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Examining Media Bias Surrounding Black Higher Education: The Dominant Culture’s Portrayal of Historically Black Colleges in the Media

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Proposal Title
Examining Media Bias Around Higher Education: The Dominant Culture’s Portrayal of Historically Black Colleges in the Media
Project Narrative

Introduction

In 2010, Jason Riley, a Wall Street Journal contributor, wrote an article that questioned the need and existence of historically black colleges and universities. To support of his stance, Riley quoted economists Roland Fryer of Harvard and Michael Greenstone of MIT (2007) as saying that black colleges are inferior to traditional schools in preparing students for post-college life. Fryer and Greenstone argued that in the 1970s, HBCU matriculation was associated with higher wages and an increased probability of graduation, relative to attending a traditional college. However, by the 1990s, there was a substantial wage penalty. The data showed that, overall, there was a 20 percent decline in the relative wages of HBCU graduates in just two decades. Fryer and Greenstone concluded that by some measures, HBCU attendance appears to retard black progress (p. 1).

The Wall Street Journal article by Riley (2010), written over two years ago, is not the first article to negatively portray historically black colleges in the media, nor will it be the last. Some of the nation’s historically black colleges have found themselves facing financial problems—Morris Brown College, Fisk University, and Philander Smith College are a few examples. Reporters of various media outlets have often pointed out the shortcomings of historically black colleges while often generalizing issues at particular historically black colleges to include all historically black colleges. Gasman (2006) argues that articles in the media have gained national attention, often jeopardizing the recruitment efforts, fundraising success and long term existence of this institutions (p.112).

In recent years, a look at the media coverage of historically black colleges portrays endless skepticism about the accountability and academic inferiority of these universities. Also, various media outlets have questioned the continued need of historically black colleges in post racial society. Researchers (Shaw, 1979) of agenda setting insist that the media are unique when it comes to the art of persuasion. Shaw (1979) argues that the media are persuasive in focusing public attention on specific events, issue and persons when determining the importance that people attach to public matters (p.96). Shaw states that the agenda setting theory says that because of newspapers, television and other news media, people are either aware or not aware, pay attention to or neglect, or play up or downgrade specific features of public matters. People tend to exclude or include from their cognitions what the media include or exclude from its
content. People also tend to assign an importance to what they include that closely resembles the emphasis given to issues or persons by the mass media (p.96). Shaw’s explanation of agenda setting serves as the outcome of how media shapes public perception so that media bias can be seen.

**Objective of the Study**

This critical analysis examines the bias evident in the portrayal of historically black colleges in the media. I will specifically examine the media’s coverage of the financial crisis that took place at Fisk University and the marching band’s hazing related death that took place at Florida A&M University.

**Significance of the Study**

The current study examines the bias evident in the portrayal of historically black colleges in the media. It also seeks to offer historically black colleges a look into how the dominant culture’s history of racism affects the mainstream media’s portrayal of historically black colleges. It is hoped that this research into the portrayal of historically black colleges in the media will not only expand upon the body of literature, but will also contribute to a framework for administrators and faculty at historically black colleges in assessing policy and program development that will improve their efforts in the student recruitment, fundraising, and economic sustainability.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework used to guide this study is the theory of racial comity and Kochman’s theory of black and white cultural styles. The conceptual framework of this research involves three constructs: the lack of positive race relations (Entman, 2000); the legacy of racism (Entman, 2000; Shaw, 1979; Watkins, 2001); and the portrayal of negative black images in white media (Entman, 2000). Underlying these three constructs are the theories of racial comity and black and white cultural styles.

Watkins (2001) states that ideology and education becomes the currency of those dominating the culture (p.9). Dominant ideology is a product of dominant power. The dynamics of power, control, racial subservience and class shaped and constructed the curriculum of black education (p.10) Watkins argues that historically black colleges were established by white missionaries who were the dominant culture of that time. Watkins states that organized education has long been influenced by the power structure within dominant culture. Historically black colleges were built on the legacy of racism and racial subservience. Watkins concludes that ideas and institutions that do not conform to the dominant relationships receive little or no support within the educational system (p.10). Therefore, those who hold power, who are the dominant culture, attempt to forge
an ideological society based on their economic and cultural agenda (p.11). Historically black colleges were built to push the dominant culture’s economic agenda.

Constructs

RACIAL COMITY

- Legacy of racism of historically black colleges
- Lack of positive race relations
- Portrayal of negative black images in white media

Kochman’s (1981) theory frames the legacy of racism and how it played a part in the history and founding of historical black colleges. Kochman argues that mainstream American attitudes toward cultural diversity have been generated by differences in black and white mainstream cultural patterns. The socially dominant white group established the standard culture and has ignored other cultures. Kochman also argues that whites insisted upon cultural assimilation by blacks and members of other minority groups. The accommodation process is nonreciprocal by the dominant white social group.

The legacy of racism that historically black colleges were built on leads to the lack of positive race relations between the dominant culture and historically black colleges. In order to achieve positive race relations between the dominant culture and its portrayal of historically black colleges in the media, Entman (2000) discusses the theory of comity as a way to resolve this issue. Entman defines comity as courtesy, civility, kindly and considerate behavior towards others. Entman argues that comity will allow whites and blacks to see common interests and values and readily and thus to cooperate in good faith to achieve mutually beneficial objectives (p.11-12). Comity is based upon there being a trustful interaction which will result in more cooperation and trust. Entman concludes that comity frames race relations. A context of comity can nurture the circle of respect, empathy and generosity, therefore eliminating the vicious circle of suspicion, separation and stinginess (p.12). Racial comity means more than mere tolerance. It requires that members of two races identify with one another beyond skin color to their own shared interests in a harmonious society.

Methodology

This critical media analysis examines the media bias of historically black colleges in the media. I will specifically examine the media’s coverage of the financial crisis that took place at Fisk University and the marching band’s hazing related death that took place at Florida A&M University. I chose the historically
black colleges in this analysis because of the current issues at each individual institution. Fisk University is facing financial troubles. Florida A&M University faces a lawsuit stemming from a marching band hazing incident that lead to a student’s death. Both of the incidents taking place at these two historically black colleges are considered newsworthy.

**Instruments, Procedure & Data Analysis**

Data for this study will be collected through examination of newspaper and magazine articles, web-based publications and transcripts of television reports and interviews. Altheide (1996)’s method of content analysis is used to examine written material from various media venues and to examine the dominant ideas being put forth by the media on the subject of historically black colleges in higher education. I will collect various forms of articles for a period spanning 2009-2013, for a total of four years. Content analysis will give an indication of the dominant ideas being put forth by the mainstream media on the subject of higher education at historically black colleges. Specifically, I am interested in the descriptive language used in the articles and transcripts to describe both Fisk University and Florida A&M.

For this research, frames, themes and discourse are used to analyze the media bias in articles and reports written about Fisk University and Florida A&M University. Altheide (1996) identifies frames, themes, and discourse as a three-part process that describes the identification of frames, themes and discourses within the content of written material. He specifically notes that frames focus on what will be discussed and how it will be discussed; in other words, how the media selects the content for the article (p. 31). Altheide states that themes pertain to the recurring and dominant ideas that appear within the material that has been selected. Finally, Altheide describes the discourse as the actual messages being communicated by the documents.

**Warrants for Point of View**

Based on her research, Gasman concludes that media contributes to the public’s perception that black colleges are no longer relevant. Gasman states that “the implication of these statements is that racism has led to the inferiority of Black colleges overall—and that these institutions have not been able to emerge from this second-class status” (p.19). Gasman argues that black colleges are dedicated to racial uplift and the education of African Americans. Each has its own environment, culture, and struggles. She also concludes that black colleges must be aware of the types of discourse embedded in past media coverage and how this can distort stories about black colleges. This research seeks to expose examples of unfair coverage. The researcher hopes that this research will force the mainstream media to be responsible for understanding the history and culture of historically black colleges. This research also seeks to provide black college administrators and faculty with institutional data to counter stories pushed forth by the media. Gasman suggests that black colleges need to be wise to the ways
of the media and use an aggressive strategy to counter negative stories. They must contribute to the discussion on historically black colleges rather than letting the mainstream media set the agenda.

**Preliminary Findings**

Based upon Gasman’s research model and Altheide’s method of content analysis, a preliminary analysis of the data collected on Fisk University indicates bias in the portrayal of Fisk University in the Nashville media. The media’s framing of the problems at Fisk University produces the following preliminary questions: What are the financial problems at the university? Will it maintain its accreditation? What are the qualifications of the administrators? Two of the media stories collected center on all of these questions. A January 2013 story on the NewsChannel 5 website points out that Fisk is receiving more attention to its financial status than its academic prowess. The news story also refers to Fisk University as a school deep in both tradition and debt. A December 2011 new story in Nashville’s City Paper indicates that Fisk received warnings on its accreditation based on its financial stability and the concerns of its administrators not being qualified.

Within the frames discussed, a few common themes are noted within these two articles. These themes include: the decline of historically black colleges and failure. The main theme receiving the most media attention is the decline of historically black colleges. This theme is framed by the media’s portrayal of Fisk being financial unstable and warnings against its accreditation. Entitled “Fisk, Museum Agree to Settlement over Art Sale”, the article describes the university as having a dwindling endowment and that administrators are scrambling to find a way out of a financial crisis. The sale of artwork from the Georgia O’Keeffe collection could potentially save the school. The theme of failure refers to Fisk’s failure to be financially stable and the failure of the university’s administrators who are not deemed qualified to lead. Entitled “Fisk University Placed on Probation for One Year”, the article indicates that the school is on a one year probation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, following two warnings issued over the past school year. The article further describes the warnings being due to the school’s financial instability and concerns regarding the qualifications of administrators.

**Significance of the Findings**

The significance of the preliminary findings on media articles about Fisk University are that it represents examples of media bias in the mainstream Nashville media. Based on Gasman’s research noted earlier, the Nashville media suggests that the struggles of the university overshadows its academic accomplishments; therefore signaling the decline and failure of historically black colleges. The findings based on this research provides black college
administrators and faculty with institutional data to counter stories pushed forth by the media. Black college administrators must contribute to the discussion on historically black colleges in the mainstream media rather than giving the mainstream media the opportunity to set the media agenda on historically black colleges.
References


