REMOTE CONTROL:

HOW MASS MEDIA DELEGITIMIZE RIOTING AS SOCIAL PROTEST

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Abstract: This study investigates newspaper coverage of contemporary riots. An analysis of the Los Angeles riots of 1992 and the Cincinnati riots of 2001 demonstrates the media's role in situating riotous activity within very specific frames. The authors contend that newspaper coverage of recent riots represents a shift in the way media frame rioting. Race riots of the 1960s are often linked to and situated within the social protest frame by media (the authors contend that a great difference exists between the Civil Rights Movement and the race riot). Contemporary riots like those in Los Angeles and Cincinnati are most often framed as ineffective, illogical protests against established order, and not as mechanisms for progressive social change.

Keywords: riot, race, police, brutality, newspaper, mass media.

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We can behave barbarically toward a group of people best if we can call them barbarians and thus appear only to be defending our civilized norms. (Gerbner, 1978:14)

Media depictions of U.S. riots have been remarkably consistent in recent decades. Despite claims of objectivity, balance and fairness, coverage has almost exclusively served to reinforce the need for social order while vilifying those who actively seek to defy systemic forms of oppression and authority, particularly when the participants are non-White.

All Americans were privy to a unique view, via the mass disseminated, "objective" gaze of the video camera, of Los Angeles Police Department officers beating Rodney King. When the same police officers were acquitted on April 29, 1992, Black citizens of Los Angeles rioted so violently that America was shaken to its very core. Contemporary rioters are not linked to an established movement. As such, mediated depictions of modern riots represent a significant shift away from the more balanced and sympathetic media framing of riots and rioters during the 1960s. During that era, the media generally associated rioting with the Civil Rights Movement and other efforts to secure freedoms. According to Button (1978), such coverage supported what was at the time a rather widespread liberal perspective on rioting—a sense that violent acts are inevitable in the struggle to redistribute power in any political system, and that efforts toward social and economic progress should alleviate the tensions that lead to rioting. In contrast, the 1992 riots, which are not linked with any recognized movement, have been framed by mass media as largely futile and even as an ill-expressed rage against order—a frame that clearly supports a conservative perspective on social unrest, according to Button (1978).

While past uprisings were generally precipitated by the perception of a "deep wrong" such as murder or rape having been committed, in fact or in rumor, against the person of a member of one racial group by a member of another (Lieberson & Silverman, 1965), the 1992 L.A. riots paralleled the Miami riots of 1980. In both instances, the riots followed a legal verdict, not a violent act. On May 1, 1992, the Washington Post wrote:

When four White police officers delivered 58 blows of their nightsticks to one unarmed, undefended Black man, they dealt a crippling blow to the
Black community's faith in the law enforcement system. Despite Black Americans' horror at the videotaped scene of violence, they exercised restraint, trusting in the nation's justice system to right the wrong that had been done. ("For the Record," p. A26)

Los Angeles, however, does not represent the first time urban residents took to the streets in response to police brutality and subsequent police acquittals. In 1980, Miami residents responded in similar fashion when police officers were acquitted after fatally beating a Black motorist. In the case of both Miami (1980) and L.A. (1992), then, waiting to riot until after the verdict was announced was an expression of some faith in the system by the urban core. But the system ultimately betrayed African Americans. Subsequently, nearly a decade following the L.A. riots, Blacks in Cincinnati revolted after a White police officer shot and killed Timothy Thomas, an unarmed Black man. This time, the rioters did not wait for the trial; they immediately took to the streets in protest.

This article will examine the ways in which rioting functions in an unequal society and how the media serve to frame this form of social protest, using the Washington Post and The New York Times as texts for thematic analysis. We will seek to establish the ways in which the Post and the Times reported incidents during the L.A. riots and the consistency of this coverage when reporting on the Cincinnati riots. In doing so, we hope to confirm the salience of the urban response to the Rodney King verdict and how that response—and the mediated depiction of the response—reflects newspaper journalists' continued framing of riots and rioters.

RIOTING AS HISTORICAL EXPRESSION

According to Olzak and Shanahan (1996), riots are the violent expression of two very different types of social unrest: race/ethnic protests and race/ethnic conflicts. The first type of uprising, the researchers suggest, finds a distinct group expressing a grievance or demonstrating against the existing power structure on the basis of ethnic or racial identity, while race/ethnic conflicts involve one group attacking another racial/ethnic collective or a group representing the sociopolitical structure, such as the police or the military. Olzak and Shanahan conclude that large-scale riots may erupt as a result of either type of demonstration, though violence is generally not an intended purpose of race/ethnic protests, and is rarely instigated by the protesters themselves. In similar fashion, Lieberson and Silverman (1965) define riots as "... a generalized response directed at a collectivity rather than the offender" (p. 891), and further note that such actions are "... frequently misunderstood" (p. 898), often attributed to criminals and rabble-rousers rather than to respectable citizens in desperate search of a means to express their dissatisfaction with current conditions and policies. Oberschall (1993) concurs, noting that such acts do indeed contain "normative and rational elements" (p. 257). In other words, while riots are clearly the by-product of more legitimate—and legitimizing—forms of unrest, because the attendant violence is
rarely directed at those responsible for the unrest, or even aimed specifically at larger groups seen to represent the guilty party or system, it becomes far too easy to frame these moments of collective brutality and terror as nothing more than meaningless, futile expressions of violence.

Researchers have argued for decades over the exact causes of racial unrest in contemporary American society. For example, Olzak and Shanahan (1996) point to a trio of theories around which many social and political scientists have shaped their own "explanations" for the sporadic outbursts of violence that have marked U.S. history over the past half-century. According to the researchers, deprivation theories suggest that communities with high concentrations of people of color who have low levels of education or are engaged in highly segregated, low-paying jobs have proven historically to be hotbeds of racial unrest. At the same time, however, other researchers argue that racial violence actually follows a decrease in deprivation. As disparities in education, employment and political opportunities between White and Black residents decrease, expectations among people of color increase, and racial unrest is fomented. In a related sense, resource mobilization theories suggest that as inequality is reduced between members of different racial groups, a share of the increased resources enjoyed by marginalized racial/ethnic collectives is channeled into protest efforts that eventually encourage violent action. Finally, competition theories argue that as racial and ethnic boundaries overlap in contemporary America's integrated communities, competition for scarce resources also increases. Under such conditions, the process of new groups making inroads on established or more powerful groups has resulted in efforts by the stronger groups to exclude the weaker ones from competition. When less powerful groups attempt to counteract this exclusion, racial violence is often triggered.

Olzak and Shanahan (1996) assert that both mobilization and competition theorists have come to attribute racial violence to a combination of a decrease in racial inequality and a gradual breakdown of traditional segregation in America's cities. The mutually reinforcing cycle of marginalized groups' increased ability to compete for resources, then, and the dominant group's attempts to resist such competition has resulted in conditions ripe for social unrest, according to those who embrace these and related hypotheses of social interaction.

A host of studies has both confirmed and rejected these general assumptions about racial violence. In an early analysis of global outbursts of racial unrest throughout history, for example, Lieberson (1961) concludes that complete assimilation of less powerful groups by more powerful ones is the best remedy for racial unrest. For his part, Spilerman (1970) finds little evidence to support either resource mobilization or deprivation theories, concluding that "... the larger the Negro population, the greater the likelihood of a disorder. Little else appears to matter" (p. 645). Button (1978) suggests that riots may be more prevalent in times when there is a perception on the part of marginalized groups that available resources are not being equitably distributed to their communities—and a corresponding belief on the part of the group in power that such resources simply
are not available for wider distribution. McPhail (1991) argues that collective behaviors are much more complex than previously assumed, and that group violence in the public arena is a relatively rare occurrence. Tilly (1978) suggests that citizens' greater familiarity with such public behaviors as demonstrations and marches, coupled with their lack of familiarity with violent public acts, may serve as a constraint against rioting. Finally, in an analysis of some 76 events occurring in the U.S. between 1913 and 1963 that they define as "Negro-White race riots" (p. 887), Lieberson and Silverman (1965) note that such violence is almost always precipitated by crimes against persons rather than property. Because such offenses arouse the greatest media attention and public concern, they are also the most likely to trigger racial violence. Interestingly, Lieberson and Silverman assert that the crimes most commonly responsible for fomenting racial unrest are different for specific racial groups: For African Americans, offenses committed by law enforcement officers are the most frequent causes of riots, while for Anglo Americans, the rape of White women by Black men and the violation of "taboos" against interracial contact have most often caused riotous behavior.

Given the focus of contemporary media reports on riots, one might be surprised to learn that American history contains at least as many examples of White "race" riots as of Black ones. Indeed, when one takes into account the estimated 3,700 lynchings of Black men in the U.S. between 1889 and 1930 alone (Lieberson & Silverman, 1965)—an act of violence that is generally not considered a "riot" because it is directed at a specific individual rather than at a group—the balance clearly tips in favor of Anglo Americans as the more common perpetrators of racial violence. Yet the uprisings that ensued from White perceptions of Black violations of taboos on "... civil liberties, public facilities, segregation, political events, and housing" (Lieberson & Silverman, 1965:889) have been overshadowed in history by media coverage of the 1960s-era revolts and other events definitively linked to Black inner-city unrest. As but one example of this trend, Button (1978), in his study of "Black violence," is careful to operationalize his use of the term "riot," yet never explains how he determines which events in his study constitute "Black" riots. In failing to do so, he gives the impression that all race riots are triggered by African Americans—a conclusion that only contributes to the wholesale equation of rioting with race, and thus with Black unrest in particular, in the public's mind.

What most Americans tend to overlook when analyzing riots and other instances of civil unrest is the notion that riots and civil disobedience are political as well as racial. The "Boston Massacre" and the "Boston Tea Party" are just two examples of rioting as a means of fighting various forms of oppression—means that are woven into the very fabric of American society (Gilje, 1996). Still, many Americans fail to see these celebrated historical acts as riots—further evidence of the active deligitimization of the concept through contemporary media treatments.

Much like the patriotic rebellions of the 18th century, modern forms of urban upheaval continue to shape and transform American society. More than 300
important incidents of rioting took place in 257 American cities between 1964 and 1968 (Button, 1978). Contemporary urban Black uprisings in particular are not isolated events without meaning, nor are they disconnected from the ebb and flow of African American history (Harris, 1998). When viewed in this context, the cataclysms that rocked Los Angeles in April 1992 and Cincinnati in April 2001 represent a legitimate American socio-political phenomenon.

Because riotous violence is often an expression of protest against the indignities of racial and economic discrimination and manipulation (Fogelson, 1971; Harris, 1998), African Americans have frequently employed rioting as a channel through which to demand freedom, self-determination and justice. Harris (1998) contends that Black urban uprisings are responses to systemic White domination and the attempt to diminish African American core values derived from historical experience. As African Americans continue to use rioting as a means of fighting oppression and domination, the system simultaneously seeks to subvert the legitimacy of this unique form of social expression. According to Harris (1998), "the very fact that Black urban rebellions are spontaneous, violent, and short in duration has been sufficient for theorists of American democracy to declare them unintelligible aberrations that are devoid of political significance" (p. 373).

While the research of Lieberson and Silverman (1965) and others suggests that the urban environment in Los Angeles immediately prior to the riots in 1992—a concentration of people of color in specific neighborhoods, a perception of inequalities in resource distribution, a clear assault against a member of the racial in-group by members of the racial out-group who also represented the existing power structure in society—was ripe for violence, such precipitants were downplayed or even ignored outright by both government representatives and media reports. Indeed, the government's clearly conservative approach to the crisis, coupled with mediated narratives that framed the riots as a racial (and therefore Black) issue, invited mainstream readers and viewers to perceive the riots as a futile, even ridiculous response to social unrest.

**MEDIA FRAMING AND INFLUENCE**

The mass media play a significant role in shaping our perceptions of riots as either legitimate or illegitimate forms of social dissent (Parenti, 1986). The impact of protests on public opinion and public policy depends on the amount and type of news coverage (Oliver & Maney, 2000). The media become sense-makers to the world, providing stocks of knowledge, available concepts (categories), and interpersonal rules (relations) by which individuals can classify and interpret events (Sherizen, 1978).

Because of the potential threat to established order, violent collective behavior has been extensively studied, and the media have been implicated in the search for causes of such behavior. Media play a major role in the creation and
dissemination of beliefs about crime (and thus rioters) by associating protest with violence (Conklin, 1975). The mass media provide citizens with a public awareness of riots and rioters, but this awareness is, at best, based upon an information-rich and knowledge-poor foundation (Sherizen, 1978). Consequently, media provide both information and context in riot reporting. According to van Zoonen (1992), the media are more than simple transmitters of movement messages and activities; it is not the transmission that counts so much as a particular construction of the movement’s ideas and activities, influenced by many negotiations and conflicts within the news organization.

In short, media "construct" social formations and even history itself by framing images of reality in predictable and patterned ways. Framing can be described as either the influence on the public or the news angles, interpretive frameworks and "spin" that contextualize news reports (McQuail, 2000). Entman (1992) found that news coverage contributes to the phenomenon social scientists have labeled "modern racism"—a compound of hostility, rejection and denial on the part of White people toward the activities and aspirations of Black people. In part, local news' inadvertent contribution to this phenomenon may arise from its coverage of those involved in crime and in politics. In this way, news reporting appears to be helping to change the shape of White people's racial attitudes to fit the system's current political practices and social realities. In other words, media are part of politics and protest in that newspaper coverage of protests is shaped by the politics of the day (Oliver & Maney, 2000).

This interrogation of media coverage and its relationship to urban unrest is closely aligned with that of the historic Kerner Commission Report. Issued in 1968, the report addressed President Lyndon B. Johnson's question regarding the effects of mass media on the U.S. race riots of the 1960s. The commission found shortsighted reporting on race relations and ghetto problems, and the need to bring more Negroes into journalism, as precipitants of urban uprisings. The report indicted mass media by suggesting that in defining, explaining and reporting this broader, more complex and ultimately more fundamental subject (the urban Black condition), the communications media ironically failed to communicate. The commission found a discrepancy in riot coverage between what happened and what the local media outlets said happened. It found that while the media tried to give a balanced, factual account of the disorders, distortions crept in, resulting in an exaggeration of both mood and event (Kerner, 1968).

The failures of the media during this increasingly turbulent era included using scare headlines over relatively mild stories, staging rock throwing and other events, reporting rumors, broadcasting live from a riot site without the benefit of editing, speculating about potential violence, relying unskeptically on official sources, displaying "a startling lack of common sense" in personal conduct and playing up riots in distant cities while one's own community was in conflict. Interestingly, the commission did not find that the media played up emotional voices to the exclusion of calm ones, or that the reporting on the riot perpetuated
and/or prolonged the ordeal—if for no other reason than people in ghettos believed little of what they saw on television and almost none of what they read in the papers. The commission's most far-reaching conclusion was that the media had inadequately reported on the causes and consequences of civil disorders and the underlying problems of race relations. Thus, the Kerner Commission found the media were among the many guilty parties in bringing America to violence as well as contributing to the polarization of the Anglo and African American. The report adds, "This is our basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two separate societies, one Black, one White -- separate and unequal" (Kerner, 1968:1).

The Kerner report presages Button's (1978) findings that a significant gap exists between Black leaders' perceptions of rioting as "... meaningful, politically purposeful acts of destruction" (p. 157) and the general public's conclusions that such acts are "... infrequent, unnecessary, and pathological" (p. 156). Media exposure undoubtedly plays a role in this gulf of perception. In particular, Spilerman (1970) credits TV news coverage with heightening racial consciousness and unrest during the uprisings of the 1960s. In general, it seems likely that the media do have a capacity to define the nature of events; even if they are ultimately on the side of established order, they can unintentionally increase the degree of polarization in particular cases (McQuail, 2000). This conclusion renders even more salient the Times' and Post's coverage of the 1992 L.A. riots and the 2001 uprising in Cincinnati.

COVERING THE RIOTS

For this study, we conducted a textual analysis of the Washington Post and The New York Times coverage of the L.A. riots from April 30, 1992 to May 13, 1992—two weeks following the infamous verdict—of the papers' reporting of the Cincinnati riots from April 11, 2001, to April 23, 2001—two weeks following the fatal shooting of Timothy Thomas. All articles and editorial pieces (excluding letters to the editor) within these time frames mentioning the riots or rioters as yielded by a search of Academic Universe were considered. In all, 136 articles on the L.A. riots and 21 articles on the Cincinnati riots were compiled and analyzed. We employed textual analysis to examine these articles because it provided us with the latitude to present a composite view of the articles' subject matter in tandem. As a result, we are not interested in providing the reader with examples from all 157 articles; instead, we are more concerned with providing a comprehensive view of article content and extrapolating pertinent points and quotes from articles that exemplify themes embedded in the texts.

Even the most cursory of glances through the articles analyzed for this review reveals a remarkable consistency in both concept and content. Such similarities in news reporting and writing should be expected, given the unprecedented concentration of media ownership through the past decade (Bagdikian, 2000). Still, it is surprising to note how frequently a few specific
themes appear within the selected texts. Even when various articles present alternative approaches to the issue, specific statements within the articles themselves support these core themes and thus invite specific perceptions and conclusions on the part of readers. Through focusing explicitly or implicitly on a series of core themes, then, the media reports fill three specific functions—and each serves ultimately to delegitimize the process and function of riots.

Three overarching themes emerged from our close reading of the articles in the Times and Post. First, coverage tended to make rhetorical links between the terms race and riot. By emphasizing the racial dimension of individual riot events, these newspaper reports serve to convince readers to freely apply the stereotypical qualities of poor Black Americans to the riots themselves. Second, the articles emphasized riots as a reaction to control rather than a call for justice. By presenting the riots as a usurpation of societal order rather than as a protest against the systemic denial of civil liberties and justice, the texts further work to convince readers to view rioters as dangerous criminals rather than as justified demonstrators. Finally, the articles frame the act of rioting as an illogical event. By stressing the illogicality of Black riotous acts, the reports offer yet another reason to discount the very real and valid statements of discontent that lie at the heart of the mayhem. In addressing these themes, the authors seek to depict the agenda of the newspaper journalist/industry through identification of specific evidence found in the papers' articles. Taken together, these threads of meaning woven throughout the texts provide significant justification for readers to condemn the events in Los Angeles and Cincinnati as deplorable, frightening and meaningless. In the process, these reports come to provide a veritable template for future media treatment of social unrest in the United States.

MASS MEDIA'S RHETORICAL LINKS BETWEEN THE TERMS RACE AND RIOT

A key result of the newspapers' coverage of the Los Angeles and Cincinnati riots is the encouragement of readers to associate rioting as a concept with perceptions of race and racial difference. At first glance, this association is anything but surprising; after all, the riots in question were racially motivated, and this motivation may well be the only aspect of the events upon which all involved clearly agreed. A more in-depth consideration of this mediated theme, however, reveals the troublesome nature of the cognitive linkage of "race" and "rioting" as necessarily associated terms in readers' minds. Dyer (1988) alleges that the concept of "race" has come to embody very specific connotative meanings for many Americans. According to the critic, Whiteness can function as a human norm precisely because White people are not racially seen or named, and thus have the power to speak for all of humanity rather than speaking exclusively for their own race. Indeed, Dyer claims, "... race is something only applied to non-White peoples" (p. 1). Nakayama and Krizek (1995) concur, noting that one of the strategies supporting the systemic power base of Whiteness in the U.S. today is a refusal to label Whiteness in a racial sense. As a result, Nakayama and Krizek
suggest, the term "race" is left to be applied exclusively to the "other." Finally, Warren and Twine (1997) assert that Blackness serves as a metonym against which Whiteness is measured and given meaning in our contemporary society. Because of this, Whiteness exists as two general categories: White and non-White. Through this process, non-Whiteness becomes synonymous with Blackness in many Americans' minds.

The implications of this cognitive association are particularly clear when it comes to media coverage of riot events. Because viewers and readers are encouraged to see riots as largely racial events, and because for many readers the term "race" is synonymous with their conceptualization of "Blackness" (Warren & Twine, 1997), riots become for these readers events that are by, for and about African Americans. Coupled with the associated framing of riots as illogical acts in response to necessary societal controls, this cognitive linkage of rioting with a specific racial group can have a staggering impact on the way readers process the "facts" about violent urban uprisings.

As might be expected, nearly all of the Times and Post articles generated in the two weeks following the Los Angeles and Cincinnati riots place the events squarely within the context of racial difference. Many do so in a direct, explicit way. In reference to Los Angeles, one Times report recounting newscasters' and public officials' reactions to video coverage of the riots suggests that "A year ago to anyone with a television set, the city meant police brutality. This week it means rampaging Black youths" (Goodman, 1992:A7). Perhaps predictably, however, such bluntness is more the exception than the rule. More common is an attempt to capture the reactions of Blacks and Whites to the mounting violence—ostensibly as a way of confirming that Americans both Black and White were appalled by the riots. In doing so, however, the reports also affirm the notion that the brunt of the responsibility for the violence rested with the Black inner-city residents; even if both Blacks and Whites were disturbed by the verdict, it was largely urban African Americans who responded with violence.

An excellent case in point is Wilkerson's (1992) Times feature based on what she calls "several dozen interviews with Blacks and Whites" (p. A23) conducted within hours of the outbreak of violence in Los Angeles. The reporter emphasizes the vast differences between the reactions of Black and White Americans to the rioting—Anglos expressing fear of victimization, African Americans personalizing the attack on Rodney King. Linda Gits, described as a graphic designer from Chicago and the mother of a 2-year-old boy, turned in a typical White response. According to Wilkerson, Gits worried that Blacks might take their frustration out on her and her son, saying "... it seems in the past 10 years we have started to slip back into the darkness of evilness and hate. It's scary"(p. A23). These comments are balanced by those of James Buford, a Black man Wilkerson presents as the antithesis of the "typical" African American—a faithful Republican, president of the Urban League of Greater St. Louis and "the picture of middle-class success"(p. A23). Expressing his sense of powerlessness
and disgust at the verdict in the King case, Buford is quoted as saying, "I have played by the rules... I have supported Clarence Thomas. I have supported the Bush Administration and worked for it. I have tried through everything in my power to convince people the two-party system and the American dream can work. You know if I'm feeling that, what those who have absolutely nothing feel". In case any readers missed the point, Wilkerson concludes with the specter of some Whites expressing confidence in the findings of the predominantly White jury in the King case, while Blacks talked about "taking up some kind of arms and uniting in an eye for an eye" (p. A23).

This message of coalition along racial lines in response to the King verdict and the riots that ensued echoed throughout the analyzed texts. Common among the reports are statements emphasizing a sense of solidarity among individuals of the speaker's race—and a corresponding lack of understanding of the other race's point of view. Mills (1992) provides a powerful statement in a Post interview of African American rapper and orator Sister Souljah. Throughout the article, Souljah expresses a belief that the riots were an act of revenge against a system of White oppression: "...if Black people kill Black people every day, why not have a week and kill White people? This was Black-on-White 'rebellion'" (p. B1). A similar statement was made by Councilman Adam Clayton Powell IV in a Times article by Roberts (1992). According to Roberts, Powell responded to the riots with this: tirade: "It makes you hate this country... It makes you hate the flag. It makes you hate all White people who can even think to begin to excuse this verdict" (p. B3). Of course, in order to successfully delegitimize the acts of violence and unrest that prompted these comments, it was important for the reports to surround these affirmations of solidarity with contrasting admissions of guilt, remorse and even shame. Few White readers were likely to disagree, for example, with a Times article that describes a Black looter admitting that the riots were "something that we caused ourselves" (Mydans, 1992:A7). Quindlen (1992) fills a related function when she reports: "One Black woman stood watching looters, tears rolling down her face, and said she couldn't understand how they could bring their children to steal. 'I'm ashamed of my own people,' she said" (p. D17). These and numerous other "snapshots" from the edge of the urban battlefield that erupted in LA and Cincinnati served as not-so-subtle reminders of significant differences between Americans Black and White.

Other reports generated by the riots offer much more careful reminders of the gulf in perception and belief between Black and White residents of America's cities. Surprisingly, the occasional column or article actually does admit to the fact that the violence on the streets of South Central Los Angeles and Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati had a multiracial dimension. For example, Terry (1992) calls the LA riots "a rainbow of anger" (p. A1), while Newman (1992) notes that the L.A. unrest was far from a Blacks-only affair: 40 percent of the businesses destroyed in the riots belonged to Latinos, and more than one-third of those killed were Hispanic. When Kurtz (1992) describes the victimization of journalists during the L.A. riots he writes, "Race did not seem to matter; several Black and Hispanic journalists
were among those attacked" (p. D4), while Sullivan (1992) notes: "Aftershocks for the Rodney King verdict continued rumbling through the Washington area yesterday as protesters of all races took to the streets in the District, Maryland and Virginia" (May 2, 1992:A13). He allows the frame to surround race and not the geographical location.

Despite these rare concessions, however, the Times and Post reporters paint a clear picture of the riots as racially divisive events. We by no means intend to imply that the rare concessions to this general pattern of reporting that exist do not serve as pertinent examples of balanced coverage that may have an impact on readers' perceptions. However, when these counterclaims are viewed in context, the preponderance of articles illustrating the contrary point makes them appear as anomalies at best. Indeed, even while mentioning the participation in the L.A. riots of people of other races, these reports suggest that the "rainbow" of participants were merely accomplices to the "real" rioters—the African-American inner-city Los Angeles residents. In similar fashion, following the Cincinnati riots, the Times ran several stories that centralized the Black/White conflict, particularly as it related to rioters and police. Clines' (2001, April 14) account of the events subsequent to the Thomas funeral both mentions the presence of Black Panthers at the service and references skepticism from some as to the Panthers' intentions in attending. Many of the articles dealing with the Cincinnati riots also invoke in some way the memory of the Civil Rights Movement marches of the 1960s. These references serve as a constant reminder that these riots are largely about race. Representative is Clines' (2001, April 13) quoting of Keith Fangman, a Cincinnati police representative: "We are not some band of rogue Nazis hunting down and killing Black men" (sec. 1, p. 6). In a separate article, Clines (2001, April 14) raises the specter of racial opportunism in the Cincinnati riots, quoting an 80-year-old, presumably White man as saying, "... and now here's the media's open mike, the chance of a lifetime for those people" (p. A1, emphasis added).

Instructive, too, in this vein is the Times' review on May 4, 1992 of significant riot moments in American history. A total of nine "disturbances" from 1964 to 1969 are listed, along with the numbers of citizens injured, killed and arrested throughout the course of the violence. Yet only two of the nine instances are given any historical context; the rest are simply listed as among the moments "When Racial Tension Has Boiled Over," (p.A29) as if readers would simply assume, on the newspaper's authority alone, that these were, in fact, race-based riots. In order for such a graph to be read as a viable piece of information, one might argue, it is necessary for readers to have linked the concepts of "race" and "riots" within their cognitive schema, and to have further concluded that African Americans are ultimately responsible for these unfortunate events. Again, we are not suggesting that the minor voice of contention as it arises in these articles is neither important nor impactful for some readers. Overall, however, the predominance of examples tends to reinforce our initial theme.
NEWSPAPER DISCOURSE EMPHASIZE
RIOTING AS AN ISSUE OF ORDER—NOT JUSTICE

The urban violence that erupted in both Los Angeles and Cincinnati was
the result in many ways of a clash between notions of individual liberty and the real
need for order in society. Then President George Bush clearly described this
intersection of ideals in his speech to the nation following the riots on May 1, 1992.
In his address, Bush speaks of "...two very different issues at hand" the first of
them being "...the urgent need to restore order" ("Riots in Los Angeles," 1992: p.
A8). Likewise, the texts analyzed for this study recognize the compatibility
between the issues of order and justice, yet in instances where the two are
incompatible, the need for order supersedes the need for justice within the media
frame. Numerous articles, for example, recognize the seeming injustice of the King
verdict, and the social conditions that sparked the riots. Gilliam (1992) compares
the L.A. riots to those in Watts in 1965: "While the issues of poverty are more
complex and subtle now it still takes a riot to draw public and political attention to
racial and economic inequalities" (p. B1). Krauthammer (1992) goes so far as to
say that the riots were sparked as a result of Black people's perception that they
cannot get justice because they are Black. The Post also quotes from Colin
Powell's commencement address to Fiske University graduates: "The problem goes
to the despair that still exists in the Black community over the inability of Black
Americans to share fully in the American dream" ("Colin Powell Speaks Out,"

Other articles make reference to the injustice of the verdict, yet link the
two issues by also emphasizing the need to show respect for the law (Goodman,
1992; Safire, 1992; Wines, 1992). On May 1, 1992, the Post reports "Even while
struggling to keep their own rage in check, Black leaders -- in riot-torn Los
Angeles and elsewhere—have been calling for calm. That's what they should do"
(Raspberry, p. A27). In a separate article, the Post quotes Benjamin L. Hooks,
Director of the NAACP, as saying, "We are bitter and disappointed at the outcome,
but we urge that the decision be met with calmness ... Rioting, arson, looting and
murder solve nothing" (Taylor, 1992:A29).

Some texts make the point that the verdict should, in fact, increase
America's faith in the criminal justice system; if the jurors and judge could overlook
such obvious evidence of wrongdoing in order to follow the precepts of law, then
the system should function effectively for us all (Daniels, 1992). Times and Post
reporters trace the effects of the riots on those who purportedly suffered most,
namely the officers sworn to serve the people of inner-city Los Angeles and
Cincinnati. An editorial in the May 2, 1992 edition of the Times titled "Learning
From Los Angeles" provides an excellent case in point. Raising the specter of social
injustice and unequal opportunities for people of color in this country, the editorial
proceeds to make abundantly clear the true concern at the heart of the issue: "... the
expansion of social problems during the 1980s transformed the challenges faced
by police all over America" (p. 1/22). Indeed, an arguably disproportionate number
of the analyzed texts focus on the difficulties America's police officers encountered in the wake of the riots. Various articles claim that the decision by the police departments in both Los Angeles and Cincinnati to pull back and allow the rioting to continue largely unabated was justified in light of existing circumstances ("Learning from Los Angeles," 1992; Egan, 1992); others assert that future positive relations between police and inner-city dwellers will depend on adjustments on the part of the citizens, not the law enforcement officers. When adjustments by the police are called for in the texts, the emphasis is generally on more police presence in the riot-scarred communities. A Times editorial suggests, for example, that the solution to America's epidemic of violence might well be a multibillion dollar federal allocation to bolster law enforcement ("For College Kids," 1992). Thus, throughout the coverage of the Los Angeles and Cincinnati uprisings, the need for order is consistently framed as a more vital goal than the protection of civil liberties.

**RIOTING AS AN ILLOGICAL RESPONSE**

Finally, the articles provide several examples of attempts to highlight the illogical nature of rioting as a response to any sort of social oppression or mistreatment. The illogicality theme illustrates the media's emphasis on things like property damage and financial losses as a result of riotous activity rather than the social inequities that engulf the lives of the disenfranchised. Media's placement of the contemporary riot within the illogical frame makes them culpable in upholding current systemic perceptions and practices. Mills (1992) embodies this attempt when he asks Souljah, "... the people perpetuating that violence, did they think it was wise? Was that wise, reasoned action"? In a Times editorial, an anonymous jurist from the King trial offered, "I think they (the rioters) were just waiting for something to happen so that they could go out and destroy people's lives and their property" ("The Other Jury," 1992:A34), while Terry (1992) quoted L.A. resident Yolanda Gnat as avowing that the rioters "... are doing it just to be doing it. A lot of people probably never even heard of Rodney King. They're doing it because it's like Christmas in the springtime" (p. 1/1). A Post article titled "Neighborhoods Torn Between Right and Wrong; Amid Madness Citizens Ponder Whether to Condemn Pillaging or take Bounty" (Duke, 1992:A1) uses its headline alone to reduce rioting to an opportunity for urban residents to participate in criminal theft. In addition to focusing on the rampant looting, the article poses the following question: Why aren't these things happening in Beverly Hills? The question forces readers to place the Black urban rioters in diametrically opposed positions to their wealthy White neighbors, with Black urban rioters as seeking vigilante justice and Beverly Hills residents as law abiding and orderly citizens. The question, while appearing logical on one hand, is simplistic and flawed on the other. In short, the question does not take into account the history of police brutality, sanctioned discrimination and profuse injustice waged against the Black community, an important contextual cue in analyzing Blacks' reaction to the verdict. Instead, Blacks and Whites are juxtaposed in such a way that one group is framed as
inherently illogical and out of control, while the other is logical and thus under control.

Indeed, as if such insinuations were not enough, other reporters take the issue to its illogical extreme. While many individual acts committed during a riot are necessarily illogical, the media's focus on these specific acts to the exclusion of any examples of reasoned riot behavior serves to suggest that all riotous acts are inherently illogical. Perhaps the most compelling report from the heart of the violence in L.A. finds Marriott (1992) interviewing individual looters, including a young Black man who would only identify himself as "Master." The Times reporter came across the looter as he attempted to close the lid on a car trunk filled to overflowing with boxes of Cinnamon Mini Buns cereal. "I don't even eat this stuff" (p. A21), the young man purportedly said. The fact that "Master" intended to distribute the cereal among the poor is added as an afterthought, largely unrelated to his senseless looting. Elsewhere, Marriott found 15-year-old Keysha Cummings sitting at a picnic table across from Martin Luther King Jr. Park. "They are standing around shouting 'Black power' and they are burning our stores down," Keysha reportedly said. "...We shouldn't be tearing up our own stuff" (p. A21).

At the heart of the newspapers' emphasis on the illogicality of rioting is, a carefully drawn image of inner-city Blacks destroying their own streets and stores as a way of protesting systemic racial injustice. Representative in this vein is Winerip's May 3, 1992, column in the Times, in which the author laments the illogicality of what was happening in South Central: "At 12th Street someone smashed a bus shelter. These things never make sense. How many rich people get wet if a bus shelter's destroyed" (p. A37)? Herbert (2001) is even more caustic in his Times condemnation of the Cincinnati riots. While acknowledging that the inequitable treatment of Blacks in America—including cases of police brutality and a relative lack of progress on the race-relations front—are largely responsible for the violence, Herbert proceeds to condemn the rioters by framing their actions as aberrant:

There is something both very weird and very wrong about continuing to respond to the outrages of racism and police brutality by throwing bottles, smashing windows, overturning cars, looting stores, burning down buildings, shooting at police officers and dragging innocent White motorists from their vehicles and attempting to beat and stomp them to death. (p. A25, emphasis added).

Herbert goes on to say that the riots are "...a peculiar way of addressing one's grievances," and calls for a "...smarter, more effective response to these evils" (p. A25, emphasis added), though he fails to provide any specific actions which he would consider to be either smarter or more effective.

The Post and Times' reports served, then, to suggest that residents of L.A. and Cincinnati protested the festering oversights in their lives by torching their own
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CONCLUSION

The findings of this study clearly suggest that media coverage of contemporary race riots have implications on the state of race relations in the U.S. today. By inadvertently creating and thus perpetuating the gulf of difference between White and Black perceptions of these events, such coverage may only encourage readers to see modern America as a nation clearly divided along racial lines. By associating the practice of rioting with a specific racial group, by depicting order as the appropriate end for the riotous mean, and by situating contemporary riots squarely within the illogical frame, the media reports stemming from the L.A. riots of 1992 and the Cincinnati riots of 2001 exemplify the remarkable consistency in media coverage of riot events. In short, (race) riots that fail to fall within a recognizable and "sanctioned" frame continue to be reported as unnecessary evils. It is neither our contention nor intent to suggest that journalists from the papers' purposefully reported the riotous activity in racialized terms. Still, the three themes identified become problematic even when they are only sporadically counterbalanced by mention of nonracial elements, systematic oppression or logicality. Much of what is reported and depicted as deviant purports to describe some abnormal state of affairs or persons. The symbolic function of the depiction, however, is to make it easier to behave toward the subject of the depiction in "abnormal" but (to the symbol manipulators, at least) highly functional ways (Gerbner, 1978). "...When irrationality, a code word for abnormal or bizarre social expression, is used to interpret violent actions, it becomes convenient to dismiss African Americans altogether as deviants" (Harris, 1998:377).

During the Los Angeles riots the media played an integral role in shaping America's views of the situation via their portrayal of the riots on television. Viewers were exposed to terrible, violent and chaotic shots of the streets; it might be argued that after watching the footage, they turned to the print media to make sense of what they had seen. Unfortunately, print media took full advantage of the opportunity to insist that such rioting had no legitimate function as a political statement. And, because the rioting was depicted as a primal reaction and not a macro response to the systemic deprivation of rights, the actions of rioters actually justified more systemic attempts to restore order. As a result, rioting as a legitimate form of social protest continues to be delegitimized by mainstream media. Media representations of riotous violence have forever changed the way information consumers conceive and process notions of both racial difference and social unrest.
Future studies examining contemporary riots might employ quantitative methodologies such as content analysis and survey research to demonstrate not only the dominant themes present in media discourse, but also the contrary voices. This would allow researchers to comment not only on what is included in the discourse, but importantly, what is not excluded. Unfortunately, this very important aspect of riot research extends beyond the scope of the current study. The limitations inherent in textual analysis prevent us from commenting on issues of audience reception and how individual readers might respond to the overlapping and often contradictory riot themes presented by newspapers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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