk Bigotry', *The Washington Post*, 6 September 1992: C5). The article also contrasted the Klan members to whites in the observing crowd who raised a cry against the marchers. A second article described the coach of a youth football team who used the confederate flag on the team helmets even though four black children played on the squad. When an opposing coach objected and took the matter to the league's board of directors, they were indifferent. The article ridiculed the coach and the board of directors for 'tolerating a symbol so historically divisive' and for not 'having a better grasp of history than the children they help organize' ('War Over Helmets', *The Times Picayune*, 22 September 2000: 6).

*Black rationality:* Black victims of racial oppression willing to absolve whites for their participation in racial oppression were depicted as rational actors. The Mandela as hero narrative, in fact, probably would not be possible in the US

press had he not forgiven his white oppressors and taken a politically moderate stance of reconciliation. By distancing himself from more radical solutions to social transformation in South Africa (such as expelling whites or appropriating their property), Mandela was depicted as rational actor *par excellence*. But even average black citizens could be rational actors in their willingness to absolve whites. For example, one article described how a black journalist in Colorado, Patricia Raybon, spent most of her life hating whites: 'I'd always worn this façade, this politeness, the smile. But I was just churning inside, angry about everything I knew about racial oppression.' The story then indicated that Raybon decided to 'remember, forgive, forget and love', 'follow a path of forgiveness and peace' and that she 'found liberation' by not hating whites. Though this article is framed as a health issue, the theme is clearly black repentance for hating those who oppress them ('Is Hatred Hazardous to Your Health?', *Daily News* [New York], 22 August 1996: 55).

Another variety of the rational black actor blames blacks themselves for racial oppression. A long book review summarized the argument made by black linguistics professor John H. McWorther in the following terms:

African American culture is infected with a variety of ideological ailments that are much more responsible than white racism for retarding black progress toward full and equal participation in American life. In [McWorther's] view, victimology, separatism and anti-intellectualism are particularly destructive. ('Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America', *Los Angeles Times*, 3 September 2000: 8)

According to the article, many political conservatives – both black and white – praise McWorther for identifying the retreat of racism and showing that realities of racial oppression 'are distorted by people who exaggerate its scope and mis-portray its motivations'.

Taken together, these articles dealing with the narrative of race and rationality suggest that when whites spot racism and engage in anti-racist actions, they are rational actors. But when blacks spot racism and call public attention to it, their actions are deemed irrational. Accompanying this discourse is one that claims that whites who engage in racist actions are irrational while blacks who forgive white racial oppression or claim that blacks bring oppression on themselves are rational.

## Discussion

As indicated in the section on racial formation, a certain level of discursive coherence emerges from the relationship between the representational choices made by racial projects and the subsequent narratives that flow from those



choices. In the case of US press coverage of racial oppression, journalists made several distinct choices for constructing the idea of racial oppression that led to the narrative themes of Mandela as hero, white guilt and absolution, bounded empathy and race and rationality.

One way the US press constructed racial oppression was as a literally black-and-white issue in which whites oppressed blacks. Framed in this way, the news focused on two places where most racial oppression apparently occurs: South Africa and the United States. In these places, the oppressed are explicitly identified as either black Africans or African Americans. However, the oppressors are less frequently named explicitly, even in the South African case, though it is clear from the context of the story that it is whites that are doing the oppressing. The explicit naming of the oppressed facilitates the white guilt narrative but at the same time, the absolution narrative is buttressed by the lack of attention to whites as oppressors.

This relatively straightforward construction was complicated by a pattern of representation in which blacks who explicitly pointed out racial oppression were depicted as irrational while whites who did the same were depicted as rational. Conversely, blacks who forgave racial oppression by whites were represented as rational (even heroic in the case of Mandela) while whites engaging in explicit acts of racism were shown as irrational. These complexities in the representation of blacks and whites were at the core of the race and rationality narrative.

A set of three other representational choices was related to the time, place and nature of racial oppression. First, grave situations of racial oppression occurring in the present were typically depicted as occurring outside the United States. Apartheid was the case in point and it was associated not only with a distant location but also with an authoritarian government. The narrative, therefore, was that contemporary blatant racial oppression does not occur in democracies such as the United States. Even post-apartheid South Africa is depicted as flawed because of its friendliness with world leaders that are not viewed favorably by the United States. This depiction fed in to a narrative of bounded empathy for South Africa and its leaders.

Second, explicit racial oppression was something that could happen in the United States but only in its past. The case in point was American slavery that existed in an imperfect and immature democracy. The narrative of white guilt acknowledged that slavery was an abomination and that reparations for the descendants of slaves was an issue that should be kept on the social agenda though not necessarily implemented.

Third, issues that the press deemed to be less serious examples of racial oppression – particularly the flying of the confederate flag over statehouses –

was something that could happen in the contemporary United States. The idea seemed to be that serious racial oppression happens in places outside of the United States or in the country's historical past. Contemporary racial oppression within the United States was limited to controversy over symbols that might offend blacks. Thus, bounded empathy would be an expected narrative direction from this portrayal.

## **Conclusion**

We recognize a number of limitations to this study. First, our sample of articles includes only those mentioning the term racial oppression in the headlines and first few paragraphs. Though this methodological choice yielded valuable initial insight about the journalistic construction of racial oppression, our numerical findings cannot be generalized to all articles using the phrase racial oppression during the time period examined. Second, the 12-year time period we examined included one of the most historically significant events of the 20th century, the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa. It is possible that this event prompted US newspapers to cover related issues in the US context and affected the ways newspapers covered race relations generally. Using a longer time frame may have diminished the frequency with which US newspapers discussed racial oppression and also changed the ways in which racial oppression was constructed and conveyed. Third, our interpretive findings are based on the events, issues and circumstances included in the journalistic construction of racial oppression in the sample of articles and may not hold in larger samples or different time frames. The validity of the results reported here is not affected, however. With these limitations in mind, we offer the following conclusions.

In terms of frequency of coverage, it could be easily argued that the concept of racial oppression is not a major focus in the US press. Six newspapers accounted for about 42 percent of all articles prominently using the term racial oppression. More important, however, are the narrow parameters within which the idea of racial oppression is conveyed to the reading public. Racial oppression, according to US press coverage over the time period examined, is constructed as something that occurs mainly in the past, involves blacks and whites, and takes place in South Africa or the United States. Racial oppression primarily involves apartheid, slavery and the confederate flag. The racially oppressed are identified as Africans and African Americans but the oppressors and why they oppress are often not named or discussed. The

obvious absences (in relative, not absolute, terms) in the US news construction of racial oppression include oppression of minorities other than blacks, oppression in the present, oppression in countries other than South Africa and the United States and oppression related to economics, education, and sports.

These absences amount to blind spots that plague the US press corps when it takes on the task of conveying an understanding of racial oppression. If journalism is the key source of information in the modern world – an argument made convincingly by Hartley (1996) and others – then one of the most disturbing consequences of the US press's overly narrow construction of what racial oppression involves is the potential undermining of a broad-based anti-racist movement. If racial oppression is understood as primarily involving blacks and whites, perhaps Asians, Latinos, Native Americans and Arab Americans will see no reason to be involved. If racial oppression is understood as occurring primarily in the past, its contemporary significance downplayed or ignored, people may feel little urgency to join anti-racist struggles. If racial oppression is presented in a fashion that ultimately absolves whites from examining white privilege and the role it plays in the exploitation and degradation of non-whites, they are not likely to see anti-racist struggles as meaningful for their own lives.

If US journalism is to become more relevant in the area of race relations news generally, typical journalistic practices must be transformed. Reporters must raise fundamental questions about power, social justice and culture. This effort requires journalists not only to actively interpret the 'facts' of racial oppression but also to make moral and ethical judgments about the nature of oppression of all kinds. Such an approach requires specific reporting strategies that move away from myopic definitions of news and how to cover it. Such an approach would emphasize processes rather than discrete events, dynamic explanations rather than static descriptions, bottom-up rather than top-down flow of information, a wide range of sources rather than just officials and experts, and an explicit commitment to progressive social change rather than professed neutrality (see Shah and Thornton, 2004). However, transformation of journalistic practice must be accompanied – perhaps cannot occur without – institutional change in the news industry and even broader change in the political economy of cultural production industries generally (see McChesney, 1999). Journalistic practices, regardless of how progressive or radical they may become, will always be carried out in contexts of organizational, institutional, economic, ideological and other constraints (see Hall et al., 1978; Shoemaker and Reese, 1991). Thus, any attempt to reform the journalistic practice of constructing racial oppression must involve media reform more generally.

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