

Reinforcing stereotypes in prime time

One third of the US public portrayed negatively

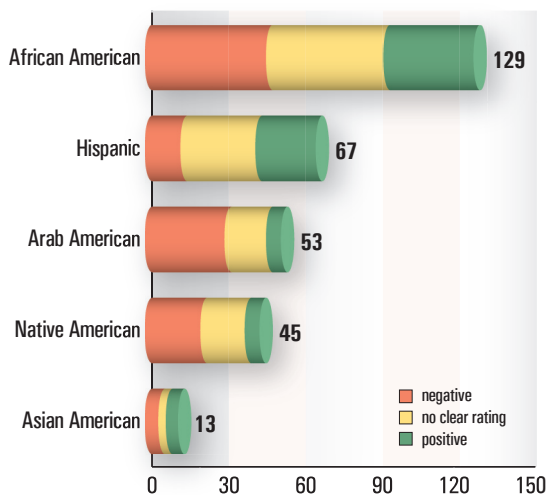
A Media Tenor study on the coverage of ethnic and racial groups shows that leading U.S. media distorts the image of American society to the general public and thus reinforces old stereotypes because it shows a lack of diversity in reporting.

The analysis of all reports in TV national network news, **The Wall Street Journal**, **Newsweek** and **Time Magazine** focused on reports with a specific U.S. ethnic and/or racial group as the main protagonist. The results show an unbalanced portrait of the society with minorities playing secondary roles in news stories while white Americans lead most of the political and economic events.

More alarming was the coverage with minority groups as the main players in the story; often representatives of minority groups were reported in negative situations involving court cases, violence, epidemics and conflicts – a dangerous portrait of the nearly one-third of the U.S. population now identified as non-white and comprised businessmen, entrepreneurs, professors, students and investors expecting fair treatment from the society.

This contrasts with the general feeling: The United States is becoming increasingly diverse and most Americans are content with it. On the 50th anniversary of the historic civil rights decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Gallup conducted a survey on civil rights and race relations that found 73% of

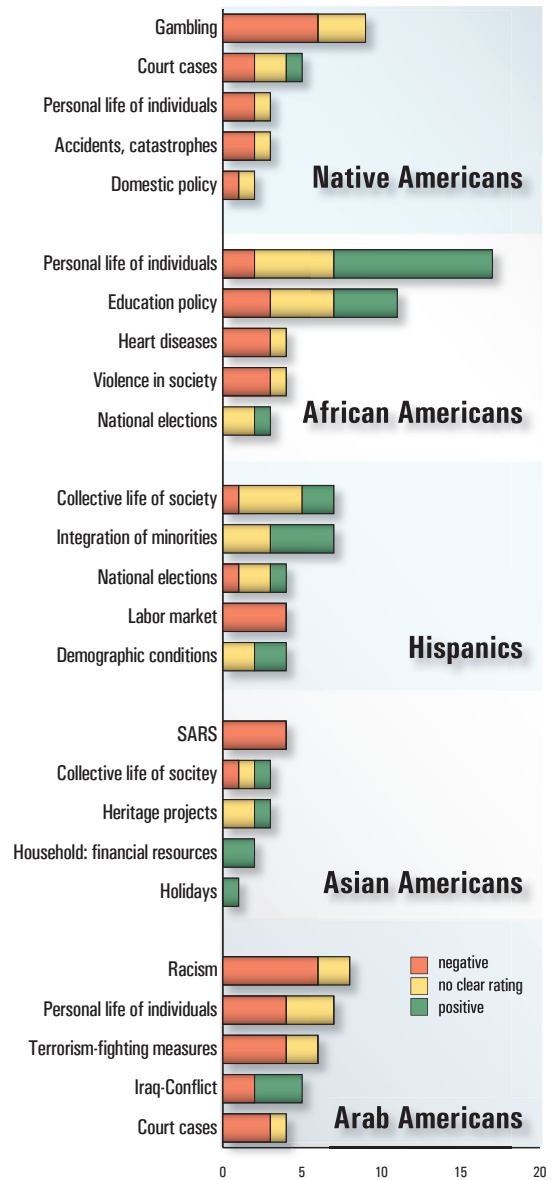
Arabs and native Americans: Small coverage, negative tone



Source: Media Tenor 01/01/2002 – 05/31/2004

Basis: 154,003 stories overall in 6 US – Media

Coverage of ethnic and racial groups: presence and assessment



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Americans said they approve of interracial marriage, a sharp contrast to the 1958 results where an overwhelming 94% of those surveyed opposed what has become a common part of American society. Progress is clear but some lingering issues continue to impede total equality.

Hispanics gaining attention

The Media Tenor study shows a marked improvement in the coverage of Hispanics, who have attracted an increasing attention since 2002. The fastest

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growing ethnic group in the U.S., overtaking blacks in 2003 as the largest racial minority with approximately 39 million people, Hispanics have received increasingly positive coverage, especially in stories regarding successful integration of minorities. At the same time, in stories related to unemployment or immigration policies, the tone of coverage was largely negative.

The coverage of all other groups was negative overall, especially that of Arabs and Native Americans, who received shares of negative stories of 58.5% and 48.9%, respectively.

It's hard to be a black "average Joe"

One intriguing trend has been noticed in the coverage of African Americans, where there is a frequent focus on stories about ordinary peoples' lives: A soldier coming home after the war, the story of someone waiting for a transplant, a school teacher who could finally buy her own home. In these cases, the majority of stories, 58.2%, were positive.

At the same time, most other news stories with black protagonists were about problems faced by the community with housing, healthcare and violence – with an overall negative rating.

One particularly tricky trend comes from the media's tendency to cover the difficulties and problems of regular black citizens and occasionally significantly highlight an aspect of black achievement. By reporting these successful stories, while also portraying social conditions in a negative light, risks making successful African Americans look like uncommon exceptions.

Media setting dangerous labels

The most frequent topics in coverage of Native Americans were gambling businesses and court cases, both reported on with an overall negative tone. Newsroom criteria for choosing these stories seem to require that they be packed with scandals or disasters, which led to 48.9% of all reports on this group being negative. When there was a lack of scandals, awareness of the group as expressed through coverage volume decreased: From 2002 to 2003, stories with Native Americans as the main protagonists in the media analyzed decreased sharply from 32 to 10. Reports with Asian Americans as the main protagonists jumped from none in 2002 to six in 2003.

The topic that brought the most attention and suddenly gave this underrepresented group a small place in the spotlight was the SARS epidemic. During the same period, Arab Americans were featured mostly in the contexts of racism, the personal lives of individuals, terrorism and court cases, and for the most part were covered in a negative tone.

A whiter view of the world

The results of this analysis disturb, because while we may expect stereotypes such as the white male surgeon, the Hispanic housewife or the wise old Native American to linger in fictional entertainment products, the news should be a prime example of unbiased accuracy and public service.

In another analysis, **Media Tenor** looked at all appearances of persons (not just protagonists) for at least five lines or five seconds in the same set of analyzed media were counted – including not just members of U.S. society but individuals from any country featured in the news. In this analysis whites significantly dominated the news. In both analyzes, the U.S. media provided an unbalanced representation not only of people within the country, but also around the world.

Awareness and power

The influence of archetypes and stereotypes provided by the media takes on more significance when one considers how limited views of different ethnic and racial groups might interfere in decisions affecting the whole society.

In a 2004 Harris Poll about power and influence on government, when asked which groups have "too much or too little power and influence in Washington," 71% of the participants said the news media have too much power, holding fourth place amongst influencing organizations, only behind big companies, political action committees which give money to political candidates and political lobbyists. In the same survey, 54% of the respondents said racial minorities have too little power.

While advertising has already "discovered" minority groups as profitable consumers, tailoring products and services – and even political candidates – according to precise profile information on each community, white privilege is still supported by the news media and allows for continuing social prejudice and disparity.

Some old prejudices already as a part of the American culture may always be around. Despite the optimistic numbers of the Gallup poll, a skeptical 63% of the respondents agreed that „race relations will always be a problem in the U.S.“ Maybe they're right – maybe they've just been watching too much TV. ib

Basis:

Media: ABC World News Tonight, NBC Nightly News, CBS World News Tonight; Wall Street Journal, Time Magazine, Newsweek

Time: 01/01/2002 – 05/31/2004

Analysis: 154,003 stories overall in 6 U.S. media

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