Reproducing Racism
How media helps us racialise

Global media changes "are likely to tighten, rather than unravel, the web of racism that surrounds us", argues **Oscar Gandy Jr.** Gandy takes a structural approach to assess prospects for moving beyond racialising in the media system. **Melissa Baumann** interviewed him for Review:

In your book *Communication and Race: A Structural Perspective* (Arnold/Oxford University Press, 1998), you write of 'the media's reproduction of racism'. What do you mean by 'reproduction' – from both the point of view of producers/distributors and consumers?

If we understand racism to be a set of relationships that are based on perceptions and expectations regarding the various 'oth-ers' we will encounter, then the mass media can be understood to play a critical role in providing the primary, and most readily available, images, impressions and information that we use to form those perceptions and expectations. As expectations govern behaviour, negative assessments of the racialised 'other' insures that the number and quality of relations across the colour line will be limited.

To say that the media are impli-cated in the reproduction of racism is not to say that they ultimately deter-mine our perceptions of the social world. But the mass media do not construct an image of the world out of whole cloth. In some cases, the mass media, especially the news media, are little more than conduits for the mes-sages that have been designed to meet the strategic goals of political and eco-nomic elites.

It is also true that the media are guided by an assessment of what 'the audience' is 'ready to hear'. By this I mean that media producers have to take into account their best estimate of the limits of consumer tastes and pref-erences for themes, characters, and relationships. This is complicated fur-ther by the influence that investors, clients and, to a far lesser extent, regu-latory agents may have over the production of media content.

Like other social systems, media systems do change, often dramatically, from time to time. My sense, however, is that the changes that we are observing in the development of the global media system are likely to tighten, rather than unravel, the web of racism that surrounds us.

will be exposed to a more consistent stream of images and impressions that will reinforce the assumptions about the world that attract-ed them to these environments in the first place.

To the degree that segregation within media environments is matched by segrega-tion, and limited interaction with others in our daily lives, then the impressions derived from media will be the primary impressions

Media produced for the poor folks at or near the bottom of the racial hierarchy

You have written (in the journal *Media Development*, Vol. XLVII 2/2000): "Racism continues to be good business within the context of societies in which racial and eth-nic distinctions can be used to establish, reinforce, and justify inequality in the dis-tribution of power and resources." How does this relate to growing trends in the mass media to segment the media market along racial or ethnic lines? Doesn't this potentially aggravate racism?

Although it is a complicated, and general-ly unpopular, position, I am of the opinion that racial segmentation in media is more likely to reinforce racial segregation in social relations, and thereby contribute to a further decline in race relations. Sociologists have already noted that the trend toward greater racial understanding has peaked, and in some cases has already begun to decline among adolescents. I believe that media segmentation will only accelerate this decline.

Segmentation that is guided by a commercial logic will tend to rely on familiar stereotypes to clearly define and attract the 'right audience' for the content being provided. Consumers who spend more and more of their time within media environments that are racially, and economically, defined

we will rely upon to govern our social and political choices regarding others who are outside our primary group.

In addition, the sorts of 'corrupt segmen-tation' that advertising invites means that media produced for the poor folks at or near the bottom of the racial hierarchy will be of the lowest quality, and will most often be financed by the sale of dangerous, debilitat-ing or worthless goods and services. I say this because if the advertisers are unwilling to pay the market price for an audience they don't value, the only alternative for communicators who continue to produce for that market is to reduce the cost of producing content that attracts that audience, holding their noses while they do business with the 'sellers of sin'.

Can you say more about how communica-tion about race influences the distribution of power? Tied into this is the media's con-ferral of status to different groups at differ-ent times, often aggravating racial, ethnic and class divisions. Examples of media impact in this regard?

The best way to think about this process is to understand the role that the media play in shaping the public's orientation to policies designed to overcome the legacy of slavery and the history of discrimination. The mass media serve a number of functions. They
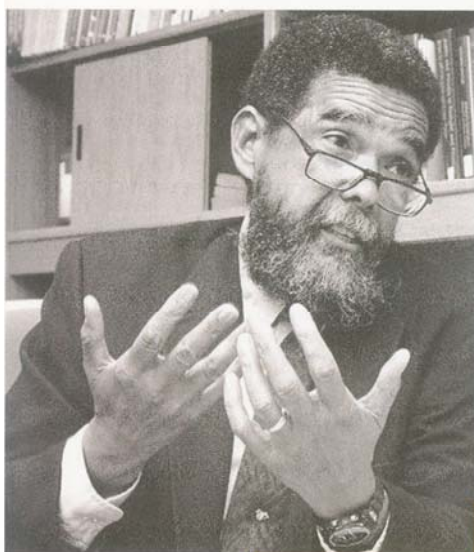
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describe the state of the world, and warn us about problems. Sometimes they discuss these problems in terms of racial disparity.

The media play a critical role in helping us to appreciate the seriousness of the disparity – how much inequality is too much? They help us to evaluate public policies meant to reduce that disparity by providing a basis for understanding its cause. It is here that the media may provide cues that lead to blaming

even worse than the initial distorted impression of the world.

One could argue that racism in the mass media has become generally less explicit over the years. It tends to be reproduced more in code words and images. Could you give examples of some of this codification, and how it works psychologically/cognitively?

There is a lot of work to be done that would help to identify the more subtle ways

As I mentioned earlier, although we tend to talk about 'the media' as if they were collective actors, it is also important to understand the ways in which they function as resources for policy elites. I have written in the past about 'information subsidies' to describe the ways in which media sources provide information to media in forms that are often passed on to the public without modification. Thus, we find that from time to

ences are few and far between. Almost none are willing to support the production of content that serves the informational and conceptual needs of the poorest among us.

How could the media better help us find, as you put it, "an operational definition of racial identity"?

I invite journalists to really push hard on trying to uncover and convey an understanding of the complexity which surrounds issues of race, class and gender. It is espe-

will be of the lowest quality, and will most often be financed by the sale of dangerous, debilitating or worthless goods and services.

the victim, rather than revealing the nature and extent of discrimination.

In the framing of these stories about racial disparities, the media may help to reinforce an understanding of social policy as a 'zero-sum game', where assistance to victims means a personal or group loss. The mass media have played a critical role, for instance, in creating an impression among white males that they are the victims of affirmative action policies.

The media have clearly missed an opportunity to help the American public understand the ways in which institutional racism worsens the social position of African Americans. The news media have largely failed to inform its audience about the ways in which 'reasonable racism' is destructive of the social fabric.

Police stop black automobile drivers and search black airline passengers because they believe (incorrectly) that African Americans are more likely to be carrying illegal drugs. Because they stop and search far more black than white travelers, more blacks will be arrested and imprisoned for possession. This is a clear case of expectations producing the reality (a self-fulfilling prophecy). There are countless other examples in which a seemingly rational action, based on erroneous belief, eventually creates a condition that is

in which statements about race are still being made. It is especially important to pursue the ways in which these statements are made 'unintentionally'.

Martin Gilens' study of the photographs used in news magazines is a good example of this (see his book, *Why Americans Hate Welfare*). Gilens observes that the number of black people pictured in stories about poverty is disproportionate. That is, there are far more pictures of black people than their status among the poor would justify. But more importantly, according to Gilens, the black people portrayed were less likely to be the sorts of people that would evoke a sympathetic response (eg, old, or visibly handicapped). Thus the over-representation of seemingly able-bodied African Americans works symbolically, but cumulatively rather than individually, to maintain an impression of poverty as a black problem, reflecting characteristic laziness.

You also talk about the media's role in 'constructing race', and promoting racism, by constructing what is 'foreign' and thereby promoting nationalism and ethnic divisiveness (eg, the media in Britain making cultural accusations of "not being British enough"). Could you elaborate on this, with other examples?

time xenophobia is activated in the public by policy elites who would like to influence laws governing immigration, language use, residency requirements and access to education and social services.

In your book you set forth two ideal standards by which to measure the media's efforts to counter racism: one asks if certain media "contribute to an understanding and appreciation of difference"; and the other asks whether it has "helped to shape participation in the public sphere by informing individuals of their interests, including interests that are determined in part by their membership in racial and ethnic groups". What media initiatives currently or in the recent past stand out for you as coming close to these goals?

Certainly the programmes on public television that feature African American and other minority scientists and engineers, in addition to those series which highlight the contributions that black people make to arts and culture, contribute to an appreciation of difference.

I really have no good examples of media doing a good job in the public sphere. I have only more warning and concern. Advertisers and investors willing to be associated with content that angers and mobilises their audi-

cially important for journalists to question, rather than readily pass on, the assessments and interpretations of 'the facts' and explanations that people might provide for social problems. They should look to the 'interests' that are served if that impression, or conclusion, becomes widespread.

Along these lines, I would invite journalists and commentators to question themselves and others who might slip into talking about race as causal. A person's 'race' cannot be the cause of anything they do, or think. The only time race can be thought of as causal is in terms of the responses that people may have when they encounter people that they have 'raced' in their minds. This might be extended to a policy that leads journalists to avoid racial identification, and certainly if identifications must be made, the race of the victims is far more important than the race of the accused.

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