

'Lotten Amellican!'

Taking on the powerful in the US media

IN MANY WAYS, racism in US media operates much like racism in any other institution or industry – entrenched, often unexamined, attitudes and practices marginalise people of colour and exclude them from positions of power. Media content reflects this imbalance, with minorities and our perspectives largely missing or misrepresented. But racism, or more precisely white supremacy, in US media is also reinforced by the decisive, but rarely discussed, corporate commercial nature of the US media system – a system that privileges consumers over citizens and private profit over public interest.

Fighting for Fairness



Racism is institutionalised in the American media, argues **Janine Jackson**, by the under-representation of people of colour in US newsrooms, by top-down reporting which favours those in power and by the commercialisation of news. It's time to demand major, structural changes in the US media industry...

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

A 1987 Boston study (summarised in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, 5-6/87) showed what many already knew: white-owned media tend to view communities of colour through a lens of pathology, with African Americans disproportionately linked to stories of crime, violence or purported social dysfunction (eg, drug use, 'unwed motherhood'). Indeed, mainstream television journalists, themselves overwhelmingly white, acknowledge that they routinely illustrate stories about crime rates or welfare dependency

including the declaration on TV's "Meet the Press" by eminent *Washington Post* reporter David Broder that "the Chinese are not nice people". Several newspapers ran a cartoon by Pat Oliphant, depicting a buck-toothed, slant-eyed waiter, spilling a bowl of "cat gizzard noodles" on Uncle Sam, then demanding, "Apologise, Lotten Amellican!"

Critics also note media double standards on race. Reporters seem more likely to call public demonstrations by African Americans 'riots', for example, while rallies, even violent ones, involving mainly white people rarely earn that label. Criminal suspects who are black or Hispanic are identified by race more often than white suspects. Black leaders, like Jesse Jackson, are frequently called on by media to account for the actions or statements of other blacks, in a kind of 'one standing for all' rule that is not applied to white community leaders. And while it is frankly impossible to imagine mainstream media devoting weeks and weeks of respectful, legitimising coverage to a book that argued that white people are genetically inferior to non-whites, this was precisely the US media's response to *The Bell Curve*, a pseudo-scientific treatise that claimed the reverse.

Such things seem nearly subtle alongside radio hosts like New York's Bob Grant, who regularly refers on-air to blacks as "savages" and "subhumanoids", and has described Haitian immigrants as "like maggots on a hot day". The West Coast has Los Angeles' "Mark & Brian Show" which ran a promotional campaign on the theme of "black hoes" (meant to invoke the term "black whore") in which the station gave out black garden implements to listeners and advertisers.

Lest one believe that such scurrilousness exists on the US media fringe, until it was cancelled in the wake of an activist campaign, Bob Grant's show aired on the ABC radio network's flagship New York City station. The 'black hoe' hosts work for none other than the Walt Disney Company, which – in the wake of lawsuits and complaints brought on by that campaign – did not fire the hosts, but promoted them.

journalists may strive for accuracy and balance, 'objectivity' *per se* is not really possible in newsgathering. Media decisions rely on judgments made by human beings – judgments about what stories are newsworthy, which sources are credible, what language is acceptable. It matters very much, then, that US media remains, particularly at the top, overwhelmingly white – and male.

The most recent survey by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found that the percentage of journalists of colour actually declined – to 11.6% – in 2000; fully 44% of daily newspapers have no people of colour in decision-making roles.

Other media aren't much better: Latinos, blacks, Asian Americans and Native Americans make up just seven percent of writers for primetime network TV, according to one survey, while filling about 16% of on-air parts on primetime shows. And the higher you go, the fewer people of colour you find: there are only a handful of minorities in media's corridors of power.

This behind-the-scenes under-representation is a key reason US media looks the way it does. But we must add to it a certain 'top-down' approach to journalism, endemic in the US press, which essentially defines 'news' as what the powerful say and do. Confronted with the dominance of their guest list by white males, for example, the producers of *Nightline* offered not apologies but an explanation: "We try to get the players, the people who really are the decision makers," said then-producer Richard Kaplan, "to hold their feet to the fire." Many journalists see no problem with this 'traditional' approach to newsgathering, even if means that whole sectors of society – those outside of power – are marginalised.

Compounding these biases is the fact that US media are overwhelmingly corporate-dominated and commercially driven. On one level, corporatisation has meant ever-escalating concentration in the media industry, such that the majority of the country's newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations are now controlled by a tiny handful of compa-

Clearly, media that will not speak of racism will not successfully challenge it. It is an open secret in US broadcasting that advertisers pay less

for programmes that garner non-white audiences, and that some sponsors refuse to place ads on such programmes at all.

'savages'

'subhumanoids'

'black hoes'

with a 'B-roll' of black and brown people, whether or not such images fit the facts of a particular story.

Such associations, of course, foment fears and stereotypes, resulting in misinformed public opinion and misdirected public policy.

The corollary to media's often negative framing of people of colour is that African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Native Americans only rarely appear in more positive contexts, as 'experts' or sources in news stories. A study of ABC's *Nightline*, for example, found that non-whites made up less than nine percent of the guests on that prestigious news programme.

Wars and international disputes frequently showcase media prejudice: the recent spy plane standoff between the US and China unleashed a spate of racist commentary,

There is no shortage of examples of racist media, big and little, overt and indirect.

Crucially, however, there is virtually no sustained media discussion of racism itself. The word itself is abjured, even in contexts in which it is perfectly appropriate, like coverage of anti-discrimination programmes and policies. A 1998 study of major news outlets' coverage of affirmative action policies found that just 15% of stories made *any reference at all* to inequity or bias (past or present) against people of colour (or women). The result is to make racism seem like a 'perception' or a 'claim' made by people of colour, rather than observable fact.

Clearly, media that will not speak of racism will not successfully challenge it.

HOW IT GETS THAT WAY

It has long been recognised that while

Historically excluded, minority owners have a difficult time squeezing into such a consolidated field.

Commercialism also means, simply enough, that the driving force in US media is not the audience, as is generally believed, but the advertisers. Commercial media producers do not want just to reach the largest possible audience, but the particular audience their sponsors want to 'target' – and those are generally well-off and white.

These facts are not so much denied by media executives as they are excused as being 'just business' with their anti-democratic implications denied. But for anyone interested in media diversity, the results are devastating. For example, it is an open secret in US broadcasting that advertisers pay less for pro-

to page 57 ►

A Toast to 'Charles'

◀ from page 44

designated TV1 channel, which also had a large number of urban black viewers. Advertising for Castle Lager led the way with some milestone commercials such as 'Train' (1984), 'Joggers' (1987), 'Musicians' (1987), 'Canoe Race' (1989), 'Reunion' (1989) and 'Homecoming' (1990). This discourse of apartheid-breaching advertising manifested itself across nearly all brands of beer, and by the end of the 1980s had found its way into the advertising of virtually all the major corporations.

In the post-apartheid period there have been some instances of racial stereotyping of whites in advertisements. Indeed, some advertisements seem to represent a form of sub-conscious white self-effacement in penance for apartheid. An example of this is the advertising campaign for Vodacom that depicts a white bagel (Jewish male) making a fool of himself. By including white onlookers who frown upon the bagel, who are thus identified with the black point of view, this campaign attempts to legitimise the pejorative nature of its representation.

In conclusion, stereotypes are group concepts and may not always be generally recognised as stereotypes. The more obviously pejorative forms of racial stereotyping do in certain circumstances occur in advertisements, but are rare. Establishing an adequate framework for criticising less obvious forms of racial stereotyping is a complex task; depictions that are currently accepted at face value may in the future be regarded as racial stereotypes. There has been a transition in the depiction of blacks in South African advertising from ethnic to westernised or cosmopolitan and middle class. In a context of relative underdevelopment, these affirmative depictions are in general more likely to be decoded as being positive, as evidence of democratic change and upward mobility.

ALEX HOLT is a lecturer in cultural studies, film, and advertising. His doctoral dissertation studied racial stereotyping in SABC-TV commercials during the period of reform. He is co-ordinator of the World Conference Against Racism Film Festival due to take place in Durban from 29 to 31 August and 2 to 7 September 2001.

Fighting for Fairness

◀ from page 49

grammes that garner non-white audiences, and that some sponsors refuse to place ads on such programmes at all. The policy, known as "discounting", is pervasive, but was brought to light only in 1999 when an internal memo from a media representation firm was leaked, in which the company advised its sales staff not to place ads on so-called 'urban' radio stations, explaining that businesses want "prospects, not suspects".

Clearly, advertisers' preferences, which determine which programmes are deemed successful and are therefore likely to be reproduced, are always not based in 'market sense': investigation by the Federal Communications Commission found that some companies offered explanations rank with bias for their refusal to buy ads on radio stations with primarily non-white listenerships. A Latino-formatted station was denied an ad for Ivory soap because, a representative claimed, "Hispanics don't bathe as frequently as non-Hispanics". Other companies cited worries that "our pilferage will increase" if they advertised on minority stations, or said simply, "your station will bring too many black people to my place of business".

The point is not that corporate advertisers can be racist. Rather, the US media's commercial structure means that, whatever the intentions of individual writers, producers and editors, the bottom-line values of advertisers and owners are allowed to trump media's creative and democratic potential.

White-owned media tend to view communities of colour through a lens of pathology.

The Trouble with Race

◀ from page 43

faces to explain things, that race is automatically and intrinsically relevant.

If we understand that 'races' are really fluid results of historical processes of racialisation, we can see that they are far from being ever-present, let alone in a consistent form or intensity.

To apply this insight to the case of the crowd at the court, the point is that black South Africans are not essentially caring or uncaring about white murders – or vice versa. Such racial assumptions have to be tested rather than taken for granted. Instead of working within the simplistic paradigm of race essentialism, journalists reporting the story could simply have asked the crowd: "Why are you cheering?"

To the extent that some spectators explained they were present to demonstrate 'black' empathy with the victims' families, the story could have reported on exactly this particular racialisation. But maybe different, non-racial, answers might have been given.

RACE OVERSHADOWS OTHER REASONS

To see race as a social construction rather than a birth-mark opens our eyes to the wider range of ways we are shaped and defined. It helps us put race in its place – which is alongside class, gender, nationality and the many other factors that influence who we are and how we behave.

Understanding racism's roots in racialisation means that we can begin to do journalism that is also opposed to sexism and xenophobia.

We must rage against racism and we must repair its damage. But if we really want to eradicate this disgrace, we have to go further. That means a quest to erase race from the prominent place it occupies in how we make sense of the world and how we seek our undecided future.

GUY BERGER is Professor and head of the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, South Africa.

FIGHTING BACK

The various expressions and sources of media racism mean that media activists have many fronts on which to fight. Some groups, like the NAACP, call for increased representation of people of colour in the media, both behind-the-scenes and on the front page.

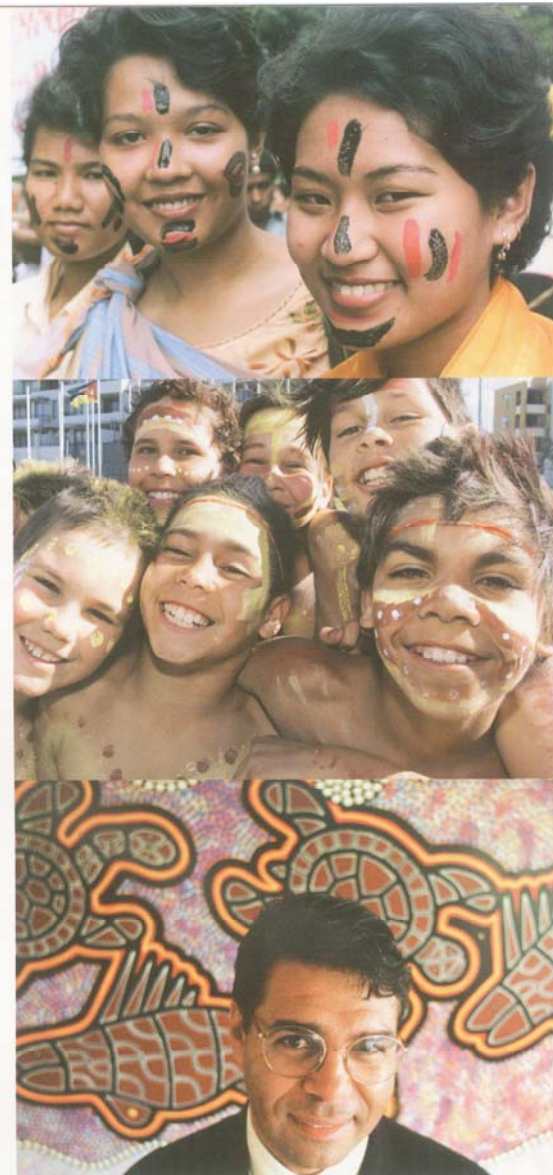
Others take on racist media directly: a campaign led by FAIR and others got the ABC radio network to reconsider including openly racist host Bob Grant in their lineup. Activists have encouraged local public TV stations to air documentaries on, for example, the role of US blacks in World War II.

Media activists also use research and monitoring to support their arguments. Recently, a coalition of juvenile justice

groups released a report on media coverage of youth crime, showing that, while crime involving young people is actually declining, the public's fear of such crime is increasing, in good part due to alarmist, misleading media coverage.

As well as talking back to media, activists also intervene in media, helping grassroots groups develop media skills and strategies to counter destructive coverage of their issues and also to serve as resources for reporters and hopefully improve coverage that way.

While fighting to improve mainstream media, media



activists are also increasingly creating their own. Access to new technology, while not a panacea, is allowing independent journalists and artists to create and distribute their own media, providing a vital alternative perspective. For example, both the Republican and the Democratic National Conventions in 2000 featured Independent Media Centres – ad-hoc, informally organised coalitions that supported dozens of alternative radio reporters, print journalists and film and videomakers who covered the conventions from a very different angle than the major media, including the voices of social justice activists, artists and social critics who were not being heard on the nightly news.

These encouraging efforts offer the best hope for moving toward truly diverse, anti-racist media. Ultimately, it will take a broad-based movement to demand structural changes in the US media industry – changes that would break up the dominant conglomerates, establish independent public broadcasting and promote strong, non-profit sources of information. Like other rights, the right to inclusive, fair media will not be granted. It must be won.

JANINE JACKSON is programme director of FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting), a media watch group based in New York. She is also host/producer of "Counter-Spin", FAIR's radio show.