Racial Exclusion, Economics or Something Else Entirely?

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Abstract

Newspapers have been a part of our society dating back to the 1800's and as such, play a large role in how our society receives and interprets the news and important cultural information. (Phil Barber) As a country the United States is young and our population is forever changing and evolving both socially, economically and racially. This article focuses on the racial differences and changes that are having a profound affect not only on everyday life but, also politically and economically. The purpose of my thesis was to see if the current changes taking place would be reflected in our cultural media and exclusively for the purposes of this research the New York Times. With minority members increasing in our society not only numerically but, also in terms of power and authority, I wondered would the paper reflect this change. What I found after looking at 3 months of papers was that the New York Times in fact did not reflect the change evident in our society however, not for many of the reasons I believed at the onset of my research. Rather economic forces were most likely to blame for the lack of representation evident in the New York Times.

Introduction

Whether it is to check the movie listings or the weather report newspapers have globally been the primary source of current events. Newspapers have been and continue to play an integral part in American history. In addition to informing the American public of the most current and important events taking place within the United States newspapers also provide insight into what is taking place around the globe. (Phil Barber) Of course today, in the digital age we currently live in, newspapers have fallen to the third most used way in which Americans receive their news followed by television and the internet. (NAA) To keep up with the times many newspaper have added online editions of and in some cases such as New Weekly have done away with paper editions altogether. (NBC News) Despite the change in our culture and the way we receive news, newspapers are at par with television as a source of news in terms of daily exposure. (NAA) Sixty seven percent of the adult public watches at least some television and reads at least one newspaper on any given day. (NAA) Additionally newspapers are read in 75 percent of all U.S. households and are in the hands of over 110 million adults on any given weekday. (NAA)

In addition to the changes we currently see in newspapers our country is also experiencing a change in the racial and ethnic makeup that exists. America has long been referred to as a "melting pot" or a "salad bowl" made up of a diverse group of individuals that in sum represent America as a whole. (Hoover Institution) Our "melting pot" is changing, and at a fast rate according to the 2012 census. By the year 2043, Caucasian Americans will no longer make up the majority in American society according to the census bureau. (Census) This change occurring within the United States does not just revolve around the long held black/white dichotomy but, also includes those Americans that are multiracial. (Saulny, Susan) By 2060 this group of Americans is projected to more than triple from 7.5 million to 26.7 million. (Census)

In order to try and answer my research question I first had to subscribe to the Times, something that I discuss further as having an effect on the lack of representativeness later on. I subscribed to the Times for a total of three months August, September, and October of 2012. This totaled 96 news editions that I looked at for the purpose of this research. In order to get to the question at hand I looked at the first page of each New York Times. Only those articles that made the front cover were a part of my research. For each front page I looked at several different variables to try to determine if it was representative or not. I looked at the feature story for each cover and noted the topic of the story and the photo if one was attached. I also did the same for each story noted on the cover. The articles on the front page were separated into five different categories that involved minorities those that did not, and those that were positive neutral or negative. Every story on each of the editions front page was put into one of those five categories.

Methods

In the graph above you can see that for the month of September 2012 whites outnumbered racial minorities in representation by an 8 to 1 ratio. As stated above, the number of pictures and stories featuring minorities is more pronounced than normal since the research took place during the presidential election of Barack Obama. Of those pictures depicted on the front page of the Times 13 of the 19 were pictures of President Barack Obama.

Economics

After looking at over 90 editions of The New York Times it is obvious that the newspaper does not reflect even the current state of the racial and ethnic makeup of the United States, and I found no indication that the number to which minorities were spoken about were increasing or going to increase. As mentioned above the times motto of "All the News that's fit to Sell" seems to ring true.

We know that looking at the larger US population African Americans represent thirteen percent of the population while Hispanics represent seventeen percent of the population for a total of twenty-nine percent of the population. However, their representation through The New York Times over the course of 3 months only amounted to .028. Depicted in the graph below we can see the comparison of what the stories should have looked like if the Times were truly representative compared to what I found.

Conclusion

Economic forces play a major role in all of society and the newspaper industry is not the exception. In fact one of the most important aspects to remember about the newspaper industry is that it is just that an industry. The bottom line is to make a profit. I can only assume that with racial and ethnic minorities gaining both numerically and in terms of their wealth and power newspapers and other news source outlets will increase their representation of minorities. As the economic needs of newspapers come into alignment with being able to represent racial minorities, I hope that newspapers will embrace their economic freedom and do the right thing.