HISTORICAL MEDIA ANALYSIS

Oppression and Resistance

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Historians and other scholars widely acknowledge that the media has helped to create dialogue and shift attitudes surrounding race in the US. Some even suggest that the powerful effects of American media coverage of racial issues have contributed to and even caused ethnic and racial hatred, injustice, and violence. Even so, there is also a powerful social change component when considering the scholarship that has examined media history, race, and ethnicity. Instead of, and sometimes in addition to, looking at how minorities have been portrayed in the white press, scholars have researched media organizations that helped to inspire and propel social movements and consequent social change. The story of how these opposing forces used the same tool—the mass media—is essential to our understanding of our broader history and the important influence of both the media and minorities in defining our society. The media history scholarship reflects both sides of the story—the story of racism in the mainstream white media and the story of empowerment in the alternative minority media. In this chapter, through an examination of the scholarship surrounding the history of media and race, we discover many perspectives that help to explain how some white American media organizations have oppressed minority groups and how these same groups have employed the media to advance their causes and positions in society.

Naturally, the media have provided ample material for these scholarly perspectives, as racism has been a constant in American media history. Certainly, our earliest newspapers attacked Native Americans, referring to them as beasts and savages in need of religious reform or eradication. Over the years, as our history unfolded and new groups of immigrants entered the country, the media publicly disparaged, undervalued, and dismissed each group. But with time, these groups formed their own newspapers and communication strategies (and later broadcast outlets) that would serve and strengthen their own communities. In fact, much recent media history focuses on the hard-working and talented minority leaders who launched newspapers and other media organizations. These media outlets provided minority groups with a sense of self and purpose while serving as a source of social advancement as they raised awareness and helped to change attitudes and behaviors. The argument that the media has contributed to both positive and negative attitudes regarding race is widely accepted. As historian Jane Rhodes explained in
her 1993 analysis, “This struggle between the transmission of racist ideology . . . and the efforts of oppressed groups to claim control over their own image, is part of the legacy of the American mass media” (185).

Though scholars are still interested in exploring how the mainstream press covered minorities and minority issues, as mentioned, much of today’s scholarship tends to address minority media organizations and leaders, particularly black organizations and leaders. In recent years, however, historians have expanded the body of literature to include research addressing Native Americans, Asian Americans (generally during WWII and in the American West), and Mexicans. This scholarship, however, is limited. Several books, generally edited volumes, contain broad-based summaries of many ethnic publications and stories of their leaders (see, for example, Miller 1987; Ireland 1990; Rhodes 2010; Hutton and Reed 1995). Though these books don’t provide in-depth analysis, they do offer tremendous perspective regarding the significance of the ethnic press as well as providing researchers with context for many media outlets, including publications that were printed in foreign languages.

An important example of a broad-based historical approach to media and minorities is News for All the People, by Juan González and Joseph Torres (2012), who present a review of mainstream press components while chronicling a number of minority news organizations. They describe how mainstream newspapers and radio/television stations “played a pivotal role in perpetuating racist views among the general population” (2). More importantly, the authors present illuminating stories of dedicated African-American, Native American, Latino, and Asian journalists who challenged the existing narrative and worked to replace it with new narratives for their respective audiences. They describe how the press knowingly “misled the public and inflamed racial bias . . . [while also creating a] deeply flawed national narrative” that described Europeans as overcoming “an array of backward and violent non-white people” (2–3). Gonzales and Torres explain how members of the minority press “waged heroic battles with their papers and over the airwaves to tell a different story—to assure fair and accurate news accounts of their communities” (12).

Historians began examining the black press as early as the 1890s, but these efforts were few and infrequent until the late 1900s. The topic of race and the media received significantly more attention beginning in the 1960s, but still could not be viewed as attracting widespread interest among historians. The next major wave of articles on minority media emerged in the 1980s. Over the following two decades, the topic of media and minorities would become the most popular topic in American Journalism and Journalism History, the pre-eminent media history journals. The initial focus was on newspapers and magazines, but contributors eventually published articles on minority images in advertising, film, broadcasting, and public relations. According to Jean Folkerts (1991), studies of minorities and women that started to appear in general history periodicals in the late 1980s reflected changing enrollment patterns and curriculums in journalism schools as well as the job market. She specifically notes two media history texts published in 1989: her own (written with Dwight Teeter), Voices of a Nation: A History of Media in the United States, and David Sloan’s edited collection, The Media in America. She describes these books (which are widely used and have numerous editions) as deliberate attempts to include minorities and a broad range of media enterprises.

Despite the expansion of research into other media-related professions, the scholarship is still limited when looking at minorities in expanded professional areas. At least four researchers have examined the important role of public relations in advancing black causes
such as the 1920s Black Nationalist Movement, the 1920 NAACP Conference, and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement (Cutlip 1994; Hon 1997; Mislan 2013; Murphree 2006; Straughan 2004). Conversely, at least two others—Cutlip (1994) and Walton (2009)—have examined how public relations was used to advance the causes of racist organizations such as the White Citizens Councils in Mississippi and the Ku Klux Klan.

Analyzing stereotypes and content is a common method in studies of advertisements, especially pre-1960s images (Kern-Foxworth 1994). Leslie (1995) compares occurrences of light- and dark-skinned models, and Zinkhan et al. (1990) looks at the number of blacks appearing in mainstream advertisements. Similar patterns can be seen in research on minorities in films. For example, Donald Bogle (1996) describes five character types for blacks between 1900 and the 1990s: toms (servile), coons (cowardly), mulattoes (tragic, mixed-race), mammies (dark-skinned, motherly), and bucks (oversexed and violent men who desire white women). The authors in Daniel Bernardi’s (1996) edited volume discuss representations of Native Americans, African Americans, and Eskimos in films produced as early as the silent era. They show how non-white men were generally depicted as weak, unlikeable, andemasculated.

One important exception to the stereotype identification approach to media research is a two-volume series written by Thomas Cripps (1993, 1999). While he does address stereotypes, he also provides broader cultural analyses. His first book focuses on how WWII helped liberalize the United States, thus giving blacks more opportunities to appear in films and eventually to portray less stereotypical characters. The second volume focuses on the period between the end of the war and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.

Cedric Robinson’s 2007 book examines depictions of race in American theater and film before WWII. Taking an economic approach, he suggests that capitalism helped to maintain black stereotypes on both stage and screen. Other researchers have analyzed stereotypes from a censorship perspective—for example, Douglas Smith’s (2002) examination of the state of Virginia’s use of censorship to sustain racial separation. He describes how the efforts of filmmakers from all parts of the country to present positive images of African Americans failed in Virginia due to the state’s power to control what was shown on movie screens.

Similar to public relations, radio and television broadcasting has been used as an important organizational and entertainment tool in black communities; however, very few efforts have been made to address this topic from a historical perspective. One important example, however, is Barbara Dianne Savage’s 1999 book, *Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1939–1949*, which discusses how African Americans influenced national radio network content during WWII. Savage notes that the federal government produced many black-oriented programs that encouraged racial tolerance. Deborah Heitner’s *Black Power TV* (2013) chronicles the emergence of black public affairs television beginning in the late 1960s, and shows how both national and local shows provided venues for black expression and the dissemination of black culture.

As is generally the case when examining broader American historiographies, earlier efforts to analyze race and journalism tended to be biographical or focused on organizational history. As the topic of media and race attracted more research attention, perspectives expanded to include examinations of media coverage of specific events and theoretical analyses. James Carey’s 1974 (reprinted in 1985) article “The Problem of Journalism History” criticizes media historians for focusing too much on two narrow themes: “The expansion of individual rights . . . [and the] growth of the public’s right to know” (Carey 1985: 51). He instead calls for “an emphasis on cultural history” (51) or “historical
consciousness” (52) with a focus on the minority press and the general topic of race and media—especially in the defining cultural context of the Civil Rights Movement.

Arguably the most important theoretical approach among media historians today is collective or public memory analysis. In the 1990s, scholars began to embrace this method, which is typically used to understand how the media influences or defines public memory of historical events, based on the assumption that the media prescribes our understanding of the past, at times encouraging false belief systems. Janice Hume (2010), a prominent collective memory historian, asserts that the press plays a historical role “in building American collective consciousness and memory” (187) simply because it reaches so many people, and therefore exerts significant impacts that far exceed those of textbooks and museums. Public memory scholar Carolyn Kitch (2005) notes that minority media organizations were often charged with “telling the truth and challenging truth at the same time” (107). She observes that black magazines “invoke memory so that past successes and outrages are not forgotten . . . [and] also create ‘new’ memory . . . asking readers to use the past in order to question the politics of the present” (108). Kitch also notes that the black press provided a platform for blacks to construct a new identity, with black magazines acknowledging the essential role of the past in influencing the present, since “history is a living presence [in black American] lives” (92). To support her assertion that black magazines have helped to redefine memory by documenting the past from a black perspective, she devotes a chapter to race coverage in *Ebony* (the country’s oldest consumer-oriented black magazine) and *American Legacy* (a magazine founded in 1995 with a focus on black history). According to Kitch, “These magazines reveal how African Americans have used journalism as one means by which to become a part of the official American historical narrative while also challenging and changing that narrative through ‘counter-memory’” (107). Another example of public memory analysis is Romano and Raiford’s *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (2006), in which they analyze how media portrayals of the Civil Rights Movement distorted collective memory by overlooking efforts outside the South, and by failing to look in depth at any leaders other than the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

While these kinds of theoretical analyses have become increasingly common over the past two decades, most historians writing on both broad and specific media topics continue to use traditional historiographic methods for evidence collection, interpretation, and investigation. Certain narratives have increasingly emphasized cultural approaches that focus on how environments influence the media. These cultural histories often reflect progressive perspectives of how minority media organizations and leaders have supported and advanced minority causes and helped to break down long-standing obstacles to civil rights and first-class citizenship. Media historians have also tended to interweave biographical and developmental perspectives into their scholarly efforts, with developmental historians emphasizing professional changes and advancements. Other media and minority historians use an economic perspective to explain finances as a defining factor in minority media history.

**Media History and African Americans**

By far the most frequently examined minority group in historical media analysis is African Americans, with the earliest scholarship published in 1891, but with the vast majority of studies published since 1990. African-American-related media history is currently at or near the top of the list of topics of papers published in *American Journalism* and *Journalism*...
History. In the specific area of the black press (as opposed to the topic of depictions of blacks in the mainstream media), the majority of studies examine the media profession from a black perspective. In her 1991 analysis, historian Bernell Tripp observes that the black press is frequently analyzed in terms of “evolutionary stages” of black people using the media to advance their “cultural and moral outlook” and to “communicate the shortcomings of American society” (173). She notes that after WWII, historians began to look at the black press in the contexts of “political protest and social and cultural reform. . . . These historians pictured the Black media as having succeeded only after confronting a particularly hostile White press and American society” (176–7). According to Tripp, until the late 1980s historians relied on two fundamental approaches to analyzing the black press as an instrument of change: “minimizing the struggles” and “emphasizing obstacles” (173).

Such positive recognition is a central component of a large number of biographies of major figures in the black press, including Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Ida B. Wells, P. B. Young, and W. E. B. DuBois (as well as several lesser-known regional media professionals). Since these biographical books and articles frequently serve as secondary sources for studies of more narrow topics, they can be viewed as foundational for historical research on race and media. Biographical sketches of lesser-known individuals, especially women media pioneers, have been published as collections. For example, Jinx Broussard’s 2004 volume, *Giving a Voice to the Voiceless*, examines the lives of four black women journalists, while Roger Streitmatter’s 1994 collection, *Raising Her Voice: African-American Women Journalists Who Changed History*, looks at the contributions of 11 black women journalists from 1831 through the early 1990s. Three years earlier he published an article on the career of Ethel Payne, a Washington correspondent for the *Chicago Defender* and later a CBS radio and television national correspondent and commentator (Streitmatter 1991). James McGrath Morris’s 2015 biography of Payne provides an in-depth analysis of her career and influence.

Comprehensive descriptions of black periodicals are found in several books published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is likely that the first scholarship addressing the black press was Garland Penn’s *The Afro American Press and Its Editors*, which appeared in 1891 and presents profiles of editors and their newspapers. In 1929, Charles S. Johnson published an article on “The Rise of the Negro Magazine,” in which he describes what he perceived as a shift in those periodicals from promoting unity to providing needed information. More recently, the topic of early black magazines (1838–1909) is also the focus of a 1981 book written by Penelope Bullock. Armistead S. Pride’s 1968 book contains an updated list and description of black newspapers and magazines published at that time, but offers little in the way of analysis. Significantly more detailed analysis in terms of fighting racism, maintaining economic viability, and building community can be found in Roland Wolseley’s 1971 book, *The Black Press, USA*. In 1997 Clint Wilson II published a comprehensive study of black newspapers from 1827 through the 1990s, *Black Journalists in Paradox: Historical Perspectives and Current Dilemmas*. The book also contains discussions of black-owned or oriented magazines, trade journals, radio and television stations, and advertising. Three books and a journal article published in the early 1990s by Domke (1994), Hutton (1993), Tripp (1992), and Wilson (1991) describe the development of selected black newspapers and the economic, political, and social conditions that supported black alternative publications. These texts represent a new trend in analyzing black periodicals as community builders, political tools, and instructional platforms.
One of the earliest analyses of a specific periodical was written by Bella Gross in 1932. Her subject was the first black-owned and black-operated newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, which appeared in 1827 and lasted for two years. According to Gross, it bore “the stamp of high seriousness and moral earnestness” (247), and she credits the publisher with giving power and prestige to blacks and stimulating racial pride. Other scholars, including Barrow (1977), Burrowes (2001), and Nordin (1977), have written detailed analyses of the *Journal*; Jacqueline Bacon’s 2006 book is the most comprehensive.

One of the most important publications in African-American history is the *Chicago Defender*, a weekly newspaper founded in 1905 that was published daily from 1956 until 2003, when it once again became a weekly. Published in Chicago, it was considered the best national source of African-American news. Arguably it is most famous for advocating the migration of blacks from the South to other parts of the country. In his 2006 book on the black press, Patrick Washburn devotes a significant portion to the role that the *Pittsburg Courier* and *Chicago Defender* played during the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. Other detailed analyses of the *Defender* include Thornton’s (2014) work on editorial positions and their relationship to opinions expressed in letters to the editor, Cooper’s (2014) discussion of Rebecca Stiles Taylor’s women’s column (published from 1939 to 1945), Kornweibel’s (1994) review of government suppression of the paper during WWI, and Desantis’s (1997) and Grossman’s (1985) article on the *Defender*’s advocacy of the Great Migration.

Some researchers have emphasized economic factors in their analyses of the black press. In his study of the *Atlanta World*, another important black paper with a national audience, Leonard Ray Teel (1989) concludes that William Alexander Scott, the founding editor, put finances first and social concerns second. Other authors have given examples indicating that finances were paramount for most black publishers, and for good reason—without adequate capital, they could not use their forums to promote black causes and black culture. Publishers and editors of black newspapers with the largest circulations gathered much of their own news, but also relied heavily on black and white-owned wire services. The Associated Negro Press (ANP), a wire service founded in 1919 by Claude Barnet that focused specifically on black-oriented news, is the topic of a book written by Lawrence Hogan (1984). The ANP appears to have been a successful enterprise—it lasted for 24 years—but Hogan suggests that Barnett sold out to political interests, giving up objectivity in return for financial support.

America’s participation in two world wars presented black editors and publishers with a unique challenge: how to continue advancing the interests of black citizens regarding topics such as lynching, segregation, and disenfranchisement while expressing patriotic support and advocating global democracy. William Jordan (2001) looks at these dilemmas from the perspective of WWI, but most other scholars focus on WWII. Snorgrass (1984) and Ross (1993) look at censorship and the relationship between Franklin D. Roosevelt and black newspaper editors.

The largest black-owned newspapers based in Chicago and east coast cities have received the most research attention, but there are examples of scholars discussing the significance of smaller periodicals operating in other parts of the United States. The authors in Henry Sugg’s 1996 edited volume look at black newspapers in Iowa, Kansas, and Minnesota. Kimberly Mangun has published three studies of two Pacific Northwest newspapers, *The Advocate* and *New Age* (2006, 2008, 2009).

In her examination of black frontier editors in Oklahoma, Mary Cronin (2002) describes how they moved between protest and accommodation when responding to
late nineteenth and early twentieth-century civil rights issues. Her focus in an earlier study was on black editors and their support for black westward migration from 1891 to 1915 (Cronin 2000). According to her findings, the editors emphasized the themes of “self-help, group solidarity, and race pride, along with the promise of a safe haven, as promotional devices to attract and keep settlers” (81).

The large body of work addressing the black press and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement can be divided into two categories: the ways that the black press addressed the movement, and the methods used by black advocacy organizations to manipulate or convince local and national media to advance their causes. Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff (2007) examine both white and black press coverage of the Civil Rights Movement from 1944 to 1968. Their primary focus is on the mainstream national media, but they also provide a survey of regional newspapers and some individual black reporters. David Davies’ 2001 collection of articles looks at white Mississippi editors and identifies those who supported and those who fought against civil rights for black Americans.

Sports stories have long played a central role in black media and civil rights coverage. Again, there are many studies comparing stories on black sports figures published in white and black publications, especially on individuals involved in integration efforts. Brian Carroll (2007, 2006, 2011), a media history scholar whose primary focus is on baseball, has written on the ways that black newspapers addressed relationships among the sport, community pride, and sponsorship; on Jackie Robinson’s column that appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the public relations strategy behind it; on media themes associated with the integration of major league baseball; and on the history of the Negro leagues from their inception to the 1940s. In his book on black and white left-leaning sportswriters and baseball desegregation in the 1930s and 1940s, Chris Lamb (2012) describes how sportswriters worked for over 10 years to pave the way for Jackie Robinson’s 1945 signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers organization.

**Media History and Other Minority Groups**

The literature on media histories associated with Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans is fairly limited. In each case, research can again be divided into studies of how each group has been covered and described in the mainstream press over time, and portrayals of individual press leaders and their publications.

Two themes emerge when looking at the literature on Hispanic publications: immigration and labor. Articles on each topic show how the Hispanic press played a significant role in legitimizing the Hispanic-American experience and validating Hispanic-American contributions. As with other minority publications, the Hispanic press strove to eliminate negative stereotypes and replace them with positive images. Victoria Goff’s 1995 book chapter presents a general overview of Spanish-language newspapers in terms of discrimination, politics, society, assimilation, the arts, and other themes. Felix Gutierrez’s 1977 article for *Journalism History* summarizes the work of Hispanic publishers and their products in the American Southwest. Herminio Rios and Guadalupe Castillo made an important contribution in the form of a bibliography published in two parts (1970 and 1972), in which they identify 372 Mexican-American newspapers that operated between 1848 and 1942. Similarities are noted between portrayals of Mexicans and Native Americans in the mainstream press during the last century. Fuhlhaige (2013, 2014) provides detailed examples of Mexicans being described as low class, uncultured, and unable or unwilling to improve themselves. Conversely, European Spaniards were generally portrayed as intelligent and exotic.
A significant number of studies on media history involving Asian Americans concentrate on coverage during WWII, especially the treatment of Japanese Americans, who were held in detention camps for the duration of the war. Based on his review of articles published in mimeographed newsletters produced by Japanese living in two of the 16 WWII internment camps, Takeya Mizuno (2003) shows how editorial control, government censorship, and other breaches of First Amendment rights were part of America’s mass incarceration policy. In her analysis of magazine photographs of Japanese Americans interned during WWII, Dolores Flamiano (2010) suggests that the main purpose of the images was to convince other Americans that the internment camps were necessary. She also discusses how the images projected ideas about race, gender, and citizenship. Thomas Heuterman’s 1995 article looks at local newspaper coverage of Japanese Americans living in the Yakima Valley of Washington State during the 1920s and 1930s. While he concludes that the main Yakima newspaper actually provided objective coverage of many Japanese activities, its editors failed to address the issue of hostility aimed at Japanese immigrants during times of economic difficulty.

Regarding media coverage of Chinese immigrants in the nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, Herman B. Chiu (1999) examined stories published in four Oregon newspapers during the 1870s and 1980s, and found a surprising lack of stories on Chinese immigrants, despite their large numbers in gold mining and as railroad laborers. He notes that when Chinese people were mentioned in news stories, they were almost always vilified. Andrew Kirk’s 2007 article discusses how Mormon and non-Mormon journalists in Ogden, Utah covered a local boycott of vegetables grown by Chinese farmers in 1865. While he notes the strong current of racism in newspaper coverage, he also emphasizes the strong discouragement of violence against Chinese that was expressed in newspaper editorials, as well as the slow acceptance of Chinese workers in local press coverage over time.

Other researchers have looked at the large topic of Asian stereotypes in films and television programs. One example is Jane Naomi’s 2011 book comparing real-life and fictional “oriental monk” characters shown in television programs produced between 1950 and 1975. She asserts that television screenwriters and producers hijacked Asian religion to create patently false images that have determined to a great extent what Americans know and understand about Asian culture.

Scholarship on the media history of Native Americans also tends to address either stereotypes or Native American-owned publishing businesses. General themes that emerge include debate over “good” versus “bad” Indians; the likelihood that most Americans get their ideas about Native Americans from television; and the focus on tribal sovereignty in the Native American press (see, for example, Loew and Mella 2005; Murphy and Murphy 1981). The general conclusion is that tribal journalists have been instrumental in bringing more freedom, rights, and resources to Native Americans.

Studies of Native American coverage in the mainstream press give many examples of predispositions held during various periods in American history. In his examination of portrayals of Native Americans in newspapers from 1820 through 1890, John Coward (1999) describes how clichés and stereotypes were based on journalists’ beliefs in the simplicity of Native American culture and experiences. Coward suggests that these stereotypes, which are still observable today, were less about overt biases or racism than a confluence of social and professional pressures and norms during a period when Americans were consumed by the socio-cultural concept of manifest destiny, which combined elements of Protestantism and capitalism with the rush for westward expansion. He identifies other
factors as standardized news-gathering and dissemination processes (e.g., wire services) and the rise of “adventure journalists” who created images of Native Americans. Mary Ann Weston (1996) examines stereotypes in news coverage involving Native Americans between 1920 and 1990, and argues that journalists were incapable of fully understanding the Native American experience because it was far too complex for them to deal with in their deadline-driven work environments. Last, Adare (2005), Fitzgerald (2014), Kilpatrick (1999), Raheja (2010), and Tahamahkera (2014) have all researched Native American stereotypes in film and television productions.

The Future of Historical Media Analysis of Race

Media history scholars have employed a broad range of approaches to address questions regarding social change, the dominant power structure, community building, and racism. Their efforts allow for a better understanding of the significance of media in race relations, as well as the pivotal role that media have played in the communities of America’s ethnic groups. Their studies of marginalized people are significant in terms of the history of all Americans, a history that is often defined by the media. For the most part, the media history literature underscores how minority media outlets have served as a supportive force for change in all of society, not just for minority groups, while at the same time reminding us of America’s record of denying minority groups media access. Clearly there are many gaps that need to be filled, especially in the media histories of minority groups other than African Americans. Researchers are discovering that each group operated scores of newspapers at any given time, establishing them within a surprisingly short time frame following their emigration to North America. Twentieth-century media histories need to include more broadcasting, publishing houses, and advertising and public relations agencies. Finally, there is still a great deal of research to be done regarding coverage by the mainstream press of less prominent armed conflicts and civil rights movements.

References


Further Reading/Viewing


Riggs, M. (director, co-producer) (1992) *Color Adjustment*. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. (An extraordinary documentary that examines the history of African-American representations on prime-time television; director Marlon Riggs makes extensive use of archival footage and interviews many of the important cultural studies scholars, including sociologist Herman Gray, whose work has framed scholarship on race and media.)

Romano, R. and Raiford, L. (2006) *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia. (Explores how the media and other institutions have influenced memory of the Civil Rights Movement.)