

News Representation of Race and Ethnicity: An Examination of Local News Broadcasting

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Class Project: Data collected by students 2005-2006 in the class “Electronic Media & Culture”

Abstract:

With the development of media technologies, it is easy to access national and international news through a variety of sources. While the viewing rating of network nightly news seems declining, local television news programming has increased its appeal to the public (Gallop Poll, December 2006). Based on media cultural study theories and textual analysis, this is a class research project analyzing the representation of race and ethnicity by local news programs. The results show that racial and ethnic people are underrepresented in terms of the visibility of ethnic journalists. Although the news coverage of minority people is higher than the percentage of minority people in the community, the presentation of the minorities was more likely negative. The connotative meaning delivered by the local television news seems that the minority population was not an important part of the community, and that the residence of those people might threaten the security of local community. This study will be beneficial for the Electronic Media pedagogical consideration.

With the rapid development of media technologies, various information resources have become available to American households. However, television news still is the most convenient way, in terms of cost and accessibility, to inform the public what is happening in the world and how your community is doing. While the viewing rating of network nightly news seems declining, local television news has increased its appeal to the public (Gallop Poll, December 2006). Many network affiliated television stations have been creating new community related programs in addition to network and syndicated programs. Yet, it remains a question about how local news programs cover ethnic people’s lives in their designated market area (DMA). This study aims to explore media representations of race and ethnicity by analyzing the content of local television news programs.

Three local generated news programs are examined in this study: two local television stations (one is NBC affiliate, and the other is ABC affiliate) and a university student’s weekly news for a video production class. According to the census data

(<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/19/19013.html>) and the university’s fact book

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(<http://www.uni.edu/pubrel/05-06uni-factbook.pdf>), the racial and ethnic compositions are listed in Table 1 for two counties, one university, and the state where these counties and the university are located. The ethnic persons living in these areas are ranged from about 8 to 13 percent.

Table 1: Race and Ethnicity

Location & Year Race & Ethnicity	County 1 (2005)	County 2 (2005)	University (2006)	State (2005)
White	89.6%	93.7%	90.2%	94.9%
Black/African American	7.8%	3.0%	3.4%	2.3%
American Indian and Alaska Native	0.2%	0.2%	0.2%	0.3%
Asian American	1.2%	1.6%	3.4%	1.4%
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander	0.1%	0.1%	NA	0.0%
Persons reporting two or more races	1.2%	1.5%	NA	0.9%
Persons of Hispanic or Latino origin	2.5%	1.6%	1.5%	3.7%
White persons not Hispanic, percent, 2006	87.3%	92.3%	NA	91.5%
International			3.5%	
Total Ethnic	12.7%	7.7%	9.8%	8.5%

Reference sources: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/19/19013.html>;
<http://www.uni.edu/pubrel/05-06uni-factbook.pdf>

Whether race and ethnicity issues are reported on the news depends on the news worthy judgment of reporters and producers. How to present those issues and what social meaning encoded in the news stories reflects each reporter's personal background, experience and understanding of racial and ethnic relationships in the culture and society, and more directly, the corporate/organizational culture of the news station he/she serves. However, as an Electronic Media education institution, it is important to help students become sensitive to those issues and enthusiastic to learn and understand racial and ethnic relationships, which will prepare them for better meeting the challenges from the ever changing media industries.

This study is a class research project. Students are assigned to watch the news programs of local TV stations. Although these two television stations are located in a same designated market area, their immediate communities are different. Based on the concept of Semiotics, the analysis is focused on the coverage of race and ethnicity by the news programs, and the portrayal

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of racial and ethnic people in the news stories. Finally, the discussion will articulate the news programs to the cultural, social, and production contexts at the local communities. This study will be beneficial for the Electronic Media pedagogical consideration.

Literature Review

In this section, the theories of mass media cultural studies and the findings of existing research on this topic provide a framework for the analysis. Finally, the research questions are generated to guide this study.

Cultural Studies: Signs, Codes, and Representation

Semiotics is developed to study how signs and symbols are used to address meanings of human communication (Berger, 2005; Fiske & Hartley, 2003a). The main concepts of semiotics are described by Seiter (1992) as follows,

Semiotics is the study of everything that can be used for communication: words, images, traffic signs, flowers, music, medical symptoms, and much more.

Semiotics studies the way such 'signs' communicate and the rules that govern their use ...Semiotic first asks how meaning is created, rather than what the meaning is. (p. 31)

Communication process is the process of sign production, and is related to culture. Seiter writes, "All signs are cultural constructs that have taken on meaning through repeated, learned, collective use" (p. 34). Therefore, "The convention of the sign system controls the way we are able to communicate (that is, produce signifiers) and limits the range of meaning available (that is, what kinds of signified can be produced)" (p. 35). Seiter (1992) further introduces the concepts of paradigm and syntagm in the process of constructing meanings in media production, "A syntagm is an ordering of signs, a rule-governed combination of signs in a determined sequence....A paradigm is a group of signs so similar that they may be substituted for one another in a syntagm" (p. 46).

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Barthes (1957) also articulates semiotics to cultural contexts, emphasizing denotation and connotation of meanings. Seiter (1992) explains “In image, denotation is the first level of signification: the signifier is the image itself and the signified is the idea or concept-what it is a picture of” (p. 39). Connotation is the second-order signifying system that links signs to broader cultural themes, concepts or meanings (Barthes, 1957; Berger, 2005; Fiske & Hartley, 2003b; Hall, 1997; Seiter, 1992). Connotation requires decoding the meaning of a signifier by linking it to wider cultural concepts.

Hall (1997) claims that the communication process is the procedure of sign production that reproduces cultural content. He claims that in this process we use representational system (concepts and signs) to construct meanings. Hall (1997) explains the function of language system in human communication. He defines the relationship between the material world and the symbolic practices and processes.

It is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others. (p. 25)

Constructivism emphasizes the signifying process of signs, i.e., the coding system that depends on “two different but related systems of representation” (Hall, 1997, p.28). They are: (a) a system of mental representation, which forms concepts in human minds; and (b) a language that consists of signs organized into various relationships (p. 28). More importantly, these codes do not exist in nature, but are socially created and conventionalized through human communication. Hall (1997) points out that the codes, thus, “become a crucial part of our culture – our shared ‘maps of meaning’ – which we learn and unconsciously internalized as we become members of our culture” (p. 29).

Television Realism and Ritual Condensation

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Television news programming seems telling the facts about what happened, or are happening, in the world around you or far away from you. As Fiske and Hartley (2003d) point out, “Television realism, then, following the pattern of language at large, ‘naturalizes’ the way in which we apprehend the world out-there” (p.129). Television uses a conventional way to present reality so that people cannot distinguish convention from reality, nor did mediated “reality” from reality. Further, Fiske and Hartley (2003c) apply the concept “ritual condensation” to the process of television production. Ritual condensation is “the projection of abstract ideas into material form” (p.68). In television news production, ritual condensation means that the abstract ideas of news directors and reporters about the event, issues, and relationships in a community, nation, or world, are projected into news stories. These abstract ideas are related to conventions, dominant ideologies, and controlled by institutional units, such as “the army, the government, the Department of Health, local authorities, [and] trade unions”(p.69).

The Portrayal of Racial and Ethnic People on Television News

Local news viewing. With the development of media technologies, it is easy to access national and international news through a variety of sources, such as network television, radio, cable, satellite, newspaper, magazine, and the Internet. Among those news outlets, according to the data found by the annual Gallup Poll conducted during December 11-14, 2006, (<http://www.galluppoll.com/content/default.aspx?ci=1663>, retrieved 4/9/07), the local television news program is ranked the number one. Although the poll shows that about 44% of the respondents read daily local newspapers in their areas, about 55% of the respondents watch local news programs. While the viewing rating of network nightly news seems declining (35%), local television news has increased its appeal to the public.

Minority journalists. It remains a question about how local news programs cover ethnic people’s lives in their area. Poindexter, Smith, and Heider (2003) conducted a content analysis to examine race and ethnicity in local television news stories. The sample includes 596 news stories from an archive collecting 12 years newscasts of 26 stations in 12 cities. Their findings indicate, “Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans were virtually invisible as anchors, reporters, and subjects in the news,” and were rarely interviewed as news sources (p.524). In some markets,

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although African American were seen as anchors and reporters as well as interviewees, their assignments were more likely focused on Black related issues.

Minority roles on TV news. Based on their analysis of TV network news, Dixon, Azocar and Casa (2003) reveal that Whites were more likely than Blacks to appear as perpetrators, victims, and officers. African American and White law-breakers were represented in a way consistent with their perpetration rates. Both African Americans and White people were more likely to appear as perpetrators than as victims and officers. However, Whites were over-represented while African Americans were underrepresented as victims of violent crime. Moreover, Whites were over-represented and African Americans were underrepresented as police officers. Rada and Wulfemeyer (2005) present the research on the stereotypically negative describing of African American football and basketball players as persons by announcers. This study shows that many announcers still underestimate the mental abilities of Black players and continue to craft the negative image of African American athletes. They are portrayed as “physical specimens using their God-given, natural ability, whereas White athletes are hard working and intellectually endowed” (p.80).

The impact of news representation of minorities. In addition to the lack of representation of minority on television news programs, Mastro and Kopacz (2006) conducted two surveys of 275 White college students to study the causal relationship between media exposure, stereotype, and policy reasoning. Their findings support the hypothesis, “as televised representations of African Americans and Latinos deviated from White (in-group) normative portrayals, negatively stereotypic evaluations of these groups increased” (p.318). Also, the result shows, “the greater the difference between racial and ethnic portrayals and White depictions, the more unfavorable the evaluations of minorities in U.S. society” (p.319). Thus, “media exposure has a predictable impact on race-based policy preferences” (p.319).

Fujioka (2005) presents the survey of 202 African –American respondents to show the relationships between public perceptions of Black and the portrayal of Black images on media. The study shows that negative Black images on media predict lower public perceptions of Blacks. Media are an undeniable contributor to the societal racial environment. This study also shows that African Americans are trying to protect their identity from possible harm. Black respondents claim that the news media presents them usually in two polar ways – good (which is really rare)

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and bad (which is more common). However, the negative media portrayals of African Americans are not influencing their in-group identity or policy endorsement of affirmative actions because they negate the media presentation of Blacks.

Summary. Based on the theoretical concepts of cultural studies, the present project employs textual analysis to examine the cultural representation of race and ethnicity in news programs (Berger, 2003). The textual elements include the signs, symbols, and editing techniques used in news programs, and the attentions are paid to those related to the presence and absence of, and portrayals of, racial and ethnic groups. The meanings are interpreted by relating the signs to the cultural contexts within which the news programs are produced. The main research questions are:

1. Do local television news programs cover stories about racial and ethnic groups?
2. How do those local television news programs cover stories about racial and ethnic groups?

Research Method: Textual Analysis

Textual Analysis

According to Semiotics, text is defined broadly. All the media products can be seen as texts, such as paintings, television news and shows, music, movies, radio shows, video games, and sports. Textual analysis is a qualitative approach to analyzing media content. It does not solely analyze the frequencies of sign occurrences. Instead, more importantly, it examines the signs that are chosen (paradigm) and assembled (syntagm) in the media product, and interprets the meanings of those signs by articulating them with the contexts in which they are chosen and assembled in certain way (Real, 1996). Since most of existing studies employed quantitative content analysis, the present study in textual analysis would benefit the understanding of local television news by adding in-depth and complement information to previous findings.

Selection of Media Texts

Newcomb and Hirsch (2000) find the importance of Raymond Williams's suggestion that emphasizes to examine strips of television programming as the "flow" of media text. By analyzing these flow strips, we may find the opposing ideas next to each other, and the same ideas being treated differently, through which we would get an overall view of the cultural forum initiated by television that invites public's participation in the discussion of various social issues (Newcomb & Hirsch, 2000). They recommend media researchers "taping entire weeks of

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television content, and tracing various potential strips of that week” (p. 568). In this way, they claim, “we might track the history of America’s social discussions of the past three decades by examining the multiple rhetoric of television during that period” (p.568).

Based on Raymond Williams’s suggestion, the present study pays attention to the content and audio/visual presentations of news stories covered by 5pm news programming from two local television stations, and by the weekly news of college student production. The 5pm news program is selected for the data collection because it is focused on general news without sports component, and is broadcasting just before the network nightly news programs.

Data Collections

During the fall semester of 2006, each student in a class was assigned to videotape a local station’s weekday 30-minute news program for three days according to an assigned schedule from late August to early December 2006. In the spring semester of 2007, each student in another class was assigned to watch three days’ news programs of another local television station, recorded on videotapes from late January to early April 2007. Each student filled out data sheets for the assigned three-day news, including the categories of news (such as economic, murder, robbery, education, election), the race/ethnicity/gender/age of the main character in the story, time, location, a brief description of the story, and the demographic information about the reporter and anchor. The data of weekly news produced by students in the fall 2006 were analyzed as well.

Data Analysis

As a textual analysis, the data are analyzed qualitatively by finding the patterns and themes in the news coverage and content presentation. However, it does not exclude numbers, such as percentages, and also pays attention to the validity of data collection. The instructor/researcher checks the data sheets filled out by students and corrects errors by re-viewing the relevant tapes. The data sheets not only provide the information about the proportion of the reporting related to race and ethnicity but also serve as a guide for this study to further investigate the presentation of a news story in terms of paradigm (the selection of camera shots, narratives, and oppositions and conflicts) and syntagm (the editing structure of video shots and audio). The meanings are interpreted by taking into account of the culture and community in the local area.

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Data Analysis

Two local television stations in a Midwest State were selected for the analysis. One is affiliated to NBC and the other to ABC. The structure of the 5pm news is a combination of headline news (in the nation, the state, and local communities), the health up-date information, weather forecasts, and commercial breaks. Since agriculture plays an important role in this area's economy, weather forecasts take a big portion in the newscast, counting about 6-8 minutes totally during the 30-minute news program. There are three commercial breaks, counting about 8 to 10 minutes. The commercials are mixed together with the station promos and continuities, and the previews of the station's major shows and the network nightly news. Therefore, only about 12-15 minutes are contributed to news. The rundown of the 5pm news is usually sequenced from headlines, weather brief, news segment one, weather plus, commercial break one, news segment two, commercial break two, health update, network news preview, 6pm local news preview, weather brief, commercial break three. Then, the network nightly news starts.

RQ1: Do local television news programs cover stories about racial and ethnic groups?

Table 2: Race and Ethnicity Coverage in Local News

Stories	NBC Affiliate			ABC Affiliate			University weekly news		
		N	P		N	P		N	P
Total	558			609			153		
Identified	144 (100%)			163 (100%)			121 (100%)		
Ethnic	31 (21.5%) (100%)	21 (67.7%)	10 (32.3%)	18 (11%) (100%)	12 (66.7%)	6 (33.3%)	29 (24%) (100%)	0	29 (100%)
White	113 (78.5%) (100%)	53 (46.9%)	60 (53.1%)	145 (89%) (100%)	20 (13.8%)	125 (86.2%)	92 (78%) (100%)	1 (1%)	91 (99%)

N: negatively reported, such as murder, crime, robbery, etc.

P: regular life activities, such as politics, accident, election, education, etc.

In the NBC affiliated television station, only the sports anchor is African American and no minority reporter seen on screen, referring to the pictures shown below. In the ABC affiliate, there was one Asian American reporter/anchor but she left. Now, there is no minority anchor or reporter.

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Media Employment

Coverage of Minority Stories

There were 558 news stories collected from a 5pm news program of the NBC affiliate that covers the eastern area of the State. Among those stories about 144 stories were identified with a main character in the story. The main character was marked with ethnic affiliation, such as White, African American, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American. Among the 144 news stories, about 113 stories in which Whites were the main figures while 31 (21.5%) were about ethnic people: 22 African Americans, 7 Hispanics, one Native Americans, and one from Iraqi. There were no Asian Americans featured in those stories. Of the 31 stories with minorities, there were 21 (67.7%) related to murder, robbery, crime, court hearing or lawsuits (as negative images). Among the White people news items, there were 53 (46.9%) stories related to murder, robbery, crime, court hearing or lawsuits.

The station's DMA (Designated Market Area) ranked at 88 with 331,480 TV households according to Nielsen Media Research Local Universe Estimates in the 2005-2006 television season (<http://www.nielsenmedia.com/DMA.html>). Although in the urban area where the NBC affiliate was located there were 13.1 percent African American population in the community and

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7.8 percent in the county, in its DMA the African American population was only 2.3 percent. Therefore, according to the data the coverage (22%) of racial and ethnic groups seems higher than the percentage of the minority population in the county (12.7%) where the station was located.

The other local television station is affiliated to ABC. Among the 609 news stories collected, about 163 had identified characters in the stories. Only 18 news stories (11%) portrayed minorities. Although the coverage was higher than the percentage of minorities in the population (7.7%), it was less than that (22%) in the NBC affiliate. Of those, 14 were African Americans, three Hispanics, and one Arabic origin. Of the 18 minority stories, there were 6 stories (33.3%) covering politicians' activities, such as Condaleeza Rice, Barak Obama, and Alberto Gonzales while about 66.7 percent of the stories were related to murder, robbery, and other criminal activities. The white people's images were shown in 145 stories, counting as 89%. Among those 145 stories, about 20 (13.8%) were negatively presented.

Student Production



Student News Team

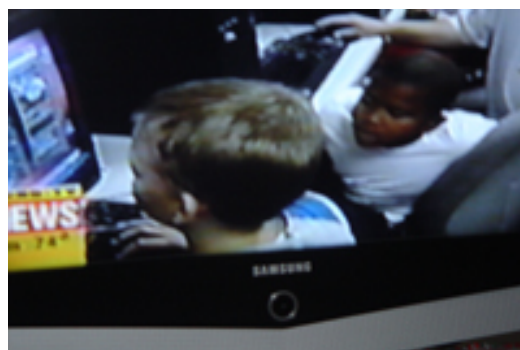
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By comparison with the local television stations, the university video production class seemed in a better shape. Among 17 students, there were 4 minority students, one African American, and three Hispanics, referring to the pictures shown above. Those minority students brought the cultural diversity into the class and news production.

According to the university weekly news, there were 153 stories, of which 121 were identified with main characters in the story. Among the 121 news stories, there were 29 stories (24%) featured with minority people and activities on campus or in the community. There were 7 stories particularly about African American, 10 stories equally presenting African Americans and White Americans, three Hispanics, and one about gay story. There were 3 stories for international students, and 4 presenting minorities in general. The coverage (24%) was higher than the percentage of the minority population (9.8%) at the university, and no story was related to crime. This figure, 24%, was also higher than the two local stations, NBC affiliate 22% and ABC affiliate 11% respectively.

RQ2: How do local television news programs cover stories about racial and ethnic groups?

To answer this question, the researcher looked into the presentation of the stories that were featured on minority characters. Overall, the video images in the majority stories reported by the local stations only showed white people, while a few minorities were seen usually in a group setting, such as the picture shown below.



Group Setting

Biased Content Presentation: More Negative than Positive

Among the 31 ethnic related stories reported by the NBC affiliate, only 10 were about regular daily life activities. For example, one showed a young African American female wanted

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to get the Dermo-Acne treatment to keep smooth skin, referring to the picture below on the right. Another was a feature about the newly recruited football player, Alvin Bowen, at a state university. The third was a story about a young man's survival from the Katrina disaster. The fourth one was in an interracial family and how they teach their child to be a fan of a sports team. The father was a retired African American football player and the mother was White. The parents used a "Baby Hawkeye DVD" to teach their children to be Hawkeye fans, referring to the pictures shown below on the left.



Parents Use Baby Hawkeye DVD



Skin Beauty Treatment

The video shots selection (paradigm) and editing (syntagm) in the news implicitly delivered the meaning to viewers. For example, one story was about African American Senator, Barack Obama, coming to support Democrat's Election Campaign. However, this scene was very short with a still picture of senator Obama, lasting about 5 seconds. The following story was featured on Laura Bush, coming to support Republican candidate, which was reported very well. The rest of the stories, counting for 67.7%, were all categorized in murder, robbery, accident, crime, or lawsuit. The main character was usually shown in a still picture, and Anchor's narrative was about who, when, where, and what, referring to the pictures shown below. This kind of video presentation was also applied to white criminals.



Murder Trial

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Among the 76 stories featured White characters, about 26 were crime and murder, or sexual abuse related, counting for 34 percent. The content in other white character featured stories was ranged from education, economy, decision-making, sports, event, world, etc.

Skewed Content Presentation: More Social Issues than Life Stories

On the ABC affiliate, there were only 6 stories presenting minorities' regular life activities. Among the 6 stories, there were four about the politicians, such as Condaleeza Rice (referring to the picture shown below), Barak Obama, and Alberto Gonzales. Only the other two were related to regular people. For example, one talked about the Representative, Dave Loeb sack, visited the local African American Museum. The other was about teaching Arabic language in High school.



Condaleeza Rice Spoke in Middle East

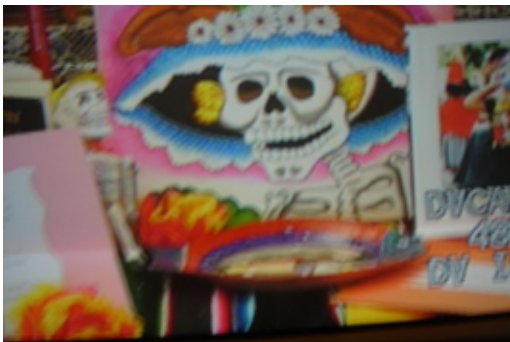
Negligence of Important Events in Minority lives

Moreover, there was no coverage at all for the Black History Month in February (during the data collection period) by the ABC affiliate, and for the Hispanic Heritage Month in September (during the data collection period) by the NBC affiliate. The absence of sign is more meaningful to show that they did not care minorities. However, the researcher noticed that the NBC affiliate, which is located in the community where 13 percent of residents were African Americans, created a weekly series to celebrate the Black History Month in February 2007. Since it was not in the data collection period for this station, these stories were not included in the data set of the NBC affiliate. Nonetheless, it indicated that this station was aware of the impact of African Americans in the community but ignored other minorities, such as Hispanic population.

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Student Production

The university weekly news covered cultural diversity week events, and different ethnic activities, such as Hispanic's holiday, "Day of the Dead," Aztec Dance, African American boys' class. When reporting general news stories, the interview was often conducted with both white and ethnic students, referring to the pictures shown below. However, those stories were usually covered by ethnic student reporters.



Day of the Dead



Aztec Dance



African American Boy's Class

Discussion

As Hall (1997) points out, the coding system does not exist in nature, but are socially created and conventionalized through human communication. He writes, "It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others" (p. 25). The news data analysis demonstrates a pattern of news presentation in the local television station. Although the coverage of minorities was more than

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the percentage of the minority population, the presentation of minority was seriously skewed. First, the results were consistent with the findings in the study of Poindexter, Smith, and Heider (2003), regarding the composition of television news team. The TV anchors and reporters usually were Whites, and minorities were “virtually invisible as anchors, reporters” (p.254). Moreover, similar to the results found by Dixon, Azocar and Casa (2003), this study indicates that African Americans were underrepresented as victims of violent crime. However, the results does not support the findings of Dixon, Azocar and Casa (2003) about “Whites were more likely than Blacks to appear as perpetrators.” Instead, this study finds that African American and other minorities were more likely than Whites as perpetrators, i.e., (68% vs. 47%, NBC affiliate; 68% vs. 14%, ABC affiliate).

In addition, this study looks into the content beyond the perpetrator, victim, and officer issue, and pays attention to other aspects reported by television news. The results show that the presentation of the minorities was biased, more likely negative than positive. Other aspects of those people’s life were underrepresented on television news. Even the stations ignored important events in minority lives, such as the Black History Month in February, and the Hispanic Heritage Month in September. The connotative meaning delivered by the local television news seems that the minority population was not an important part of the community, and that the residence of those people might threaten the security of local community. As indicated in the study of Mastro and Kopacz (2006), the under-representation of, and stereotypical view toward, minorities may distort public’s perceptions of minorities, and affect the decision-making process regarding political and social policies.

Conclusion

This study examines the local news program’s coverage and portrayal of race and ethnicity. The findings show that the news coverage of minorities is actually higher than the percentage of the minority population in the area. However, the representation of minorities in the news stories is more likely negative. Although the head quarters of those two local television stations are located in the counties with 8 to 13 percent minority populations, the news worthy judgment seems more oriented by American dominant ideology but lack of multiculturalism consideration.

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Since it is a class project and students participate in the data collection process, this study would help students learn research process and write research papers. The results would remind students the problem with news production. News production and broadcasting is not a mirror that reflects social reality. Instead, it is a ritual condensation process that reflects the perceptions of news producers and directors about the reality. The reality news programs present to public is created and interpreted by news teams, so it is not the same as the reality in the real world. On the other hand, there are weaknesses in the data collection because of the participation of many students. There is inconsistency in the data collection. In addition, the data collection dates were different for the three news programs although there were no major business differences between the two local stations. Nonetheless, as an exploratory study, the results seem meaningful. In future studies, with an improved data collection procedure, the data analysis can be expanded to including gender issues.

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