White Viewers, Black Media, and Disciplinary Boundaries

Timothy Havens


Too often, those of us who study race and media tend to ignore “whiteness” and white viewers as categories of analysis. *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America*, by Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, is an important, recent exception to this tendency. The book offers illuminating, sometimes disturbing, insights into dominant racial attitudes among white Americans and the roles that visual media might play in exacerbating those attitudes.

Despite their extensive, often creative, content analyses of film and television programming, the authors fall well short of their stated goal of bringing both social scientific and cultural studies methodologies to bear on the phenomena they study. Although they do employ qualitative methods throughout the study, these methods are wielded with little theoretical context, and only add flesh to an otherwise quantitative skeleton. Instead, this book is at its best when it sticks closely to issues associated with television news and public opinion research, which is perhaps why fully five of the eight chapters of content analysis focus on news portrayals. This shortcoming does not diminish the importance of their general findings, but it does undermine the book’s overriding conclusion that we need a national oversight board for race and media issues composed of scholars, government regulators, citizens groups, and industry representatives. If media scholars committed to racial justice cannot make the effort to communicate across disciplinary boundaries, what makes us
think that people with various politics outside the academy would be interested in trying to overcome their differences?

_The Black Image in the White Mind_ contains two main sections. In the first, the authors report findings from surveys and interviews conducted with white Americans from Indianapolis regarding their opinions about African Americans. The authors conducted a telephone survey of 241 white respondents that tapped opinions about the persistence of racialized economic barriers in the U.S. and the perceived capacity of African Americans to prosper in the present political-economic environment. In order to get at the root of respondents’ opinions, and to overcome the distortions of social desirability associated with questions about race, the survey was followed up by in-depth, structured interviews with twenty-five of the original 241 respondents.

The results of these inquiries are disconcerting, if not especially surprising. White Americans seem to hold a variety of opinions about African Americans and affirmative action, ranging from racism through animosity and ambivalence to “comity,” a term that the authors use to describe the ideal state of race relations and the underlying goals of their research. Few white respondents exhibited outright racism, defined as the belief that “Blacks (rare exceptions aside) share such homogeneously negative characteristics that they must be an inferior rank of human being” (17-18), but few exhibited a large degree of comity either. Instead, most fell in the ambivalence or animosity ranges of the scale.

In this section, we are also introduced to the model of media and society that frames the rest of the book. The authors rely on anthropologist Mary Douglas’s theory that all societies have in-groups, marked by purity and inclusion, out-groups marked by pollution and exclusion, and liminal groups that fall somewhere between the two. Because of changes in U.S. society since the Civil Rights era, they argue, most white Americans no longer view African Americans as a polluted out-group, but rather as liminal. Hence, the large number of ambivalent white respondents. According to the authors, mediated images of African Americans can play an important role in “tipping” these ambivalent white viewers toward comity or animosity.

In the second section of the book, Entman and Rojecki report extensive content analyses of local and national television news, prime-time network
television, national television advertising, and blockbuster films in order to assess the degree to which they facilitate or frustrate racial comity. Chapters 4 through 8 offer content analyses of local television news and national network news, including the kinds of roles and kinds of stories that tend to feature African Americans, as well as television’s treatment of stories about violence, poverty, affirmative action, and African American leaders. These analyses go beyond simple documentation of the aggregate number of African Americans in various stories to explore the organizational and economic roots of specific representational practices and their potential social dysfunctions. For instance, reports about poverty in the national news predominantly portrayed groups of poor African Americans absent any structural discussion of poverty, possibly contributing to the conclusion that poverty is inexplicable. Meanwhile, the presence of African American reporters suggests that structural barriers to economic achievement have been removed, thereby reinforcing the ideology that poor African Americans remain poor because of choice or lack of ability.

Regarding affirmative action, the authors argue that the issue was largely a construction of the national news media, whereas opinion polling showed relatively consistent white support for the policy from 1965 through 1995. The news media’s reliance on conflict as a news value led the national network news and national newsmagazines to frame debates about affirmative action as a zero-sum political game between African American advocates and white opponents of affirmative action. Indeed, findings suggest that local and national television news reports consistently portray African American leaders as narrowly focused on racially-specific political concerns, while white leaders address a much broader range of issues. Such differences, the authors argue, unsettle white viewers and encourage them to view African American leaders with animosity. In an especially compelling analysis of Jesse Jackson and Louis Farrakhan, the authors demonstrate how the national news media elevated an image of the two leaders embracing to the level of an icon through excessive repetition, effectively developing a powerful visual shorthand that linked Jackson with racial divisiveness through his embracing of Farrakhan.

The authors are careful not to lay the blame for encouraging animosity in white viewers at the feet of journalists, fingering instead professional practices, competition for viewers, and reliance on elite sources. Increased competition
for viewers in a multi-channel universe has led television journalists to focus ever more exclusively on conflict as a news value, which leads to an abundance of stories about crime and poverty and a concentration on divisive political issues, rather than reconciliatory or non-controversial ones. In addition, the tendency to rely on elite sources whose political futures often depend on their ability to pit “us” against “them” exacerbates reporting on racially divisive issues. The suggested remedy for this situation is quite imaginative, if somewhat unrealistic. The authors argue that journalistic commitment to objective visuals and reporting should be discarded in favor of what they call “cognitive objectivity” when it comes to racial issues. That is, journalists should stop the flow of the news in order to interject critical analyses of their own news reporting strategies and remind viewers that images such as violent African American criminals cannot be generalized to all African Americans.

In the remainder of the book, the authors train their analytic gaze on entertainment and commercial media. In analyzing two months’ worth of the top-rated prime-time entertainment programming in white households, they focus on the level of intimacy in white-black character interactions. They argue that such interactions serve as a barometer of race relations at the same time that they instruct viewers in proper and improper inter-racial interactions. Contrary to earlier content analyses of African Americans, the authors find that African Americans are over-represented in professional positions of responsibility and authority, often outranking their white counterparts at work. However, because inter-racial interactions occur primarily in the workplace between characters who do not share the same status, they are rarely shown as intimate, friendly relationships. Instead, black-white interactions tend to be formalized in an occupational hierarchy, further encouraging distance between the races.

Television advertising fares about the same as prime-time programming. While the authors find that most overt African American stereotypes have disappeared, significant differences between African American and white actors persist. African Americans appear more frequently in commercials for less expensive items, while luxury items predominantly feature white actors. Significantly, whites actors are shown in physical contact with one another (touching, hugging, kissing) three times more frequently than African Americans. However, on a more positive note, when the authors turned their
attention to advertising on Black Entertainment Television, these differences disappeared.

Finally, the authors tackle African American portrayals in the Hollywood blockbuster film, a medium that few content analysts have shown an interest in. This chapter is the most methodologically innovative in the book, combining narrative analysis with content analyses of films and film reviews, but it is also the most deeply flawed. Based on the top grossing films of 1996 that featured mixed-race casts, their analyses demonstrate that African American characters and concerns are marginalized in the films’ narratives and stereotyped in their characterization, and that the films are overloaded with close-ups on white actors and actresses. To gauge the level of societal awareness of this racial double-standard at the movies, the authors investigate whether film reviewers address them in their columns, reasoning that “[i]f the people who look at movies for a living either fail to notice [racial stereotypes], or find [them] unworthy of comment, we can hardly expect the average White viewer to notice them” (188). Not surprisingly, they find little mention of race in reviews. This analysis of film reviews fails to consider that reviewers are an integral part of the organization of Hollywood film industries, not a privileged class of cultural observers whose analytic skills exceed those of the common citizen (Hirsch). In addition, the qualitative film analyses in the chapter baldly ignore decades of film research and theory, presenting instead un-theorized and largely generic narrative analyses.

Despite the rather dismal record that their research depicts across the visual media, the authors remain hopeful about the future of African American portrayals and their ability to facilitate racial comity, not least because the increasing globalization of the film and television industries will require major producers to expand their lily-white casts. Unfortunately, like most of the discussion of the culture industries in the book, this optimism is based on a rather sketchy understanding of media economics. My own work and the work of Herman Gray, Kristal Brent Zook, and Karen Ross demonstrates that globalization has had the opposite effect of strangling racial diversity in prime-time programming, as the networks target lucrative white viewers at home and abroad more and more aggressively. This trend shows little sign of abating in the foreseeable future.
Likewise, the authors’ willingness to let journalists off the hook and blame unfair treatment of African Americans on “professional codes” smacks of naïveté and under-investigated professional contexts. In lieu of any original research into decision-making processes in television newsrooms, the authors rely on well-known theories of “newsworthiness” in order to describe the relationship between professional codes and representational practices, whereas such a dynamic process surely requires more nuanced analysis of journalistic practices. Such analysis would need to include, among other things, the kind of careful investigation of journalists’ views of race that were employed in the Indianapolis study.

Entman’s and Rojecki’s failure to critique the industries of media information and entertainment highlight their lack of attention to critical research in their research design, hypotheses, and conclusions, despite regular claims that they incorporate critical theory and occasional reference to critical scholars. True, they do utilize Mary Douglas’s theories of social purity and pollution, but such important critical theorists of race and media as bell hooks, Stuart Hall, Herman Gray, John Fiske, and George Lipsitz barely get mentioned, their ideas briefly touched upon, then forgotten. Indeed, in a cursory examination of the book’s footnotes, I counted only thirty-five of 423 (eight percent) that included references to critical scholars besides Mary Douglas, and these often included a single critical scholar in a list of social scientists.

Despite these shortcomings, critical scholars will discover some interesting findings throughout the book. In particular, the observations that prime-time African American portrayals have experienced a “utopian reversal” compared to previous decades, that physical intimacy between African Americans is uncommon in advertising, and that violent African American criminals receive three times as much screen-time as their white counterparts seem to be of interest. However, it is disheartening, at least for this reader, that the authors’ claim to have written a book that can speak to both media effects and critical researchers interested in issues of race remains unfulfilled.

Timothy Havens is assistant professor of communication and the humanities at Old Dominion University.
Works Cited


Caught in the highly flexible and contingent context of digital networks, piracy allows for the probing of norms and boundaries, questioning the logics that define intellectual property laws, broadening the uses and perceptions of authored production and enabling new forms of technology usage surpassing corporate control. Jeff Ravel in Media and Transition, and Ian Condry and Nick Montfort in Media Theory and Methods II were also fantastic guides, and I am grateful for all your advice. Sarah Wolozin and Kurt Fendt have been wonderfully supportive (and understanding!) lab directors. It's been a true pleasure to work with you both over the past two years. Viewers, week after week, and building brand recognition—contributed to the ascendance of long-form serials on American television. While 1950s television was populated by a rich variety of non-serial formats, such as anthology, sports, and variety programs, many of which were broadcast live, more serials began to appear at the end of the decade and particularly in the 1960s as a greater number of programs were produced as pretaped shows, or "telefilms."