

Warping the World

Media's Mangled Images of Race

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WHENEVER THE MEDIA cover events or develop new entertainment vehicles that involve race in any form—from O. J. Simpson to “Fresh Prince” to immigration policy to “The Joy Luck Club” to the Nation of Islam to South Central L.A.—something “happens” to their heads. Or, if it doesn’t, something should. In the case of such media offerings, which *must* involve race in an increasingly diverse America, the ante of audience perception rises and the keepers of the media gates—most of whom are from the white, male “mainstream”—tense up. Somewhere, however deep down, they know that many of their viewers, readers and listeners are not like them, neither white nor male, and see the world differently. And, at the opposite end of the media chain, minority audience members tense up as well when they turn on the television or pick up the newspaper, because they know the images and messages about themselves and their communities they will see and hear are shaped (and misshaped) by white people.

As this journal discusses and others fully document elsewhere, the norm in this country is that the perspectives of white, mainstream men generally create the lenses through which America—whether peripher-

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ally or directly—views race, and itself. Thus, there is good reason for many minorities—African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Native Americans and non-Caucasian ethnic immigrants who are not part of “mainstream” white America—to think their perspectives are at best warped by the media or, worse, not heard at all. In the year that saw a black man elected president of South Africa, there is irony in the fact that apartheid still rules the information age in America.

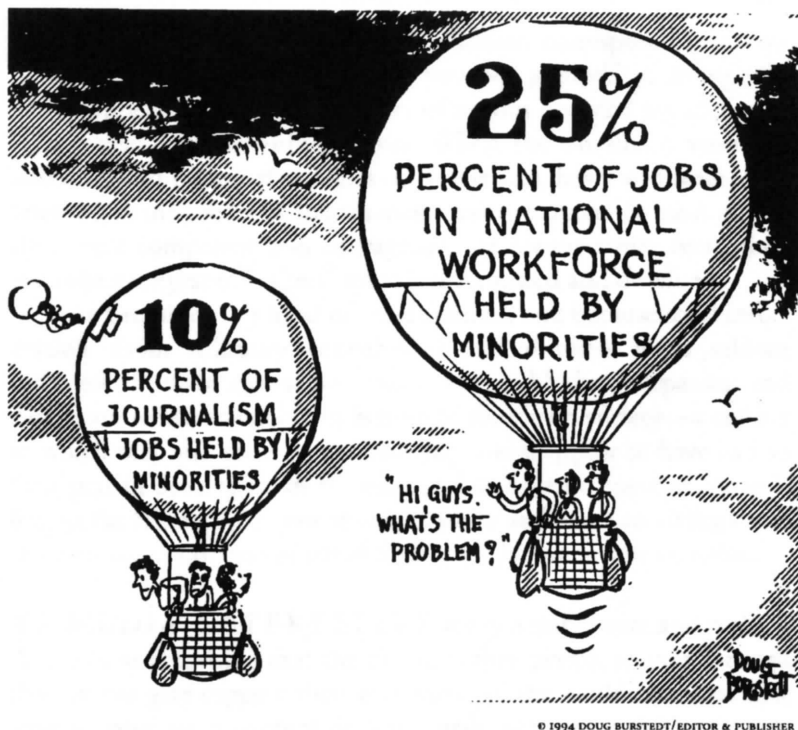
In a democratic society founded on the premise that an open flow of information is crucial if the populace is to make just, fair and informed decisions, such distortions and omissions in the totality of media content—from advertising to entertainment to news—can wreak havoc on the American population and on how well the media serve society’s represented and unrepresented alike. By definition, information whose sources are limited—whether by political outlook, economic status, education, gender, age or race—is of fatally limited value to a society founded upon diversity of opinion and informed decision-making. News of politics, the economy or social developments sheds a dim light for the larger society if it lacks an understanding of “other” groups, if it focuses on any segment to the exclusion of any others.

This is hardly a new idea, although it has been one difficult to effect. In 1947, the Hutchins Commission report on *A Free and Responsible Press* urged the news media to promote public discussions on important issues and to help ensure that all community elements have opportunities to express their views. The Hutchins report called for a “truthful, comprehensive and intelligent account of the day’s events in a context which gives them meaning,” and for the press to take care to provide society a representative picture of its constituent parts. The responsibility of a free and open media in a free and open society, the Commission said, was to provide the means for the members of that society to talk to each other. Twenty years later, little had changed. The Kerner Commission, established by President Lyndon B. Johnson after the civil disorders of the mid-1960s, severely criticized the nation’s media for failing to transmit information adequately about race relations and ghetto problems and urged the media to “bring more Black people into journalism” in order to make that possible.

Even today, more than four decades after Hutchins, it seems such a simple task, and remains such an elusive goal.

Part of the alienation from mainstream media found in South Central Los Angeles, Harlem, the South Side of Chicago and other racially and culturally bounded neighborhoods springs from a distrust learned of experience. People know that the system discourages people like them from sharing their perceptions of the day's events. They know that the world as it appears in mainstream news and entertainment in America is nearly always strained through the cultural filters that white decision-makers—however well-meaning—believe reflect “the” reality or “the” truth, and is absorbed by audiences that wear the same perceptual blinders. Interpretations of events that do not conform to the gatekeepers' worldview fade out as if they never existed. And society's “others,” who may see the world differently, are just as effectively filtered out of the media's version of “reality.” ABC's Ted Koppel, for example, conceded that his “Nightline” show visited South Africa for the first time in 1985 after years of lobbying by black ABC employees; that week's “Nightline,” anchored in South Africa by Kenneth R. Walker, an African American, became one of the most lauded news reports in the history of broadcast journalism. Meanwhile, however, on a day-to-day basis, most viewers of American TV news know black men only as criminals, and people of color as poor, desperate or dangerous. That is the media's warped reality of the world in the 1990s. “The offering pattern has African Americans disproportionately included in negative coverage—as prostitutes, drug dealers, welfare recipients, second-story men, unwed mothers,” observed *Newsday's* Les Payne. “It's a strange place, this black world the media project.”

WALTER LIPPMANN, recognizing the importance of cultural forces in society, once noted that “the subtlest and most pervasive of influences are those which create and maintain the repertory of stereotypes. We are told about the world before we see it. We imagine most things before we experience them. And those pre-conceptions, unless education has made us acutely aware, govern deeply the whole process of perception.”



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Perceptions, always dangerous and rarely true, cut in many directions. Perception of race, for instance, is rarely a true rudder. As we end the 20th century, young people (and older) are taught—largely through media repetitions of social myths, misconceptions, stupidity and outright bigotry—to view people as types locked into certain stereotypical, inalterable (and inaccurate) modes. Puerto Ricans are oily and drive Chevies with loud stereos. Black women are single mothers on welfare; black men are violent. Asians (any variety) are inscrutable (and good at math). Mexicans are in this country illegally and have large families to support. White men are successful, happy and drive BMWs. And so on. The media project images of each of these groups and others that create, reinforce and perpetuate popular “knowledge” of them that rarely is grounded in reality, “knowledge”

on which members of those groups themselves as well as others in society form judgments and act. It is a dangerous, divisive and wasteful world that the media create.

Those media, which as has been said operate from the perspective of a white man's world (especially television, but also newspapers and newsmagazines, films and books), have long taught audiences to fear black men. The poet Sterling Brown sees seven types of black characters in modern American media, and suggests that blacks are routinely viewed via media representations in classifications that range from those that will reassure a white audience—the "contented slave," the "comic buffoon" and even the "exotic primitive"—to those that confirm their worst fears—the "wretched freedman," the "tragic mulatto" and the "savage brute."

At the end of the 20th century in the United States, the problems of inner-city African Americans are exacerbated as impressionable young people absorb the pervasive and persuasive imagery of what society expects of them that is promoted in print, broadcast and other media. Imagine yourself a young black man of 16 named James. Or a woman named Janelle. You are a high school junior with an interest in, say, literature or maybe mathematics. You're thinking about college and a career in, say, engineering, maybe medicine. But when you watch TV, listen to the radio, read the newspaper, you can see yourself only in another, more limiting light. Via the media, most of the people you see who are like you resemble Brown's "savage brute," with all the pathological behavior that label implies. It is a vision of "reality" that is documented and reiterated daily both for you and people like you—as well as for people who aren't—in the news and entertainment media, in accounts of gang killings, drug busts, teen-age pregnancies, street-smart kids on the make, in newspapers, magazines, TV news and more. Or, perhaps you see people like you portrayed as Brown's "comic buffoon," as blacks so often appear in movies or TV sitcoms, the main vehicles by which the dominant culture defines African Americans in prime time. Almost never would you see yourself in either news or entertainment in a role that falls between the extremes of brute and clown—Mike Tyson and Fox TV's "Martin." Neither would you be likely to see yourself in

positions of responsibility—as news anchors, correspondents, commentators or producers. Nor will you see yourself in thoughtful entertainment formats where issues of serious concern are addressed in a realistic and meaningful way. When the dominant voices of authority and respect that James or Janelle sees, hears and reads, represented in the media as the smartest, most resourceful, most attractive, most competent and courageous, are always white men, then even the strongest of “others” must feel dismissed and devalued.

As a result of this kind of acculturation, and because solid information about minority contributors and thinkers is so seldom included in their education, many young blacks, Hispanics and Asians are rendered unable to believe in their own society—a culture in which they and their closest contemporaries appear to have had so little part in developing in the past, and so little prospect of controlling in the future. And, just as tragic, white audiences receiving those same messages can't see much of a place for James or Janelle, either.

IF MEDIA GATEKEEPERS are generally white and male, it is not so surprising that the messages they permit to pass through their media gate support their own views of the world, nor that that view is based on a concept of white male supremacy that they, too, have been taught. It is also not surprising that these gatekeepers are not as likely to let pass alternative views—of James/Janelle, say, of an African-American or Latino experience and the perspectives that inform their worldviews. The result may be white supremacist images in the mass media that become interwoven in the fabric of popular culture, images that are instrumental in molding public opinion, influencing discussions about racial differences, and influencing action.

Because they reflect and transmit society's predominant values and ideology, mass media images help to define the collective experience, shape social consciousness, and serve to legitimate current conditions. In America, the negative images of African Americans and other minorities that evolve in society in general and in the media in particular are images most people accept as authentic. These images have negative consequences both in terms of those groups' own self-image and white perspectives of them.

Some African Americans, along with the white decision-makers who control the media industries, are making money—and a lot of it—in a widespread use of television and motion pictures that defines black people in ways that are more destructive than any ever seen. What we see in the media of the 1990s are modern-era minstrel shows (sitcoms), movie thrillers, rap music and music videos that celebrate misogyny and violence, and that communicate parodied images of black men, shucking and jiving con artists who joke about pathological behaviors and criminality, while playing the role of black “bucks” to a white America. In the end, such images and attitudes diminish black and white Americans alike.