

Minding the gap: Covering inequality in the NY Times and the Washington Post

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Abstract

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Media coverage of social problems is understood to play a central role in placing these problems on the policy agenda. As we know from agenda setting theory, the amount of attention paid to problems is associated with the salience, or importance that the public places on them. Of course, bringing attention to problems does not ensure that solutions will be sought or pursued. In some cases, continued, or even periodic attention to what will become familiar problems leads to desensitization or a lack of concern. In similar fashion, repeated representation of the hardships that befall a particular group or class of victims may also contribute to a kind of fatigue in which the level of concern activated by periodic exposure to even favorable coverage actually declines over time. Policy advocates struggle to find new ways to frame both victims and favored policy responses, and they hope that the media will present these alternatives in novel and compelling ways.

The framing of inequality takes different forms as a function of the spheres in which the inequality is observed. Inequalities in the quality of life that people enjoy are often framed in the context of differential access to goods and services, and in terms of observable status obtained. Inequality is also discussed in terms of the institutional processes that limit, or reinforce disparity.

This paper explores the ways in which the New York Times and the Washington Post framed inequality from 1980 to 2000. The analysis centers on the way these elite newspapers frame disparities in health, education, economic status and resources, and treatment within the criminal justice system with regard to differences between groups defined by race and gender. Important differences between these papers emerge with regard to the amount of attention paid to racial inequality. The Washington Post paid absolutely and relatively more attention than the Times to racial disparity. The Times, on the other hand, paid relatively more attention to gender disparity than the Post. Differences were not as clear with regard to disparities in economics, health care, or criminal justice, although the Post was more attentive to stories about disparities in education. The discussion explores reasons for the differences between these elite newspapers.

Introduction

Recently, the New York Times published a remarkable series of articles on the nature and impact of social class in the United States that sought to identify the ways in which economic and social advantage and disadvantage continue to be reproduced (Scott & Leonhardt, 2005). Although the distribution of wealth in the United States is now more unequal than it has been in the not too distant past, the fact that there have been increases in wealth at most economic and social levels in the economy appear to have made growing inequality an acceptable fact of life.

Assessments of the public's level of concern about inequality in the United States (Bowman, 2000; Madrick, 2003; Wolfe, 1999) suggest that Americans share a kind of qualified acceptance of inequality (Kleugal & Smith, 1986). Americans tend to tolerate substantial inequality if they believe that opportunity is still generally available to those seeking to reduce the gap (Ladd & Bowman, 1998). This view reinforces a core ideological assumption about the American Dream being possible for anyone willing to devote the time and energy that the generation of wealth requires.

The salience of the public's awareness of inequality rises and falls in response to a host of competing influences. For example, The Wall Street Journal (Davis, Lyons & Batson, 2007) recently identified rising inequality as an unanticipated and troublesome consequence of globalization. They suggested that increased economic inequality in the world's poorer nations represents a serious threat to political stability in those nations at the same time that it threatens to reduce popular support for continued liberalization of trade and foreign investment. Global inequality was apparently even on the mind of one of the world's richest men, leading Bill Gates to focus his Harvard graduation address on his claim that "reducing inequity is the highest human achievement" (Guth, 2007, p. 1).

Globalization, and increasing poverty are not the only indicators of rising inequality that attract the attention of scholars and the public at large. Studies of inequality or resource gaps focus on a diverse array of indicators. An increasingly popular subject of analysis is the nature of the disparity in health status (Victoria, et al., 2003), and access to the health care services upon which good health status depends (Cornelius, 2000; Institute of Medicine, 2003). The first annual report on healthcare disparities was published in 2003 (Agency). The report examined the ways in which differences in access to quality healthcare varied by race, ethnicity, income, education and place of residence. The conclusions of this comprehensive analysis were that disparities were likely to increase over the coming half-century.

Similarly, studies of inequality in access to information have focused on access to information technologies such as computers and network technology. Inequality in access along racial and gender lines has been discussed in terms of a "digital divide." (Mason & Hacker, 2003). Research into the nature of this disparity in access has increased over the years, and not surprisingly, debate still rages over the quality of its measurement (Martin,

2003; Robinson, DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2003). Of particular importance is the extent to which debate about the digital divide leads to its gaining a place on the public policy agenda.

Public concern about gaps in educational attainment varies as a function of the ways in which the problem is framed. When inequality in education can be ascribed to racial discrimination, the public is more likely to support private and public initiatives to narrow the gap than when the problem of access is framed in terms of a “diversity” rationale (Renner & Moore, 2004). The diversity rationale began to replace a concern with educational equity following the Supreme Courts’ acceptance of this alternative rationale in its 1978 *Bakke* decision. As a result, the gap in educational attainment between Whites and minority group members has steadily increased, while the public’s level of concern has lagged behind.

Academic investigations of the causes and consequences of income inequality have explored a variety of factors, not the least of which is the relationship between inequality and domestic prosperity. Neither wealth, nor widely valued features of democratic governance seem to be related in any systematic way to income inequality, although people are better off, relatively, and absolutely under conditions of higher average wealth and civil rights (Roll & Talbert, 2002). The same assumptions are made in studies of the relationship between investments in the development of the capacities of women, and the rates of growth in the national economy. The data do suggest that gender inequality in education tends to retard economic growth (Dollar & Gatti, 1999).

Unfortunately, the causal relationship between progressive social policy and economic equality has not been firmly established. As some observers suggest “we don’t even know whether policies intended to reduce income disparity actually deliver resources to the poor, nor whether they have any impact whatsoever on the rich or on the average citizen” (Roll & Talbert, 2002, p.7). Of course, the absence of clear evidence does not stand in the way of attempts to shape public policy in one way or the other.

Framing Inequality

It seems likely that the mass media play a central role in shaping public tolerance of different forms of inequality (Conrad, 1997). The ways in which the media frame disparity shapes both our estimate of the magnitude of the gap, as well as our sense of who bears the responsibility for its existence or its amelioration (Iyengar, 1996; Iorio & Huxman, 1996; Kahneman & Tversky, 1984).

A central aspect of media framing relates to the ways in which the winners and the losers are identified (Goshorn & Gandy, 1995, Gandy, et al., 1997; Padin, 2005). The framing of racial inequality in terms of White privilege, rather than Black disadvantage may actually work to activate guilt, and reduce prejudice among members of the privileged group (Powell, Branscombe & Schmitt, 2005).

While there is evidence to suggest that the ideological orientation of media users helps to shape their preference for policies designed to address the problem of inequality (Brewer

& Gross, 2005; Pan & Kosicki, 1996), the influence of framing decisions made by journalists and their editors has an independent impact on the public response (Avraham, 2002; D'Angelo, 2002; Reese, 2001).

It is also important to understand that media frames are not entirely the product of journalistic routines. The media's elite sources are also influential providers of policy relevant issue frames (Gandy, 1982; Pride, 1999; Van Dijk, 1993). The array of policy relevant frames is also influenced by a host of other factors that include the number and variety of competing issues on the policy agenda that are accompanied by their own distinct set of frames (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). Some theorists have even attempted to associate changes in media frames with cyclical changes in national and global economic indicators (Davis & Gandy, 1998; Kellstedt, 2000). Kellstedt (2000, p. 256) for example, observed that as "expectations of the economic future become rosier, egalitarian cues in the national media become more prevalent."

The Framing of Inequality at the end of the Century

The rise and fall of public concerns and the frames that shape public understanding can be mapped through an analysis of their presentation in elite newspapers such as the New York, and Los Angeles Times (Danielson & Lasorsa, 1997). This study reports on a comparative analysis of the New York Times (Times) and the Washington Post (Post). These two papers were selected primarily because of the different racial, economic, and political significance of their cities of publication. The Post, published in a city characterized by the prominence of its African American population, is also characterized by its status as the center of the US government. These characteristics are likely to shape its attention to both federal policy, and matters of racial inequality.

The primary frame for much published news and commentary can be identified from the headline (Pfau, 1995), although it has also been noted that the assignment of headlines to wire service stories can be used strategically to shift the reader's understanding of the article (van Dijk, 1988; Geer & Kahn, 1993; Zillman & Brosius, 2000). Blood and Phillips (1997) used time series analysis of New York Times headlines to examine the relationship between the news, the state of the economy, and the economic and political sentiments expressed by the general public over time. Their analysis provided what they claimed was "clear empirical evidence in support of the agenda-setting effects of media influence" (p. 111): negative headlines led to negative consumer sentiment. Of more critical importance, the data suggest that the headlines, rather than the actual economic conditions as indicated by standard indicators, actually shaped public perception.

This study examines the rise and fall of elite media attention to the problems of inequality between 1980 and 2000. It characterizes the relative importance of stories about inequality between people defined by race and gender. Media attention to disparities in health, education, criminal justice, and economic status and resources is assessed through an analysis of articles that were published in the Times and Post.

Electronic indices for the two newspapers were searched in the following way: 1) the full text search was limited to the headlines and lead paragraphs, 2) articles were qualified if inequality in the United States is its primary focus, 3) inequality expressed in comparative terms was especially relevant, as in inequality between groups defined by race, class, or gender. The search across the 21 years produced 218 qualified articles for the Times and 326 articles for the Post.

Each of the articles was coded by a single coder (Yang). Reliability was assessed on the basis of a recoded sample ($n = 94$) of the items used in the analysis. There was perfect agreement with regard to the assignment of articles to their relevant group (race/gender). With regard to the identification of article domain (economics, healthcare, education, criminal justice), agreement was observed for 95.7% of the comparisons ($Kappa = .942$, $p < .001$).

Differential Emphasis

Although the two papers differed in the number of articles they published, the articles tended to be of similar length (750.12 words on the average for the Times, and 749.56 words for the Post). However, while the Times devoted relatively more text per article about racial inequality than the Post (787/757 words), the Times devoted relatively less space per article for stories about gender inequality (665/710).

The Times also tended to publish longer articles (857 words) about Criminal Justice while the Post devoted similar amounts of text to both Economics (796) and Education (792), and relatively less (662) to Health.

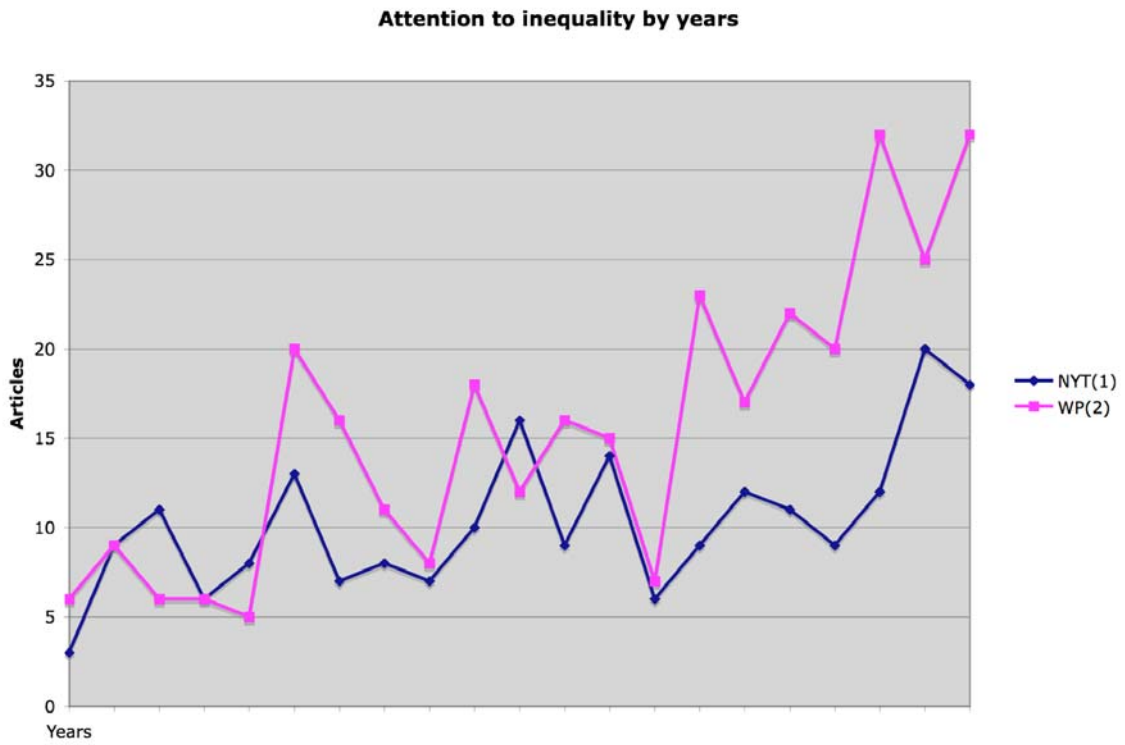
While the Post published more articles on inequality, the Times had a slightly greater emphasis on gender inequality than the Post (12.3/10.3%). The Post devoted substantially more articles on racial inequality than the Times (49.6/27.8%). The overall difference was highly significant (Contingency Coefficient, .157, $p = .000$).

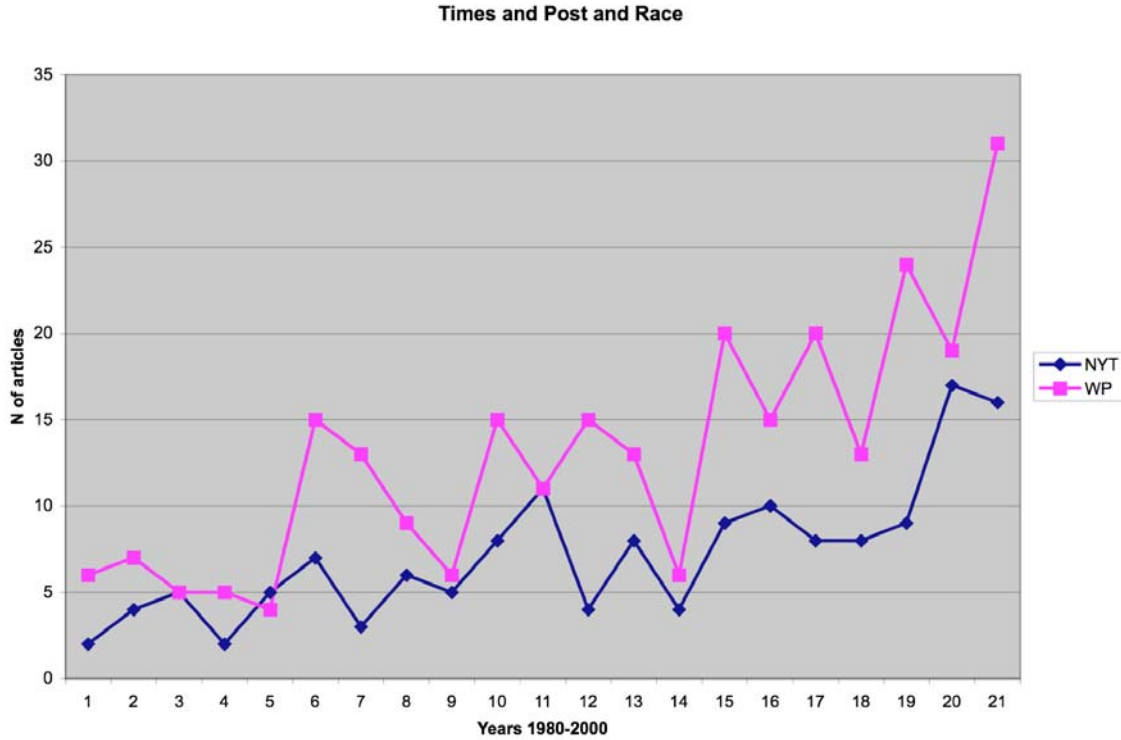
The newspapers allocated the same proportion of their stories to articles about economic disparity (~33%) and criminal justice (~21%) but differed considerably more with regard to the other two domains. While the Times devoted more attention to health than the Post (32.1/27.0%); the Post devoted more attention to education (19.0/12.8%) than the Times. These differences were not statistically significant overall, however (Contingency Coefficient, .088, $p = .235$).

Inequality over the years

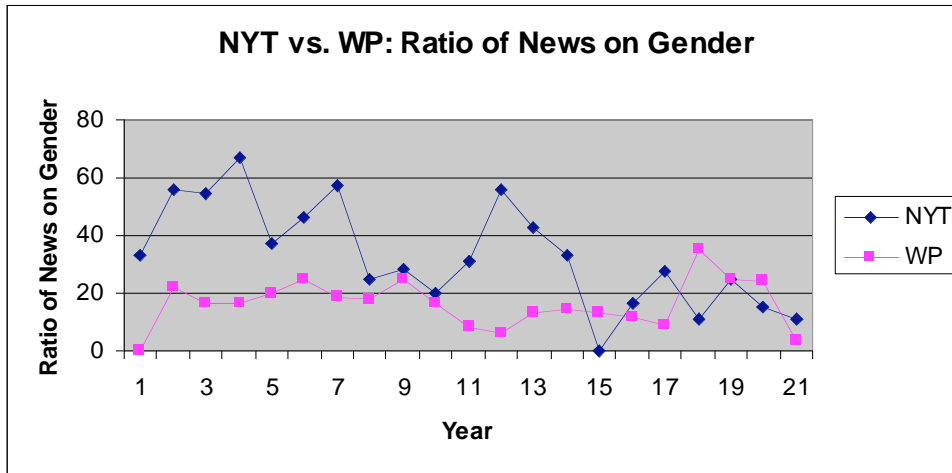
These two newspapers might be expected to differ in their coverage of the inequality story over the years, in part because they cover both local and national stories. However, it is also possible to identify a critical point at which these papers began to diverge in their attention to inequality. In 1994, the Post tripled its coverage of inequality, while the Times only increased its coverage by half. While all the stories published in that year by the Times were about racial disparity, primarily disparities in health, the Post devoted

more than half of its stories to an exploration of economic inequality. Like the Times, the Post focused almost entirely on racial inequality in that year.

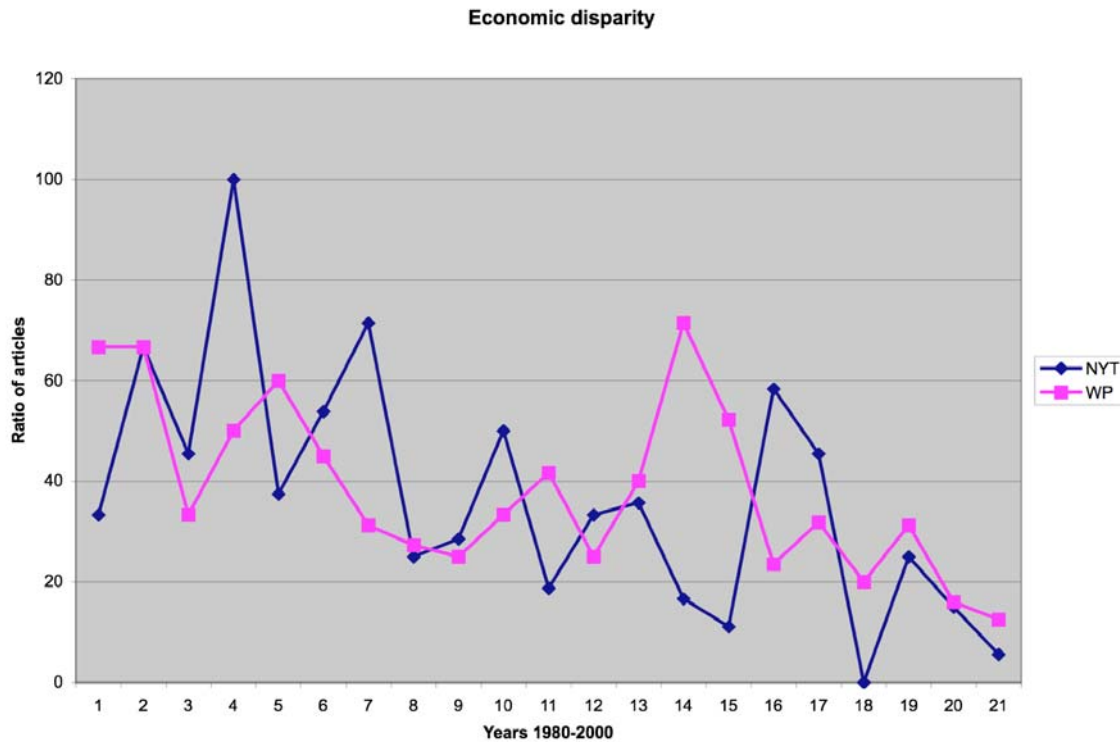




The Post consistently paid more attention to racial disparity than the Times. The differences in attention to these stories increased in the mid-90's.



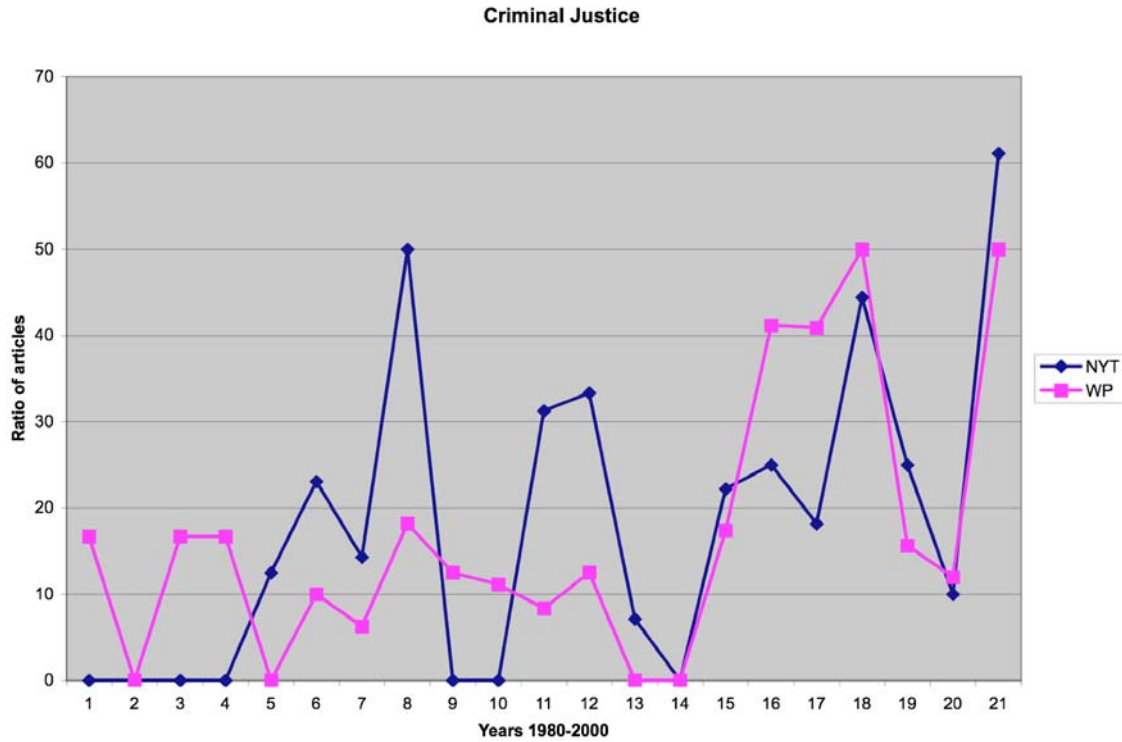
While the Times' coverage tended to focus somewhat more on race more than gender, it was in 1994 that this paper's coverage began to focus almost exclusively on racial inequality. The Post, on the other hand, always devoted more of its coverage to racial as compared with gender inequality.



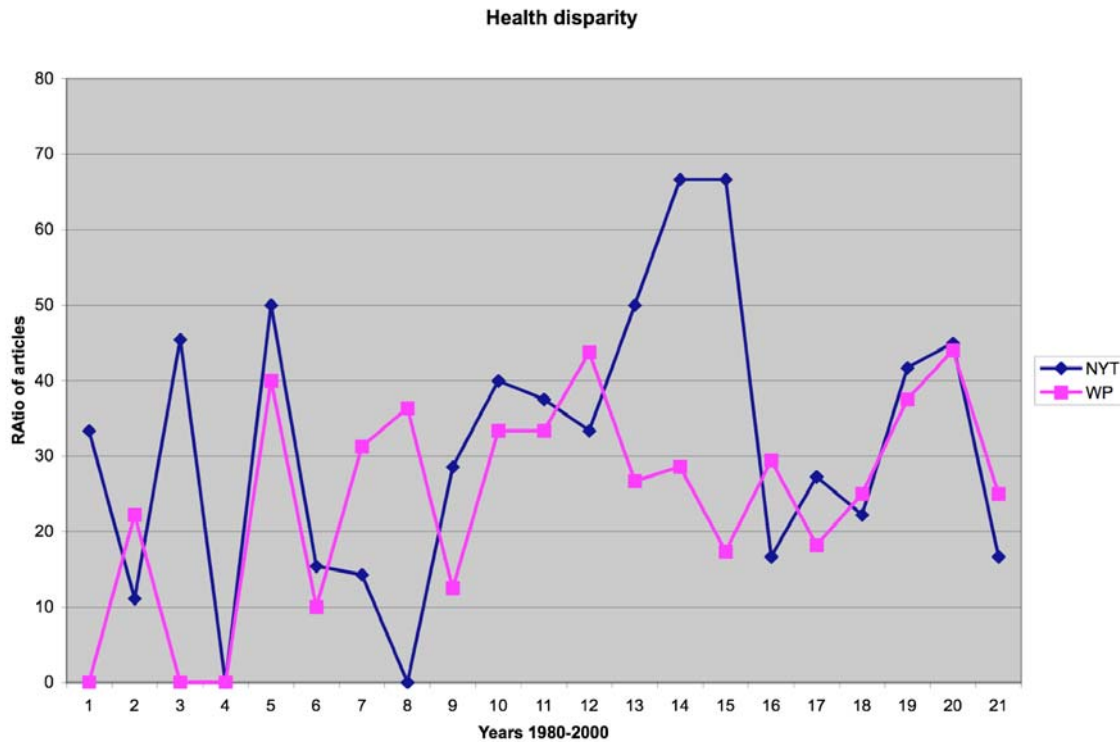
The Post and Times revealed a similar pattern of growing disinterest in stories about economic disparity. These newspapers' interest in income inequality appears to decline at the same time that income inequality had been rising in the US (Jones & Weinberg, 2000).

Although there was a noticeable trend toward greater attention to issues related to inequality within the criminal justice system, no such trend was observed with regard to stories about health care.

While the Times and Post evidenced similar patterns in their coverage of criminal justice, when we compared the newspapers in terms of their relative emphasis, the Times devoted substantially more of its budget for inequality to criminal justice stories than the Times in 1987, 1990, and 1991. In 1987, the stories in the Times were primarily about the death penalty. Because this was a national, rather than a local story, the failure of the Post to also cover this story is striking.



The Times also differed dramatically from the Post in the amount of attention it paid to disparities in health in 92-94. No particular story dominated health coverage during these years. Although 1994 was marked by an emphasis on stories about racial disparities in health, only one of those stories had a local focus.



Dominant concerns

Media attention to particular aspects of inequality is shaped in part by the presence or absence of major news events, published reports, court decisions, or legislative debates. For the purposes of a comparative analysis, a dominant concern was identified if the number of articles on a particular issue was equal to or greater than half of all the items in its category for a given year.

Times coverage of stories about gender inequality were dominated by stories about the special hardships faced by older women in 1986.

In 1987, coverage of racial inequality in the Times was dominated by coverage of stories about the death penalty. It was reported that there was remarkable inequality in the use of the death penalty. Defendants, whose victims were White, were more likely to be sentenced to death, than were defendants whose victims were non-White. This particular story also dominated the criminal justice category, although there was a second criminal justice story in 1997 that was racial in its effect, if not in its framing.

It was reported that convicted users of “crack” cocaine received longer sentences than users of powdered cocaine. Crack users were more likely to be African American than not. It was especially notable that the story about inequality in cocaine sentencing appeared, and was dominant in the Post two years earlier (1995) than it did in the Times. This continuing story was covered in brief items appearing in the Times in 1997. Overall, there were far more articles about inequality in the operation of the criminal justice system in the Post than the Times during this three year span (95-97).

Framing the cocaine story

The cocaine story emerged in the Washington Post in March 1995 (Locy, 1995). This was a national story, based on a report by the U.S. Sentencing Commission submitted to the House and Senate Judiciary committees, indicating that federal sentencing guidelines that were tougher on crack dealers would have a disparate impact on African Americans. The article noted “a dealer selling 50 grams of crack faces a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in prison. A powdered cocaine dealer must be caught selling 100 times as much of the drug to get the same sentence.” The article, reflecting the emphasis of the Commission report, noted that there was no evidence that the disparate impact on African Americans was intentional. An ACLU representative was quoted as criticizing the Commission for identifying a problem without making any recommendations for addressing it.

In August, a column by Ari Armstrong (1995) included arguments of those who supported maintaining the harsher penalty for crack cocaine. Supporters argued that the marketing of crack produced enough increased violence to justify the stiffer penalties.

By November, the story had made its way to the Sunday Outlook section (Morley, 1995), where the governing frame shifted to a more comprehensive analysis of the racial impact of the nation’s developing anti-drug policies.

By 1997, the focus of the cocaine story reported by the Times had become little more than periodic requests that something be done about the disparity; reducing it, if not eliminating it all together (Wren, 1997). The Post, on the other hand, continued to give the story prominent coverage. In addition to reporting on the Clinton administration proposal to reduce the sentencing disparity, an additional article on the story noted the fact that what was considered “one of the more racially sensitive issues in criminal justice” would be addressed for a second time that year by the Supreme Court (Biskupic, 1997). More critically, this article suggested that because “90 percent of the prisoners convicted for crack crimes are black, while most crack users are white...the law ‘results in a perception of unfairness and inconsistency’.” Stopping short of an explicit appeal to moral and ethical responsibility, the article raised the possibility of a backlash in respect for the law among its victims.

Privilege versus disadvantage

Gandy and Li (2005) observed that newspapers tended to frame stories about racial disparity in terms of “Black loss” rather than “White success.” This focus on disadvantage rather than privilege, especially in the context of a commonplace tendency to blame the victim, when the victim is positioned as “one of them” rather than “one of us” tends to result in a minimization of the importance of any disparity to members of the privileged group.

A similar tendency is observed with regard to the framing of statistical comparisons in which the target of the comparison is the underprivileged group (Wanke, Schwarz & Noelle-Neumann, 1995). Ironically, this tendency among well meaning journalists to focus on victims may actually serve to reproduce the disadvantages that the victims face.

At the very least, the victimization frame may reduce the intensity with which those with the power to make a difference will pursue solutions to the problem of inequality.

For the analysis of loss framing in the Times and Post, all headlines that included an explicit racial identification were assessed in order to determine which groups were identified as winners or losers. Headlines were only coded as being framed in this way if there was explicit identification of Black, or minority group members as losers, or if there was explicit identification of Whites as winners. The same approach was used for the analysis of the headlines of articles about gender inequality.

The analysis reveals a similar pattern for both Blacks and women. Approximately 28.2% of all headlines from stories about racial inequality were framed in terms of Black loss, while 29.2% of all headlines in stories about gender inequality were framed in terms of Female loss. Headlines about Whites or men winning were extremely rare (1.7% or 2.4%). However, when we examine the use of the Black loss frame by these papers with regard to particular story themes, important differences emerge. While the Times and the Post were both more likely to use the victimization frame in stories about economic inequality, the Post's usage of this frame was almost exclusively (80.9%) devoted to stories exploring this theme ($\chi^2 = 16.105, p = .001$).

Two cases have been selected to illustrate how this kind of framing is usually encountered within this kind of story.

In 1993 and 1994, articles about disparities in health were relatively common in the Times. A central focus among these stories was the higher risk that African Americans faced with regard to cancer and infant mortality. But there were also stories that were framed in terms of Black vulnerability to AIDS and to heart attack. While most of the articles reported uncertainty about the causes of the heightened risks African Americans faced, one article suggested that the cause might be genetic; while three others suggested that a cause may be associated with disparities in the nature of the care being provided. There were no stories focused on inequality in health or health care in the Post during this time period.

A relatively lengthy (1,212 words) article in the Times (Kolata, 1994) focused on the absence of a good explanation for the fact that Black women were much more likely to die from breast cancer than White women, despite the fact that White women were more likely to get breast cancer in the first place. Although concerns about the impact of poverty and a lack of medical care were still salient, the discovery that Black women were apparently susceptible to a more deadly form of cancer re-opened the door on a discussion about fundamental differences in racial groups. Most of the other stories about racial disparities in health outcomes in the Times suggested that poor outcomes for Black and minority patients could be explained by lower quality care.

The story that dominated coverage in the Post during this period was about economic inequality, primarily with regard to the difficulty that African Americans faced in the market for mortgages, loans and banking services. In an extensive article (3,547 words)

published as part of a series on racial disparity in access to banking, the lead paragraphs emphasize the difficulties Black customers face trying to complete a transaction.

Cars fill every parking space and stream out into traffic at the American Security Bank on South Capital Street in the District. Inside the tiny branch office, customers are pressed against one another, standing 20-deep in a line just to cash their checks or make deposits with one of the branch's four tellers (Spayd & Brenner, 1993, A1).

This episodic frame is broadened to reveal the article's primary theme in the third paragraph where this particular bank is marked as "one more sign of the vast disparities in service that local financial institutions provide black and white neighborhoods." The next paragraph refers to another branch in an upscale white neighborhood where customers rarely stand in line.

Stories focused on gender inequality in the Post were concentrated in the years between 1997 and 1999. Most of these stories were about inequalities in health. These stories noted women's vulnerability to heart attack, depression, and injuries, such as those from falls. A few articles suggested that women received a low level of care, and a rare article suggested that women actually fared better than men, as in the case of trauma.

A brief article (321 words) emphasized differences in the nature of care men and women received from their doctors (Colburn, 1997). The headline exclaimed that "Women heart patients get different treatment," while the first sentence in the story clarified that difference to mean that the care received by women was less aggressive than the care that men received. The result was that the health of men improved, while that of women declined.

A somewhat different slant was observed in a relatively lengthy (1,250 words) article about trauma (Boodman, 1999). In a rather unusual example in which the outcome and the frame emphasized male loss, the article reported on a study of trauma patients that found that males were more likely to develop serious infections after surgery than were women. Immediately after noting the gender disparity, the article indicated that the cause might be biological, associated with the "deleterious effects of testosterone." The article was consistent throughout in its use of a victim frame, where males were the targets of comparisons in which they lost.

At this point, I will resist the temptation to make too much of the fact that a woman authored the article, and that the lead was particularly evaluative in its framing: "So, which is the weaker sex?" I will merely suggest that the identity of the author and her assumptions about her audience may have led to this particular framing.

Discussion and conclusion

This retrospective assessment of the coverage of inequality by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* supports several observations. Overall, these elite papers have been remarkably similar in their attention to the problem of inequality over this 21-year period.

Although both papers became more similar in their attention race and gender inequality in the mid 90's, throughout earlier the period the Post paid relatively more attention to racial inequality than the Times, while the Times, paid relatively more attention to gender. It seems reasonable to conclude that the racial composition of the Post's primary market justified its greater emphasis on race.

Both papers appeared to operate in lockstep with regard to their declining interest in economic disparity, and their increased interest in disparities in criminal justice and health care. However, we did observe that their levels of attention to inequality diverged substantially in 1994, with the Post devoting more and more stories to inequality over the next several years.

The most likely explanation for this substantial change is some modification in editorial policy and corporate management. An important change in management at the Post was the appointment in 1994 of a new vice president, Patrick Butler, who was to be responsible for both public policy and new business development. Butler's appointment coincided with an improved economic performance for the paper that had recently been challenged for readers by the more conservative *Washington Times*, and the loss Ben Bradlee's leadership of the paper's editorial staff.

These papers differed in the extent to which their coverage of a particular category of stories was dominated by a particular theme or event. Again, it seems reasonable to assume that the Post's emphasis on the story of drug enforcement reflected the racial composition of its primary market.

Both papers were quite similar in their reliance on the victimization frame, and their avoidance of a frame that emphasized the privileged groups defined by race and gender. Because of the role of group identification plays in shaping the ways that members of the public respond to policy relevant frames, these data suggest that elite newspapers may actually be reinforcing the tendency among the privileged to minimize the importance of racial and gender disparities.

As a matter of editorial policy, elite newspapers, and those that follow them, should explore the best ways to frame inequality in terms of privilege. The feelings of guilt that may accompany a realization of the impact of one's group privilege may be a reasonable price to pay if it leads to a more just, and equitable society (Powell, Branscombe & Schmitt, 2005, p. 519).

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