

Editorial opinion and racial profiling: Coming to terms with DWB

Jennifer Hannah

Oscar H. Gandy, Jr.

The Annenberg School for Communication

University of Pennsylvania

3620 Walnut Street

Philadelphia PA 19104-6220

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Introduction

The evidence is hard to ignore.

Anecdotes and solid statistical evidence from around the United States point to a pattern of discretion in policing that looks to many like racial profiling. The numbers brought forth by the NAACP and the ACLU in Maryland are particularly striking. While 75% of the drivers on Interstate 95 (I-95) are White, only 23 % of those who were stopped and searched by Maryland state troopers were White. On the other hand, even though only 17% of the drivers were Black, nearly 70% of the drivers who were detained were Black (Bavovick, 1998). The disparity in police attention is explained, and on occasion justified, by the belief that African Americans are more likely to be carrying illegal drugs along the highway to New York.

From the perspective of those Black men and women who have been victimized by a racialized anti-drug policy, Driving While Black (DWB) becomes just one more form of the "Black Tax" that is routinely charged African Americans as they make their way through the day (Armour, 1997). Although racial profiling is just one part of the "everyday racism" that Blacks experience (Essed, 1991), discrimination by armed police officers takes on a special weight when an encounter can end in assault, injury, and even death for those unfortunates who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time (Cannon, et al., 1999). The widespread reporting of these events in the news helps to build concern about personal safety, and more critically, generates mistrust of police and the politicians who either justify the technique, or minimize the problem by invoking the "one bad apple" explanation for police misconduct.

At the same time, the editorial pages of the nation's papers remain a place where careful reflection on the arguments and the evidence might be expected to shape public understanding and concern about the use of racial profiling. Indeed, the editorial pages might be the place where the mobilization of opposition by citizens might begin. This

paper explores the ways in which the racial profiling of drivers has been discussed by editors, columnists, and concerned citizens in the major papers in the United States.

Institutionalized Racism

Racial profiling is not new. The use of stereotypes as a basis for decision making has long been recognized as an aspect of racism. When stereotypes are incorporated formally into administrative policies and practices, we refer to it as institutional racism. As a theoretical construct, the term institutional racism first appeared in academic literature in the late 1960's. Many scholars credit Carmichael and Hamilton's 1967 book, Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America, with originating the phrase. They suggest that institutional racism is less overt, far more subtle, and less concrete in terms of charging specific individuals with committing racist acts. But institutional racism is no less destructive of human life than its more overt forms. Because it originates from within the walls of established and respected institutions in society, institutional racism is the subject of far less public condemnation than racism of the old fashioned kind (p 4).

Several other scholars have extended this analysis and critique. They include Blauner (1972), Knowles & Prewitt (1969), and Jones (1972). Williams (1985, p. 325) identifies several aspects of institutional racism worth noting: a) the production of racial inequality by a wide range of institutions by the normal processes of their operation; b) the irrelevance of the intentions of the personnel involved; c) the historical development of racial exclusion and oppression; and d) the interrelationships between institutions, resulting in the cumulative nature of the inequalities. Institutional racism can be defined as a process that "involves a range of institutions, whose procedures combine to produce a mutually reinforcing pattern of racial inequality" (Jackson, p. 218). Neither racial animus, own group preference, or any other conscious decision to harm is required (Sawyer and Senn, 1973).

Phillips (1987) contends that "the potential for discrimination arises when normal institutional practices are consistent with, and thus draw on and are in turn reinforced by, prevailing racist ideologies" (p 218). Phillips suggests that institutional racism remains

because few consciously combat these racist practices. At the same time, Jones (1974) suggests that it is often difficult to distinguish between individual and institutional acts of racism. He contends that the two are closely related, as racist individuals need support from institutions to validate their behavior. A racist individual intends to perpetuate a racist ideology through thought, behavior, and action; an individual in a racist institution fails to see, criticize, or help change the racist practices that they may work within.

Racial profiling is a form of institutionalized racism. Profiling is to be understood to fall within the class of practices that have been criticized under the generalized heading of statistical discrimination and reasonable racism. Employers who discriminate against African Americans because they have reason to believe that African Americans will be less productive than Whites are considered to be acting rationally, and in some circles, behaving appropriately within the context of business decisions (Sunstein, 1997). Citizens who take violent aggressive action against African American males and claim self defense, may be considered to have been acting reasonably because they may have relied upon statistics about Blacks involved in violent crime in assuming that their lives were at risk (Armour, 1997). Because the use of race as a source of information has become a routine practice within one of the most fundamental and respected institutions in American society (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997), we should not expect this use to be the target of criticism. It is only when a number of highly visible cases captures national attention within a short period of time that the question of institutionalized racism might move up onto the public agenda. Two state troopers from New Jersey had been accused of shooting four unarmed motorists. Subsequently they were also charged with repeatedly falsifying the race of persons they pulled over in traffic stops. At that point it seemed to many in the press that the time had come to look more closely into the routines governing traffic stops (Avril and Campbell, 1999).

Police and Criminal Justice

Actually, it would be most unusual if police officers, on the whole, did not share the racial biases that plague the rest of the nation. Traditional stereotypes of African

Americans and other minorities as criminals seems likely to have shaped police policies and procedures as well. Morales (1978) provides a rationale:

Because the majority of law enforcement personnel are white and are believed to harbor these stereotypes, they accordingly assign more police to patrol the Mexican-American and black communities than they assign to patrol the white communities. More police in any community increases the likelihood of police observing certain kinds of behavior, such as curfew and traffic violations, loitering, and drunkenness (p 391).

Recently, following a number of reported incidents, public intellectuals have begun to call public attention to the problem of racial profiling (Kennedy, 1999). Yet, the use of race as a predictor of criminality has a long history. Indeed, the police, Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) operatives, and other law enforcement officials have developed similar lists of characteristics that they feel are indicators of likely criminal activity or that might serve as a proxy for dangerousness. Although race is never explicitly listed in documents in the 90s, numerous law enforcement officers have testified to the use of race in several federal cases.

One officer gave testimony that he stopped a car because the occupants were African Americans and fit a profile (United States of America v Marcus Lamour Harvey (24 F.3d 795; 1994 US App.). He saw the defendant and followed him until a violation that would allow him to stop the driver occurred. He testified that "...the vehicle that I observed with the defective equipment was very similar in appearance and profile to several other vehicles that I have stopped which ultimately ended in arrests of drug traffickers." The officer testified that he felt the defendants fit a profile because "there were three young black male occupants in an old vehicle" and that it was suspicious because "almost every time that we have arrested drug traffickers from Detroit, they're usually young black males driving old cars."

Media framing and race

Communication scholars have joined activists and others concerned with racism and civil rights in the United States in charging the news media with contributing to the reproduction of racism (Gandy, 1998). Their criticism has not been limited to the tendency of the press to characterize African American males as dangerous criminals, but that has been the central focus of several important studies. It is especially important to understand the role of the press in shaping the ways in which we come to understand the use of predictive models, including the use of race as the sole, or central component in a profile or model of criminality. Over time, press coverage can be understood to help frame, or shape our understanding of institutional practices and their consequences.

The term “framing” is derived from the work of Goffman (1974), to describe a way of interpretation that allows people to organize and understand their world (Gamson, et al, 1992; Snow, et al, 1986.) In his key essay, Entman (1993) argues that frames not only describe problems, but they offer judgements about causes and solutions. They organize experiences, in ways that make certain issues salient while others are ignored. More importantly, they privilege certain perspectives on a complex issue, thereby subordinating or marginalizing others. Media frames have the potential to shape and organize our understandings of the world.

The power of frames on understanding and decision-making has been demonstrated in a number of creative experiments. In their 1984 study on risk preferences, Kahneman and Tversky demonstrated the power of frames to shift policy preferences by simply reframing options in terms of lives being lost, or lives being saved. The shift in policy preferences was both substantial and robust in that it is readily reproduced with different populations.

Iyengar (1991) has examined how framing affects the attribution of responsibility for social problems. Attribution of responsibility, from his perspective, involves both causal and treatment responsibility. "Causal responsibility focuses on the origin of the problem, while treatment responsibility focuses on who or what has the power to alleviate (or

forestall alleviation of) the problem" (p 8). Iyengar suggests that two types of frames that are common in the presentation of news have consistently different influences on attributions. Episodic stories focus on specific people or events, using them to personalize some social problem or public issue. Thematic stories on the other hand, tell a more general story about trends, and overall or long-term effects. Iyengar argues that thematic frames tend to elicit societal attributions of responsibility. In contrast, episodic frames, especially those featuring real people or events, increases the likelihood that individuals, rather than institutions, or the society as a whole will be blamed.

This framing effect has been observed in stories on a variety of topics, including: international terrorism economic or labor disputes, as well as crime, poverty, racial inequality, unemployment and the Iran-Contra affair (Iyengar, 1991).

Frames and Racial Stereotypes

As Iyengar's studies of framing in television news demonstrate, the impact of episodic framing is amplified when African Americans are depicted in stories about crime and poverty. The additional effect of race on attribution is likely the result of the interaction between the stereotypical images in the news and the already existing distortions in audiences' prior beliefs about African Americans. Stereotypes are central components of both journalistic and popular conceptions of people defined by race.

A racial stereotype, which we understand as a set of beliefs about a specific group of people, is an example one type of cognitive schema that influences information processing. Researchers argue that racial stereotypes are activated immediately once cues about racial identity are presented (Branscombe and Smith, 1990). Once activated, these stereotypes are then utilized along with other available information to make sense of the situations and circumstances described (Branscombe and Smith, 1990; Gordon and Anderson, 1995).

Gordon and Anderson (1995) have also found evidence for the impact of racial cues on attributions of guilt or innocence. Subjects were more likely to judge defendants accused

of stereotype-consistent crimes more harshly than those who were not. They also found that "forcing people to make quick judgements may increase the extent to which such judgements are based on stereotypic representations" (p. 469). Clearly, jurors are not the only ones exposed to stereotype-consistent displays that may affect decision-making. Gilliam and Iyengar (1998) suggest that the frames of local television news are filled with racial imagery. From their perspective, the consequences are most troubling:

"the dominant news paradigm leads whites to accept the most base stereotypes about African-Americans, devalues black leaders, and builds racial resentment." Other scholars also suggest that images of African Americans in the news play upon commonly held stereotypes about Black people (Entman, 1997; Gilens, 1996; Gilliam, et al, 1997).

Recently, scholars have pursued the implications of reliance on racial stereotypes in the formation of public policies. Several studies demonstrate the ways in which the framing of issues, and the subsequent attributions of responsibility, have guided policy changes in the areas of welfare and crime. Iyengar (1997) suggests that more research should be done in the policy domain because "the framing of political issues is a powerful form of social control that circumscribes the national debate over public policy" (p. 282). It has been argued that by increasing the number of people who attribute responsibility to Blacks, the over-representation of African-Americans in stories about crime and poverty increases public resentment toward policies intended to redress racial inequality (Gilens, 1996).

The Editorial Frame

Hynds (1995) suggests that editorial pages have become more influential and more useful since 1977. Editorial writers are said to be taking more and stronger stands on issues in ways that provide important benchmarks for their readers. It has also been suggested that the writing on the editorial pages of the nation's papers has been improved because news organizations have assigned creative reporters to the task of researching issues in order to inform the public of the reasons behind the stands that they take (Simurda, 1997). Yet, there is surprising little scholarly writing on the process and effects of editorial engagement with public issues. It is not that scholars don't believe that editorial opinion

matters. Indeed, Szanto (1994) argues that “because of the separation of news and opinion in the American newspaper tradition, the most precise barometer of a newspaper’s position on political and social questions is assumed to reside on the editorial page – the heart, soul, and conscious of the newspaper” (p. 98). The Wall Street Journal is held up as the most striking example of the distinction between the surveillance and interpretive or editorial functions of the modern newspaper. Benjamin Page (1996) makes this point clear in his examination of this paper's response to an attempt by the Bush Administration to blame liberal social policy for the riots in Los Angeles that followed the beating of Rodney King.

Unlike most papers, the Journal frequently presents a striking contrast between its news stories, which are usually moderate, sober, and carefully researched, and its very conservative editorials, which are sometimes casual about facts and shrill in tone (p. 61).

Several scholars have turned to newspaper editorials to learn about the degree to which they influence and are influenced by public opinion and the news (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1991; Rikardsson, 1985; Romanow et al, 1985). Editors’ opinions regarding the function of an editorial page is likely to influence its content. A study by Hynds (1983) surveyed editors about the roles they believed editorial pages served in their communities. Over 97% of editors surveyed agreed that editorial pages “should provide a forum for the exchange of information and opinion” and 94% agreed that they should “provide community leadership through stands on issues” (Hynds, 1983). Other functions reported included, “educate readers on issues,” “sort out important issues and stimulate readers’ thoughts on them,” “help readers understand trends and developments,” “reflect the wants and needs of the community,” “encourage a local exchange of ideas,” and “be a kind of public conscience in the community.” Only 2% of editors surveyed felt that their editorials did not have any influence on the community.

There has also been some concern expressed over the extent to which newspaper editorials are the product of organized efforts to manipulate public opinion (Gandy,

1982). Jamieson and Campbell (1992) discuss cases in which editors publish pre-packaged editorials provided by public relations firms without attribution. They suggest that “those who are knowledgeable about journalistic norms and routines have the ability to manipulate news coverage. By strategic use of the media’s needs and constraints, public relations consultants and news managers,... help determine what is covered and how news stories are presented” (p. 114).

Letters to the editor

Letters to the editor have been a regular feature in most American newspapers since the first letter was published on September 18, 1851 in the New York Times (Renfro, 1979; Romanow, et al, 1985). These letters have become one of the most popular features in a newspaper and are thought to be an important space for public expression and discussion of opinion (Forsythe, 1950; Grey & Brown, 1970; Hynds, 1983; Lambkin & Morneau, 1988; Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1991; Romanow, et al, 1985; Singletary, 1976; Szanto, 1994).

At the same time, scholars have reached different conclusions about the degree to which letters are reflective of public opinion. Several studies of letter writers have determined that they are often older, more educated, and better read than the average American (Forsythe, 1950; Vacin, 1965). Published letters have been found to be overwhelmingly conservative and they tend to be negative rather than positive (Forsythe, 1950; Renfro, 1979). Although they are skeptical about the representativeness of letters to the editor, Grey and Brown (1970) agree that “the opinions of letter writers, even though research has identified them as an articulate minority with certain demographic characteristics, are often shared in the mass at all social and economic and educational levels” (p 455).

Much of the skepticism about representativeness rises from the possibility of editorial bias or constraint in the selection of letters to print (Grey & Brown, 1970; Hill, 1981; Hynds, 1984; Lambkin & Morneau, 1988; Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1991; Renfro, 1979). Many large newspapers simply can not accommodate the volume of letters they receive; others have policies concerning length, form and content that prevent the publication of

certain letters. Few researchers have been able to gain access to unpublished letters that might reveal something about the personal or institutional preferences of editors.

In an attempt to measure if press perception of police was reflective of public opinion, Lambkin & Morneau (1988) performed a content analysis of letters to the editor and editorials in three newspapers. They argue that “[editorials] could be viewed as reflecting attitudes of newspaper owners and writers, while [letters to the editor] reflect attitudes of readers. Differences between [editorials] and [letters to the editor], if any, could then be used to point out gaps in orientation between newspaper editors and their public” (p 195). To facilitate comparison between groups, they categorized each editorial and letter as presenting either a negative, positive or neutral image of the local police. According to their argument, newspapers that are “in tune” with their readers should contain the same percentages of editorials and letters expressing negative, positive, and neutral images of police. The authors conclude that the New York Times and Daily News editorials in their sample “generally followed the same pattern of positive vs negative image” (p 197) as their letters to the editor. However, they found that the Los Angeles Times printed “a much higher percentage of their [editorials] with negative themes, while [letters to the editor] from their readers are just the opposite” indicating that the editors were not in tune with their readers’ opinions.” (p 197).

Regardless of how the letters may or may not be influenced by editorial policy, letters are a source of information on public thoughts and perceptions for journalists, editors (Pritchard & Berkowitz, 1991) and readers. In addition, although they may not be representative of the public in general, they provide a window into public opinion in lieu of other methods. Several articles argue that if nothing else, letters to the editor provide a “social safety valve” (Davis & Rarick, 1964; Forsythe, 1950; Grey & Brown, 1970). A study on readers of editorials and letters to the editor draws a similar conclusion (Singletary, 1976). Singletary argues that:

some readers might well use the letters as a sounding board for evaluating their own positions. This “sounding board” might provide a reader a kind of feedback, a map of his ideas or opinions in relation to those of others, in regard to, for instance, logic,

popularity of the idea, appropriate emphasis, and strength of feeling (p 537, emphasis in original).

Readers not only felt that letters were a means of catharsis, but also as a way of learning about public opinion and evaluating their own views.

Editorial review of racial profiling

In the wake of the increasingly heated debate about the nature of racial profiling, discussion of the issue began to appear on the editorial pages of the nation's newspapers. Arguments developed on all aspects of the issue, including whether or not racial profiling actually existed. Many asked whether the statistics on the disproportionate number of African Americans who were being stopped were accurate? Others asked whether it was a nationwide problem or one that was isolated in specific areas of the country? Still others wondered if racial profiling was effective means of identifying for drug couriers and other "suspicious persons"? Others wondered whether particular cases were the product of a few racist cops or whether racial profiling was an institutional practice.

Mikal Muharrar (1999) published a critical review of television, newspaper, and newsmagazine coverage of the controversy that has developed around racial profiling. Muharrar charged the media with shaping a misguided policy response on the part of officials like U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno, who suggest that the "feelings" of people who have been targeted, rather than the actions of police ought to be the focus of investigatory efforts. Our study sought to determine if the efforts to shape public opinion and public policy that appear in the editorial pages might lead in the same direction.

Design and Methodology

Three primary questions guided our research: 1) what are the frames that are used most often in editorials and in letters to the editor regarding racial profiling? 2) What differences in framing exist between letters, columns, and editorials? And 3) to what extent are differences in framing associated with differences in the racial composition of the newspaper's primary market?

Our data consisted of editorials and letters to the editor gathered from two searches of the LEXIS-NEXIS General News database. An initial sample was gathered by a full-text search of items appearing in editorial sections of newspapers published after January 1, 1994 that included the phrase “driving while black.” This search yielded 60 stories. A subsequent search gathered articles in which the words “drive,” “driving,” or “driver” occurred within five words of the words “profile,” “profiling,” or “profiled” between January 1, 1994 and March 19, 1999. This search yielded 5 additional stories about racial profiling. The sample was reduced to 59 stories after the elimination of Canadian and duplicate stories.

In order to answer the first and second research questions several attributes were considered. We asked whether the effectiveness of profiling was discussed, whether statistics were included prominently in the item, whether the current controversy was placed in a historical context, and finally, whether a solution, or policy option was presented or discussed.

We also examined whether winners and losers were identified by race. We coded comments about the “unfair treatment,” of Blacks, or claims that Black people are stopped disproportionately as an example of Black Loss. These and other examples in which Blacks or Whites were identified as suffering, or being advantaged were rated in terms of prominence on the basis of the appearance of such references in the headline, or the lead, or in both.

Several additional features were also recorded. We noted if the rights and/or safety of police was explicitly stated as a concern, and if the rights and/or safety of minorities (Blacks or otherwise) were explicitly mentioned as a concern. For example, one editorial stated that “...this is the focus of officers who risk their life every time they make a traffic stop.” We also determined whether there was an explicit mention of a racial cause or explicit denial of such a cause. One item was coded as denying a racial cause because that it argued that many people, regardless of race, are pulled over by police “for no reason.”

Framing was also examined in terms of causal attribution. The “problem” might be seen as being the result of individual, institutional, or societal causes. Articles framing DWB as an individual problem might make reference a racist police officer or to an overly sensitive African American driver. Institutional causation might involve reference to police departments or official policies that encouraged (or did not discourage) racial profiling. Examples of societal problems include discussions about American philosophy, White Americans in general, or references to human nature. A statement identified as pointing to a societal cause was the claim that “our society is becoming stereotype dependent” (Seattle Post, 1996).

The demographic characteristics of the city in which each paper was published were also coded using statistics drawn from the University of Virginia’s social science data center. (<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/ccdb>). Relevant statistics include the number of people in each particular city in 1992, the number of police officers employed in each city as of 1991, the number of African Americans in each city, and the percentage of African Americans in each city’s population as of 1990. Data gathered on national demographics were obtained from 1990 Census data.

In addition to traditional content analysis, we made use a qualitative content analysis program [QSR NUD*IST Rev. 4] to explore the relationships between frames within items. String and pattern searches of keywords appearing in the full text of each item provided the basis for these analyses. In order to answer the second and third research questions, we explored the context in which certain terms and concepts were used within the item. To examine how the phenomenon was framed in terms of right and wrong, we searched for the words "problem," “discrimination,” “effective,” “bias,” and “useful.” To learn if people associated particular actors with departures from moral or ethical positions, we searched for the terms “innocent victims” “racist” and “safety.” We also searched for terms that would indicate the contexts in which people were thinking about this issue. The terms “drug history,” “nation,” and “society” were used to as markers of these different contexts.

Findings

Our sample consisted of fifteen letters to the editor (23.4%), twelve editorials by syndicated columnists (20.3%), and thirty-two editorials by staff writers (54.2%). Sixty-six percent of all articles framed the issue as an institutional problem. Thirty one (31%) percent discussed the issue in terms of a societal problem. Only seven percent blamed individuals for the phenomenon.

The majority of columns that used an societal frame also used a institutional frame (67%). However, for the most part authors, selected a single frame for causal attributions. Letters to the editor were more likely to deny the existence of an institutional problem. On the other hand, local editorials were more likely to talk about racial profiling as an institutional matter.

To determine which issues were at the center of an author's framework, we analyzed the headline and lead paragraphs. The majority of the headlines were assertions, rather than questions (89.7%). Only seventeen percent of articles used "race" in the headline; but the words African American, black or minority were used relatively frequently (27%).

Forty-two percent of articles used the headline or lead paragraph to frame the stories in terms of Black loss. These authors also tended to characterize DWB as an institutional problem (58%). Several articles discussed racial profiling in reference to drug trafficking or America's "war on drugs" (22%), but only 10 percent addressed the debated regarding the effectiveness of racial profiling in deterring drug trafficking and other crime. Thirty five percent utilized statistics about the number of drivers stopped, searched, or arrested in their discussion. While 38 percent mentioned the safety and/or rights of African American drivers, only seven percent wrote about police safety. Not surprisingly, sixty percent of the items that did address the issue of police safety also denied that racial motives were a factor in police stops.

Borrowing from the approach of Lambkin and Morneau (1988), we divided the items into three groups based on the results of our initial qualitative analysis of their frames.

Editorials were divided into three categories: 1) Negative, meaning that profiling was wrong, racist, or unjustified; 2) Positive, in support of police “just doing their job” or claims that police are not racially profiling; 3) Neutral, presents both positive and negative, or states that more research was needed.

The majority of the editorial page items argued that the profiling was wrong (66%). Of those articles, the majority were local editorials (55%). Items arguing that profiling was not racist, wrong or unfair accounted for only seventeen percent (17%) of the sample. Two thirds of this category consisted of letters to the editor.

There were differences in the frames used by each type of item. Letters to the editor were almost evenly divided between positive and negative frames, while syndicated columns and local editorials were most likely to be negative. Only one syndicated column did not discuss DWB as a national problem. While over half of the syndicated columns used statistics to illustrate their point, none of the letters to the editor used statistics. Less than half of the local editorials used any statistics in making their points. Letters to the editor avoided references to probability or probable cause, although several local and syndicated editorials used these terms to characterize the potential risks to minority drivers.

The use of institutional and social frames also appeared to be related to the author’s opinion on the morality of DWB. These attributional frames were also related to differences in whether or not the safety of police or African Americans was mentioned or if the author denied that profiling was racially motivated.

Variation between papers

We compared newspapers in order to determine whether or not region and demographic variation might influence how this issue was framed. The newspapers were divided into five regions: Northeast, South, Mid-West, West and National. There were 19 northeast,

15 southern, 13 mid-west, 10 west and 2 national columns. Articles from the northeast were overwhelmingly negative (79%). Articles from the south were primarily neutral (53.3%), most calling for more data in order to determine whether or not police are guilty of DWB. Neither the mid-west nor the western newspapers published any neutral columns; both regions published primarily negative items on their editorial pages.

String searches for the words “country” “nation” and “society” revealed that editorial items from the mid-west were most likely to conceptualize racial profiling as a national issue (33%). The mid-west was followed closely by the south (27%), the west (20%) and the northeast (19%). The northeast and west, however, were more likely to reference a historical context or event (74% and 70% respectively). Articles from the east and mid-west accounted for 66% percent of the columns that framed the issue around drugs. No significant differences existed between regions with regard to the mention of the safety of Black drivers or police. There also were no significant differences between regions with regard to proposed solutions, perceived effectiveness of profiling, or in the explicit denial of racial motivations for profiling.

In an attempt to answer the third question, “To what extent are differences in framing associated with differences in the racial composition of the newspaper’s primary market?,” we characterized newspaper markets in terms of their racial demographics. Because of the extreme variation between the number of Blacks in certain cities (ranging from 730 to 2.1 million), the markets were divided into four quartiles. As the number of African Americans increases, the proportion of the published items that were negative increases (from 50% in the lowest to 73% in the third quartile). In those cities with the largest Black populations, the items on the editorial pages were all negative, with the exception of a single item codes as neutral. These large cities accounted for 50% of the articles that linked profiling to drug trafficking. If cities are characterized in terms of black presence (proportion of African Americans in the population), the relationship changes dramatically. Only 56% of the editorial items in the markets in which the presence of African Americans is the greatest were characterized as negative.

Discussion and Conclusions

It is no surprise that so many of the editorial page items were published in the East and South. Interstate 95 (I-95) has been identified as a primary drug corridor. It was the site of numerous aggressive, controversial, and ultimately catastrophic attempts by police officers to stem the flow of drugs from Central America to the streets of Manhattan. Six states traversed by I-95 introduced legislation designed to assess and control racial profiling. What was unexpected was the way in which the editorial pages of Southern newspapers stood apart from those of papers in the rest of the United States. Southern authors were more likely than those in any other region to attempt to cast doubt on the validity of the statistics presented as evidence of racial profiling. More generally, these authors were also more likely to question the existence of the phenomenon. In suggesting that police officers could be innocent of the charge, they tended to argue that more studies would be needed in order to prove the existence of racial profiling.

Even those authors that were critical of racial profiling tended to be less harsh in their criticism of the police, society or in the use of profiles more generally. One such letter to the editor describes African American anger about DWB “understandable” but, in the same paragraph it equates their distress with that of “many Americans [who] find government sponsored race-based affirmative action to be equally motivated by barely disguised bigotry.” The view from the south was that if racial profiling exists, it is wrong; but so are other judgements based on race.

In addition to differences among regions, we also noted the tendency for letters to the editor to deny that profiling was racist. It is unclear whether these concerned readers were expressing a belief about the efficiency of profiling as a technology, or a belief regarding the probability that African American drivers are likely to be transporting illegal drugs. The evidence presented by the ACLU to the Maryland courts suggests that neither belief was justified by the facts (ACLU, 1996; Lamberth, 1998). The absence of references to statistics in letters to the editor suggests that members of the general public are not much affected by this form of argument or evidence.

Although the number of editorial items examined is surprisingly small, we believe our analysis raises some important questions about the ways in which an emotionally tinged issue is framed. We were surprised by the number of references to institutional racism in reference to law enforcement. A very substantial percentage of these items referred specifically to racism and race relations as critical issues for the nation. Although we did not attempt to pursue the racial identity of those who expressed opinions of this issue, it seemed that there was a sharp perceptual division between people around the issue of race and law enforcement.

On one hand we found anger and outrage. On the other we found doubt, and the sense of "there they go again," that Entman suggests is the likely response of Whites to Black complaints and political demands (1990). We found that these frames varied between regions, and they also varied as a function of the presence of African Americans within the population. There was no consistent effort by editorial writers to place racial profiling on the public agenda in the same way that race and affirmative action had been moved to central stage.

We believe that there is much to be learned from studying the ways in which the editorial page follows, leads, and far too often ignores important social issues. Benjamin Page (1996) believes that the editorial and opinion pages of our major newspapers are key sources for insight into the ways in which opinion leaders and policy elites engage each other in debate. Timothy Cook (1998) agrees that there is much for us to learn about the ways in which the press is involved in governance that we can learn from a study of op-ed pages. We hope that this little study convinces others that this is a path worth pursuing.

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