
RACIAL PROFILING IN THE NEWSROOM

By David Pritchard and Sarah Stonbely

This article examines patterns of story assignments at a metropolitan daily newspaper. The study's content analysis documents a form of racial profiling in which African American reporters write stories mostly about minority issues, while white reporters write stories mostly about government and business. Interviews with journalists documented the widespread belief that experience as a member of a racial minority helps the newspaper provide better coverage of minority issues. However, journalists of all races spoke of racial diversity only when they were talking about minority reporters and minority-oriented topics. The hegemony of whiteness was such that none of the journalists appeared to have thought about the role of whiteness in the coverage of the largely white realms of politics and business.



Although journalists of color continue to be vastly underrepresented in American newsrooms relative to the proportion of people of color in the U.S. population, much progress has been made in the past two decades. Minority journalists were 9.5% of all U.S. journalists in 2002, up from 8.2% in 1992 and 3.9% in 1982.¹ Minorities accounted for 12.95% of daily-newspaper journalists in 2004, up from 10.49% in 1994 and 5.75% in 1984.²

Increasing the proportion of minority journalists in American newsrooms is an increasingly important subject within the news industry,³ with wide agreement that racial composition of news staffs should reflect the communities they cover.⁴ However, the discussion within the industry focuses almost entirely on hiring and retaining journalists of color. Little attention has been given to the ways news organizations use minority journalists after they have been hired, making it difficult to assess the validity of critical-race theory as it applies to diversity initiatives.

This article offers data about the role that race plays in the topics reporters write about at a metropolitan daily newspaper. Content analy-

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sis compared the kinds of local issues minority and white reporters wrote about at the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, and interviews with journalists and editors shed light on differences we found. The results, which show that race influenced the kinds of topics journalists covered, have important theoretical implications, suggesting that the hegemony of whiteness can persist even in a newsroom with a relatively high level of racial diversity.

Theoretical Context

The dominant argument for proportional representation of minority journalists in the newsrooms of mainstream American news organizations (i.e., that such representation will lead to more sensitive, more accurate coverage of African American, Latino, and other minority communities)⁵ has never been tested systematically.

Implicit in the argument that more journalists of color will lead to better coverage of minority-related issues is a second assumption: That coverage of such issues will be, and perhaps should be, accomplished principally by minority journalists. From one point of view, this assumption makes sense—who better to write about historically marginalized groups than members of those groups? From another point of view, though, the assumption threatens to legitimize a form of racial profiling in which journalists of color are disproportionately assigned to cover minority-oriented issues, while white reporters cover the white-dominated arenas of government and business in which decisions are made about distribution of power and resources.

Having minority journalists writing mostly about relatively powerless segments of society, while white journalists write mostly about powerful institutions, may have a certain logic, given that people of color are overrepresented among the powerless and whites overrepresented among the powerful. To the extent that such practices exist, however, they both reinforce white dominance in newsrooms and shed light on the social processes by which white dominance is perpetuated.

Within American newspapers, government and business beats are widely considered the fastest tracks to management positions. Disproportionate assignment of reporters of color to minority-related topics reduces opportunities to attain positions of authority and influence in news organizations. Having fewer minority editors, in turn, tends to make news organizations less sensitive to racism, including possible biases in how they cover minority groups.⁶ Thus, well-intentioned practices that assign reporters of color to minority-related topics may not only impede advancement of journalists of color into managerial positions, but may also contribute to lower-quality coverage of minority groups.

In addition, to the extent that such practices exist, they may undermine the very diversity initiatives that made them possible. Practices that channel journalists of color into covering minority issues while white journalists cover the centers of power in modern American society reinforce white privilege and marginalize journalists who were intended to be the beneficiaries of diversity initiatives.⁷ In other words, story assignments based on race may be as much about white dominance as they

are about inclusion of journalists of color and quality coverage of minority communities.

When mainstream institutions such as the news media deal with issues of race they often focus on minority races only, which—as Dyer noted in a frequently cited essay—“has had the effect of reproducing the sense of oddness, differentness, exceptionality of these groups, the feeling that they are departures from the norm.” Dyer added: “Meanwhile, the norm (of whiteness) has carried on as if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being.”⁸

The power of whiteness flows largely from its invisibility. One scholar wrote: “As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.”⁹ Just as newsroom practices may reinforce the hegemonic power of whiteness, in part through patterns of news coverage but also through decisions that match reporters to story topics based at least in part on racial criteria, so too do they create and re-create norms of non-whiteness by constantly linking people of color with crime and other forms of social deviance.¹⁰ However well-intentioned such practices may be, they contribute to what Mellinger called “the embedded, surreptitious process through which the media continually recreate racialized identities, position people of color on the margins, and reinforce the privileges of whiteness.”¹¹

The news industry in the United States showed little interest in non-white journalists until 1968, when the Kerner Commission addressed a sharp rebuke to the media.¹² The commission, formed to explain the causes of urban riots of the mid-1960s, identified the lack of black journalists in policy-making positions in the newsrooms of mainstream American media as a major problem.¹³ As the news industry increasingly embraced the idea of racial diversity in the 1970s and 1980s, the commission’s goal of getting African American journalists into editor positions was largely supplanted by the idea that the racial mix of journalists in a news organization should reflect the community which the news organization covers.¹⁴ The implicit assumption of this shift was that mere presence of minority journalists in a newsroom will improve coverage of minority communities and minority-related issues.¹⁵ This assumption was in place by the end of the 1980s, as Martindale noted:

By some mysterious alchemy, the whole task of providing better coverage of minority issues seems to have become tied to the effort to bring more minority individuals into journalism. The idea seems to be that if we can just get more minority reporters into our newsrooms, they will make sure that we provide more accurate and representative coverage of minorities in society.¹⁶

Prior Research

Some minority journalists, however, resisted such "racial pigeonholing."¹⁷ E.R. Shipp, an African American who worked at the *New York Times* before becoming a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the *New York Daily News*, wrote that she did not want to be "stuck in the job of urban affairs reporter or race relations reporter" at the *Times*.¹⁸ A minority reporter from Los Angeles said she was "insulted by the notion that only minorities can adequately cover minority news." She added: "You don't have to be black to cover poverty in the ghetto, you don't have to be Asian to cover immigration problems, you don't have to be Latino to cover gang violence. And you also don't have to be white to cover major city, state, and national stories."¹⁹

Only one prior study has examined the effect of race on story assignments. That content analysis of local television newscasts in twelve communities found a pattern of what its authors called "segregated story assignments."²⁰ African American reporters delivered 36% of stories with a "black focus," but only 11% of stories with a "white focus."²¹ Our study extends the prior work by focusing on racial profiling at a metropolitan daily newspaper and by including interviews with journalists in an effort to understand reasons for any racial component in story assignments. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: With respect to local issues at the newspaper under study, did reporters of color disproportionately write about minority topics while white reporters disproportionately covered government and business?

RQ2: What rationales did journalists provide for race being a factor in story assignments?

Context of the Study

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, has a population of about 600,000 in a four-county metropolitan area of about 1.5 million.²² The racial mix of the city's population in 2004 was about 49% non-Hispanic white, 38% black, 9% Latino, 3% Asian-American and 1% American Indian. Outside Milwaukee, the metropolitan area was overwhelmingly white: overall, the four-county metropolitan area was 75% non-Hispanic white, 16% black, 6% Latino, 2% Asian, and 1% other. The social, political, and economic issues related to race in Milwaukee are those of urban centers throughout the United States, especially in the so-called Rust Belt that continues to struggle with the decline of its historically strong manufacturing base.

The *Journal Sentinel* is Milwaukee's only general-circulation daily newspaper, with a weekday circulation in 2004 of about 245,000 and a Sunday circulation of about 430,000.²³ Of the 176 people who wrote copy for the *Journal Sentinel* (e.g., news reporters, columnists, and sports writers, but not photographers, editors, or administrators) in fall 2003, 14.7% (26) were members of minority groups (African Americans, Latinos, or Asian Americans).²⁴ The racial mix of the *Journal Sentinel's* newsroom was more representative of its circulation area than was the case for most of

the nation's largest daily newspapers.²⁵ Despite the newspaper's relatively good record in hiring minority journalists and stated interest in diversity, studies have shown that race influences newspaper coverage of crime in Milwaukee, as it does in other American cities.²⁶

This article is based on content analysis of *Journal Sentinel* coverage of "local public issues" over a three-week period in fall 2003, as well as on interviews with journalists at the paper. We defined the concept "Local Public Issue" (LPI) by defining its component parts. An *issue* is a subject of debate that satisfies both of the following conditions: First, that the debate is capable of being resolved, and second, that various groups and/or organizations have differing views about how it should be resolved. A *public issue* is an issue whose resolution would have an impact on a significant portion of a community, not just on a few individuals. A *local public issue* is of primary importance to the city of Milwaukee, rather than to suburban communities or other areas. Falling outside of the definition of Local Public Issue were many staples of newspaper coverage, including sports, crime, and entertainment.²⁷ Because we were interested in examining links between LPIs and the reporters assigned to write about them, material without bylines (e.g., editorials and news briefs) was excluded. All bylined *Journal Sentinel* stories that mentioned LPIs during the three-week period from Oct. 20 through Nov. 9, 2003, were included.

Method

Several characteristics of each LPI mention were coded, including the race of the byline reporter. The data permitted us to evaluate the extent to which minority reporters covered topics that dealt disproportionately with minority concerns. Journalists of all races often used the adjective "urban" to refer to such topics.

Operational Definitions. The variable "LPI Topic" had three possible values: (a) minority issues, (b) issues of broader interest featuring a prominent minority public figure, and (c) those issues of broad local relevance that had no overt racial context. Minority issues were those that focused disproportionately on people of color in Milwaukee. "Issues of broader interest" featured prominent minority public figures (e.g., the category "law enforcement administration" featured the county sheriff and the city police chief, both African Americans). The third value included all local public issues with no overt racial component. Most government and business-related stories were in this category.²⁸

Overall, 90 stories focused on LPI's during the study period. Each LPI mention was coded by two graduate students. Inter-coder reliability was acceptable, with both coders agreeing on the LPI in 83 of the 90 cases (92.2% agreement, Scott's $\pi = .86$).²⁹ The seven discrepancies were resolved through discussion between the two coders, sometimes involving this article's first author.

The variable "Race" consisted of three values: white, African American, and Latino. Journalists' races were common knowledge in the Milwaukee journalism community, which includes the authors of this study. Very few LPI stories were written by Latino reporters, so for

the quantitative analysis of the content we combined stories written by African Americans and Latinos into a “minority” category.

To gain insight into patterns of coverage, seven members of the *Journal Sentinel* news staff were interviewed. Another provided extensive comments after seeing an early draft of this article. The interviews, tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim, were conducted by two female graduate students, one white and one African American. Because the interviewees were of different races and many interview questions focused on race, we believed that a biracial interviewing team would elicit the most reliable answers.³⁰

Findings

RQ1 asked how reporter race related to kind of story. Of the 90 total mentions of Local Public Issues, 68 (76%) were in stories written by white reporters, 19 (21%) were in stories written by black reporters, and 3 (3%) were in stories by Latino reporters (see Table 1).

Although white reporters wrote the stories containing 76% of all LPI mentions, they wrote none (0%) of the nine stories about LPIs of relevance mostly to minority communities. In stark contrast, white reporters wrote 45 of the 49 stories (92%) about LPIs with no overt racial or ethnic component. In the other category of stories—those about topics of relevance to minorities, but also of broader interest—white reporters wrote 72% of the stories, while minority reporters wrote 28%.

The relationship between a reporter’s race and the local public issues he or she wrote about was statistically significant (chi-square = 35.09, 2 df, $p \leq .001$). The racial focus of an LPI topic was strongly associated with reporter race. The greater the minority focus, the more likely that a minority reporter covered it. Similarly, the less the minority focus, the less likely that a minority journalist did the reporting. The conclusion of a pattern of racial profiling is difficult to avoid. White reporters tended to write about power and about issues of perceived general interest, while black reporters wrote mostly about minority issues.

RQ2 asked about reporter perceptions of this pattern. We turned to *Journal Sentinel* staff members to answer the question. All eight informants were asked whether reporters’ races influenced their beat assignments or story assignments. Each interviewee’s initial answer was “no,” regardless of his or her race. However, the “no” was inevitably followed by a qualifier: journalists are assigned to stories, or choose stories, that match well with their knowledge and experience.³¹ For example, according to a white male who had eighteen years of experience at Journal Communications newspapers (interviewers’ comments in italics):

We get the feeling that people are assigned to stories, or beats, depending on their race.

No, I don’t think so. There may be some small element of that, where you try to match a person with their knowledge, and experience and familiarity with sources in a particular segment of the community.

TABLE 1
*Racial/Ethnic Identities of Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Reporters
 and the Kinds of Local Public Issues They Covered*

	Issues of Relevance Mostly to Minorities	Broad Issues with Black Public Figures	Issues with No Overt Racial Component	Totals
White Reporters	0 (0%)	23 (72%)	45 (92%)	68 (76%)
Minority Reporters	9 (100%)	9 (28%)	4 (8%)	22 (24%)

Chi-square = 35.09, 2 df, $p \leq .001$

After more discussion, the journalist was asked whether diversity in the newsroom determined whether a story was published at all.

You [looking at and gesturing toward the African American interviewer] would look at an issue perhaps differently than I would, just because of your background, your experiences... You don't want a newsroom full of people with the same mindsets... I also think that a good reporter, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, will be able to cover a story as well as anybody else.

So, it sounds like you're saying that a good journalist would be able to know what elements of a story need to be covered and put [them] in there, regardless of...

Yes.

...but you're also saying that the people in the newsroom, with all the different ideas and everything, will possibly influence how a story gets written, otherwise it wouldn't matter if it was a homogeneous crowd or it was people from all over Milwaukee.

Yeah, I think so, I think it would perhaps change the way, yeah, I think it might change not the way a story is written but what's reported, I guess. There's a small difference in that... Just having that different perspective to suggest looking at it a different way, in terms of doing the reporting.

Does it take the person with the interest, and with the background, and with the knowledge, to bring the story to light? I

mean, I guess the basic question is, how are stories detected?

The white journalist responded to this question by telling of his interest in mountain biking, and of a time when he suggested a story about elderly mountain bikers to his editors. They liked the idea, and a story on the topic was written and published. The journalist explained:

If I didn't have that outside interest, we wouldn't have done that story; the newspaper wouldn't have done that story. So I think that happens in, there are other areas where that happens. People will see something in their own neighborhood, in their own community that will turn into a story; maybe they'll do it, maybe someone [else] will do it.

So, whether or not a person brings their bias, for lack of a better word, to the story, they might still report it objectively but the story might go undiscovered if someone didn't know about something that was going on in the community... So it does matter, if there's diversity or not.

Right, but like I said, not only racial or ethnic diversity but you would want people with diverse interests.... diverse lifestyles too... I think someone who lives out in the suburbs and has three children is going to have a different perspective than someone who's, you know, a gay male living alone in the downtown area.

Given that a reporter's interests help determine whether a story makes it into the paper, we asked whether that meant race or ethnicity makes a difference in what gets reported. The journalist agreed that race and ethnicity could play a role, especially in a reporter's choice of sources, a choice that could influence the nature of the story.

An African American female reporter also initially cautioned against "jumping to the conclusion" that race is a factor in determining which reporters write about which stories. As the discussion continued, however, she spoke of the tendency for minority reporters at the *Journal Sentinel* to cover minority topics.

With regard to black reporters covering black issues, or things oriented to the central city, I prefer my beat—I love my beat.

What is your beat?

My beat is urban affairs...and I just think it lends itself to authentic reporting, in terms of, I like being able to tell the stories of my people through this paper.

Yeah...

...and I do know, I mean, if you have a problem with that, as a black reporter, that's an issue.

If you have a problem with what?

If you have a problem with only being sent to cover black issues, and you want to do something else, that's a major problem.

Really, why?

Because then it moves outside of, this is what I want to do. I've had exposure, I covered, as a matter of fact, I filled in for the county government reporter, like, for two months before, because my background is city government, urban affairs reporting. ... However, if I'm a reporter who happens to be black, who wants to get exposure in other areas when I'm not allowed to, that's a problem.

After the "Really, why?" question, the journalist seemed reluctant to return to the subject of black reporters being assigned to cover minority issues. When asked whether race matters in reporting on a story, she told of trying to get an interview with a black minister. When the minister finally met with her, he said he had been reluctant to grant the interview because a white reporter from the *Journal Sentinel* had once written a story about him that emphasized his attire—a brightly colored suit with lots of jewelry—rather than the issues he had spoken about.

The white reporter was preoccupied with ... the outward appearance and did not necessarily focus on what [the minister] thought were the key issues. So [the minister] had written [the *Journal Sentinel*] off; ... and not only did [the reporter] piss [the minister] off, he pissed the whole congregation off. So that's a long answer to your question as to whether [race] makes a difference. Often times if you don't have exposure in a certain culture you have to ask questions.

The message was that a reporter of one race might have to invest more time and energy to cover topics with sources of a different race. The implication was that it is more efficient to match the races of reporter and source so that the reporter would not have to work so hard to understand an unfamiliar culture.

Another interviewee was a Latino man who had worked at the newspaper for twenty years. Like his colleagues, he initially denied that race had anything to do with the topics reporters wrote about.

He said, however, that racial diversity is “vital for the survival of the newspaper.”

It's not that non-minority reporters, basically white reporters, can't report on minority affairs, it's just that minority reporters bring a sense of the culture, a sense of the street wisdom, to their story that white reporters generally don't have. I think if you want to reach a new generation of readers, it helps if you have not only minority reporters but also minority editors, who are sensitive to issues that may escape white people.

So, race does matter in reporting a story.

What do you mean?

So, in other words, an African American reporter and a white reporter sent out to do the same story, will bring back different stories.

We don't know that. But we know that, in our efforts to diversify the news, you have to have a diverse newsroom...

It's interesting ...because there is such an effort to diversify the newsroom, that's kind of like admitting that race does matter.

One of the credibility factors in a news story is how many sources do you have. It used to be, the old thinking was, well, if you have both sides of the story you have a balanced article, well that's not true. You need more than both sides of the story—you need all sides of the story, you need a hemispherical look at an issue. Because one, it makes it fairer, more accurate; but it also brings context to the many readers that you have: black, white, brown... it also increases your knowledge base.

Do you think that certain reporters might be able to get different sources than other reporters based on their ethnicity?

I wouldn't say it's sourcing as much as it is, knowing what questions to ask; knowing and having a better set of ears on an issue than other reporters can have. ...You want a newsroom with a big pool of talent, and everybody brings something to the table, and ethnicity is something that can be brought to the table.

In other words, race matters. The journalists at the *Journal Sentinel* understood this, as did the editors. The editor-in-chief said that the newsroom should be diverse not only in terms of race, but also in terms of sex,

background, socioeconomic status, religion, and experience. We asked him specifically about the tendency for African American reporters to cover minority-oriented issues.

Do you think that African American reporters generally gravitate to the stories that are about the African American population in Milwaukee?

I think that most African American reporters that are on the metro staff have more interest in doing coverage of issues in the city than they do probably, in the suburbs.

Okay, but the city includes a ton of stories. Do you think that they generally look for stories that are more...

Sometimes, it just depends, they, sure they would, some of the cases we have more often apply for a, we had an opening to cover urban affairs, as opposed to covering education in [a suburban/rural county] or something like that. ... As far as their picking the stories they do, it's a collaborative effort with the editors.

The *Journal Sentinel* has no formal policy that would channel minority reporters toward minority-oriented stories, or white reporters toward stories about government and business. Given the lack of an explicit racial component in the process of deciding who covers what, we asked the editor how it happened that African Americans who covered city news at the *Journal Sentinel* were all reporting on minority-related issues.

Is it plausible to say that right now, at the Journal Sentinel, African Americans are largely doing African American-related stories?

No.

It's not?

Well, you could go around the paper and you'd find, ... I guess on how you define it. Sure, there are some that do stories that are a lot more towards the African American community and others that don't.

Who's an example of someone who doesn't?

[Here the editor mentioned a black reporter who covers sports and another who used to cover police, but who at the time of the interview had been covering entertainment for the feature section for many months.]

I guess features and sports were not included in our study because they're not local public issues, as we defined them, meaning hard news.

I mean, Eugene Kane [an African American columnist who writes almost exclusively about minority issues] writes a column, I don't know whether that was...

That would've been included because he probably would've been mentioning these issues.

Right, so he writes a lot about issues that happen in the city, he's interested in issues having to do with, with race, and certainly a majority of his columns have to do with race, so I guess in the process there are stories where people get paired up with people... It's not as simple as the reporter just, I mean, sort of going off on his own 'cause you've got African American editors, the head of photography is African American, one of the metro editors is African American.³²

The editor, like our other interviewees, was hesitant to acknowledge that reporters' races determined, at least in part, the issues they covered. His comments suggested that reporters gravitate to topics about which they have the greatest interest and knowledge. If minority reporters have greater interest in and knowledge about minority issues, that's why they write most of the stories about such issues.

Black reporters were somewhat conflicted about race being a factor in determining which stories were covered by which reporters, as evidenced by the comments of the African American woman who said it was a "major problem" if a black reporter wanted to cover non-minority issues, but that she liked "being able to tell the stories of my people." An African American man with several years at the newspaper was reluctant to criticize story assignments based on reporter race. "When editors assign minority reporters to cover minority issues, they (the editors) think they are doing a good thing, and many times they are," the reporter said. "I don't think it's fair to say or suggest it's somehow wrong to do that when the intent is actually to draw upon the presumed insights of a reporter based on his or her life experiences."

Discussion

Our study has two principal findings. The first is that race is an important determinant of the topics reporters write about: Minority reporters at the *Journal Sentinel* who dealt with Local Public Issues usually did so in the context of stories about the minority population in Milwaukee, while white reporters generally did not deal with

minority issues. The second finding is that reporters and editors alike rationalized the situation by saying reporters were assigned to stories and beats at least in part based on their life experiences, which in a majority-minority city such as Milwaukee are heavily influenced by race.

We have given the provocative label “racial profiling” to this set of practices, and indeed the results of our study do provoke thought. Content analysis suggested that race was an important factor in topics journalists wrote about. Interviews confirmed the importance of race, and also documented the widespread belief that a journalist’s experience as a member of a racial minority is valuable as the newspaper strives for accurate and thorough coverage of issues of importance to African Americans and other minority groups. However, racial experience was explicitly valued only in the case of minority journalists. The invisibility of whiteness is such that none of the journalists we interviewed mentioned the idea that being white might be useful in navigating the overwhelmingly white worlds of government and business.

The idea that a journalist’s race influences the quality of the stories he or she writes assumes that professional and organizational norms are relatively weak influences on the news a given journalist produces. Very little research has addressed this question directly, but the weight of scholarly opinion is that professional and organizational norms are the most important influences on journalistic work.³³

Power in the United States is principally the affair of whites, even in a majority-minority city like Milwaukee. Might it be that, without any overt racist intent whatsoever, the newspaper assigns whites to cover power in an unconscious recognition that power is a “white” issue?³⁴ The reach of our data does not extend far enough to support such a conclusion, but it is one of a number of plausible possible explanations for the patterns we found. Another plausible explanation is that minority journalists prefer to cover minority issues rather than issues of power or of more general interest. Such an explanation would be consistent with the views of some African American reporters, including one who said, “With black reporters, I think the reason most end up writing about ‘black’ issues is because African Americans in general are preoccupied with social and racial issues and thus gravitate toward those kinds of stories more.”

However, it may also be important to bring non-white perspectives to coverage of the centers of power. A black columnist for the *Journal Sentinel*, reviewing the newspaper’s coverage of the 2004 Milwaukee mayoral race, wrote: “This paper is not perfect; it does make mistakes. An unfortunate example was the absence of black reporters and editors in all but the periphery of the mayoral coverage.”³⁵

The reporters all told us of being assigned to do stories they had suggested on topics which, they agreed, may not have been done—or may not have been done as well—by someone of a different race or background. They all agreed that diversity in the newsroom was good and necessary primarily for this reason.

That said, our findings validate critical-race theory in two ways. The first was the invisibility of whiteness in discussions about the bases for story assignments. The journalists, whatever their race, spoke of racial diversity only when they were talking about minority reporters and minority-oriented topics. The hegemony of whiteness was such that none of the journalists appeared to have thought about the role of whiteness in the coverage of the largely white realms of politics and business. Unless whiteness and its effects become visible, the pattern of racial profiling that our content analysis revealed is likely to endure.

A second way in which our findings validate critical-race theory has to do with the irony of diversity initiatives in journalism. Although the *Journal Sentinel* had one of the most racially diverse news staffs (relative to the composition of the community it served) of any large newspaper in the United States at the time of the study, the pattern of racial profiling we found was an empirical verification of Mellinger's hypothesis that a newspaper diversity initiative "actually privileges whiteness and marginalizes the very journalists of color whom it purports to welcome into the fold."³⁶ By and large, reporters of color covered Local Public Issues of secondary importance to people in the newsroom. Everyone acknowledged (although reluctantly in some cases) that minority reporters' race was a factor in the topics they covered. In contrast, no one even whispered that race might have been a factor in the choice of white reporters to cover centers of power such as politics and business. The implicit notion was that minority reporters get their assignments because of their race, while white reporters get theirs because of hard work and talent. Such thinking keeps journalists of color at the margins of news creation and newsroom decision making.

Our study analyzed only three weeks of news content, but the patterns of content in those weeks were typical of *Journal Sentinel* content for the several months before and after the data-collection period. Our confidence that we chose a representative three-week period was bolstered by the fact that none of the staffers we interviewed suggested that the pattern of results was inaccurate.

The racial component in *Journal Sentinel* story assignments was similar to the pattern of "segregated" assignments found by a study of local television news in twelve communities.³⁷ Nonetheless, additional research at different news organizations in different cities would be helpful in determining how widespread racial profiling in the newsroom may be.

NOTES

1. David H. Weaver, Randal A. Beam, Bonnie J. Brownlee, Paul S. Voakes, and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist in the 21st Century: U.S. News People at the Dawn of a New Millennium* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007), 12.

2. American Society of Newspaper Editors, "Tables from the 2004

Newsroom Employment Survey," April 20, 2004, available at <http://www.asne.org/index.cfm?id=5147> (accessed June 14, 2006).

3. Terry Adams and Johanna Cleary, "The Parity Paradox: Reader Response to Minority Newsroom Staffing," *Mass Communication & Society* 9 (1, 2006): 45-61, 45.

4. See, e.g., American Society of Newspaper Editors, *ASNE Statement on Newsroom Diversity*, October 20, 1998, available at <http://www.asne.org/index.cfm?id=1669> (accessed 14 June 2006).

5. In addition to leading to improved coverage of minority communities, greater levels of minority staffing are often assumed to bring economic benefits for mainstream news organizations, such as increased newspaper readership and subscriptions by people of color. See Richard Gross, Stephanie Craft, and Glen T. Cameron, "Diversity Efforts at the *Los Angeles Times*: Are Journalists and the Community on the Same Page?" *Mass Communication & Society* 5 (3, 2002): 263-77. Little research is available to test that assumption, though one study of twenty-five communities found no relationship between minority staffing in local daily newspapers and minority readership. The same study found a *negative* relationship between increased minority staff and the proportion of African Americans who believe what they read in their local newspaper. See Adams and Cleary, "The Parity Paradox."

6. See, e.g., Don Heider, *White News: Why Local News Programs Don't Cover People of Color* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000); and Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, Federico A. Subervi-Vélez, Sharon Bramlett-Solomon, and Don Heider, "Minority Journalists' Perceptions of the Impact of Minority Executives," *Howard Journal of Communication* 15 (January-March 2004): 39-55.

7. Gwyneth Mellinger, "Counting Color: Ambivalence and Contradiction in the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Discourse of Diversity," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 27 (April 2003): 129-51, 130.

8. Richard Dyer, "White," *Screen* 29 (autumn 1988): 44-64.

9. George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics*, rev. and expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 1.

10. This point, especially with respect to African Americans, is made convincingly in Carol A. Stabile, *White Victims, Black Villains: Gender, Race, and Crime News in U.S. Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

11. Mellinger, "Counting Color: Ambivalence and Contradiction in the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Discourse of Diversity," 129.

12. On the newspaper industry's view on minority journalists before 1968, see Alf Pratte, "'... But There are Miles to Go': Racial Diversity and the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1922-2000," *Journal of Negro History* 86 (spring 2001): 160-79.

13. Kerner Commission, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968).

14. This is not to say that interest in having journalists of color in

decision-making positions has entirely disappeared. Fairly recent empirical studies that document the importance of minority news executives include Heider, *White News: Why Local News Programs Don't Cover People of Color*; and Rivas-Rodriguez et al., "Minority Journalists' Perceptions of the Impact of Minority Executives."

15. Raymond N. Ankney and Deborah A. Procopio, "Corporate Culture, Minority Hiring, and Newspaper Coverage of Affirmative Action," *Howard Journal of Communication* 14 (July 2003): 159-76.

16. Carolyn Martindale, quoted in Richard Gross, Patricia A. Curtin, and Glen T. Cameron, "Diversity Efforts in the Newsroom: Doin' the Right Thing or Just a Case of Show Me the Money?" (paper presented at the annual meeting of AEJMC, New Orleans, August 1999).

17. Pamela T. Newkirk, "Guess Who's Leaving the Newsrooms?" *Columbia Journalism Review*, September/October 2000.

18. E.R. Shipp, "Excuses, Excuses: How Editors and Reporters Justify Ignoring Stories," in *The Business of Journalism: Ten Leading Reporters and Editors on the Perils and Pitfalls of the Press*, ed. William Serrin (New York: New Press, 2000), 57-74.

19. Ted Pease and J. Frazier Smith, *The Newsroom Barometer: Job Satisfaction and the Impact of Racial Diversity at U.S. Daily Newspapers* (Athens, OH: E.W. Scripps School of Journalism, 1991), 24-25. Similar comments also can be found in Gerald Michael Bush, *We Need to Talk: Cultural Diversity and the Flow of News* (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina, 2000), 8, 10-11, 57, 139, 146.

20. Paula M. Poindexter, Laura Smith, and Don Heider, "Race and Ethnicity in Local Television News: Framing, Story Assignments, and Source Selections," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 47 (December 2003): 524-36.

21. Poindexter, Smith, and Heider, "Race and Ethnicity in Local Television News: Framing, Story Assignments, and Source Selections," 531.

22. Information in this paragraph not attributed to other sources comes from U.S. Census Bureau, *Wisconsin Quick Facts*, available at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/55/55000.html> (accessed July 19, 2004).

23. Rick Romell, "Circulation drops at paper," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, May 4, 2004.

24. Our method of counting produced a proportion of minority journalists slightly lower than contained in the 2004 ASNE Newsroom Employment Survey, which stated that 17.8% of the *Journal Sentinel's* journalists were members of minority groups. See <http://www.asne.org/index.cfm?id=5146#Wisconsin> (accessed July 20, 2004). See also Gregory Stanford, "Media have a way to go on the road to diversity," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, July 28, 2002.

25. Of the forty highest-circulation newspapers in the United States, only eight had news staffs with a racial composition more representative of their circulation areas than the *Journal Sentinel*. Bill Dedman and Stephen K. Doig, "Does your newspaper's staff reflect the racial diversity of the community it serves? A report for the Knight Foundation on

1,413 American newspapers and their circulation areas," May 2004, available at <http://powerreporting.com/knight/top200.html> (accessed July 20, 2004).

26. With respect to Milwaukee, see David Pritchard, "Race, Homicide, and Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly* 62 (autumn 1985): 500-08; and David Pritchard and Karen D. Hughes, "Patterns of Deviance in Crime News," *Journal of Communication* 47 (summer 1997): 49-67. For similar findings from another city, see Richard J. Lundman, "The Newsworthiness and Selection Bias in News about Murder: Comparative and Relative Effects of Novelty and Race and Gender Typifications on Newspaper Coverage of Homicide," *Sociological Forum* 18 (September 2003): 357-86.

27. At the time of the study, the *Journal Sentinel* had minority reporters covering suburbs, sports, entertainment, and technology, beats that fell outside of the study's focus on Local Public Issues relevant to the city of Milwaukee.

28. A complete list of the Local Public Issues and the values they were assigned is available from the first author.

29. William A. Scott, "Reliability of Content Analysis: The Case of Nominal Scale Coding," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 19 (autumn 1955): 321-25.

30. Scheduling problems forced one interview (with the newspaper's editor-in-chief, a white man) to be conducted by only the white woman in the interviewing team.

31. Space constraints prevent us from including comments from everyone who provided them. However, the views of the journalists whose comments are not included in this article were entirely consistent with those that the article does report.

32. The title of the African American metro editor, one of six metro editors at the newspaper, was "urban life editor." As noted earlier, the adjective "urban" is often code for "minority" in modern American news organizations.

33. See, generally, Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*, 2d ed. (White Plains, NY: Longman, 1996); and Dan Berkowitz, ed., *Social Meanings of News* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997). For example, a study of local television news in thirty-six markets found that "Black anchors and reporters spoke from the same perspective as White; there was no difference in their reporting, which is precisely what their job descriptions and professional roles demanded." The authors of that study concluded that "structural forces have far more bearing on the nature of news images than the racial identifications of the personnel." See Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki, *The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 84-87.

34. The most prestigious beats at American newspapers, including the *Journal Sentinel*, are those that deal with power. These are largely government-oriented beats, and in the fall of 2003 every *Journal Sentinel* reporter assigned to one of the following areas—Milwaukee city govern-

ment, Milwaukee county government, the state capital bureau in Madison, and the Washington, D.C., bureau—was white.

35. Gregory Stanford, "Racial split played out; Barrett faces big challenge," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 11, 2004.

36. Mellinger, "Counting Color: Ambivalence and Contradiction in the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Discourse of Diversity," 130.

37. Poindexter, Smith, and Heider, "Race and Ethnicity in Local Television News: Framing, Story Assignments, and Source Selections."