

Racial Profiling:

Racial Representation on Local TV News
2002

A Report from the
Grand Rapids Institute
for Information Democracy

GRID



GRID is an affiliate of the
Community Media Center

Summary of Findings

- * Only Fox 17 ran stories that were featured for Black History Month.
- * Each Station did run at least one story that featured groups or individuals who were doing anti-racism work.
- * The percentage of crime suspects who's pictures were shown increased for most minority groups.
- * Minority voices are still limited in number and continue to be minimal outside of race-specific stories.
- * Most of the recommendations are not being applied by the TV News Station on a regular basis.

Methodology

From January 21st through February 28th of 2002, GRIID conducted a study of three local TV News stations. (weekends - Saturdays & Sundays not included).

GRIID taped and logged information from the 6 & 11pm newscasts of WOOD TV 8 & WZZM 13, and WXMI Fox 17's 10pm newscast.

GRIID looked at the number of stories, logged who spoke in each story according to race and social position or title that was put on the screen by each TV station.

This is the 4th year in a row that GRIID has conducted a study on racial representation. To view past reports go to www.griid.org/reports.

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Introduction

The year 2002 marks the fourth consecutive year that GRIID has produced a study looking at racial representation on local TV news. Statistically, not much has changed, (see previous reports at www.griid.org/reports) particularly as it relates to the recommendations that GRIID and the Media Action Team from the Racial Justice Summit have been advocating for the past two years (see recommendations on page 12).

The percentage of voices heard in news stories continues to mirror population numbers for some groups, but underrepresents than population numbers with others. When minority voices do appear, then tend to be as consumers, people on the street or those with little social standing.

Crime stories continue to disproportionately display minority faces, even though most are only suspects. Minority voices are almost completely absent when it comes to non-race specific stories - the economy, education, environment, etc., and cultural/ethnic events are given superficial coverage.

This study, like last year, covers the period from Martin Luther King Day through the end of Black History Month (Jan. 21 - Feb. 28). We will look at MLK Day coverage, Black History Month stories and review how well the three stations implimented the recommendations. In addition, we will review coverage of a City Commission meeting where citizens came forward with accusations that the GR Police Department commits racial profiling.

MLK Day Coverage

All three stations gave time to activities and commemorations dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Fox 17 summarized the annual noon march that is organized by GRCC students/faculty and a service at GVSU's Allendale campus. The only person interviewed was the director of affirmative action at GVSU - an African American male (8 seconds).

Channel 8 had a short summary of events around the country and activities at Aquinas, GRCC and GVSU. The only person interviewed in these stories was the President of GVSU Mark Murray (6 seconds). WOOD TV8 did do a longer story at 6pm that started live at the Ford Fieldhouse event and then went to feature a Calvin Professor and an inner city minister. The Calvin Professor was talking about King's desire for Blacks to not just have the right to sit at the lunch counter, but to afford the food sold there. The inner city minister runs a men's and family shelter. He said that many of the things that King advocated for with poverty alleviation were coming true. While the minister was speaking, video footage was inserted that showed all Black men in the Heartside area (a poor area of the city). These images could lead viewers to see Blacks only associated with poverty. More importantly, neither the professor nor the minister really reflected King's message of economic injustice. (For more about King and his struggle for economic justice see Dyson's *I May Not Get There with You: The True Martin Luther King, Jr.*)

WZZM 13's coverage was by far the best in that viewers heard numerous African

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin to shift from a 'thing-oriented' society to a 'person-oriented' society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered."

American voices - the President of WMU spoke at a Steelcase event and a woman and her daughters were profiled. To see and hear a Black man as the head of a University speaks volumes to the opportunities that have been created. The interview with a woman and her daughter was also well done in that it personalized the struggle for Civil Rights, maybe to a fault. If there is any criticism of channel 13's coverage it's that there wasn't any critique of the structural injustices that King fought against. These kind of stories are harder to do, but can go a long way in informing the public on what Dr. King represents and what citizens can do to

challenge injustice.

Black History Month and other Race-focus Reporting

The only station to run stories which identified Black History month was Fox 17 which ran a series of stories called “Unsung Heros.” This is the second year in a row that Fox has featured 4 local African Americans during the month of February. This year featured a student in Grand Rapids, a Kalamazoo musician, a retired school principal, and a retired dean of minority affairs with GVSU. Each story was longer than normal for news stories and gave viewers multiple opportunities to hear each of the four African Americans featured.

There were several race-focused stories that were reported by all three stations. WOOD TV 8 ran just one story about Marshall High School’s decision to change the name/logo of the mascot. This is an important issue that has garnered significant attention throughout the country in the past decade. (go to <http://www.griid.org/mediaracism-mascot.shtml> for more information.) The school superintendent was interviewed about the decision, but so were two students who were opposed to the change. The problem with how the story was done was that the school superintendent was White and both students were Native American. The students both said that they didn’t find the use of the mascot logo/name offensive. While that may be true, it is not reflective of other Native people from Marshall, who initiated the efforts to change the name. Unfortunately, viewers would not have known that from watching this story. In the end, the story could have left viewers confused about what is at issue.

FOX 17 ran a short piece about a job opportunities seminar for minorities at the Van Andel Institute and a longer story about a church that provides urban kids with some positive experiences. The potential problem with this story is that the church representative was White and all the kids were Black. Viewers could interpret this as another example of African Americans not taking care of their kids, or that “White people are the saviors.” While we recognize that this was probably intended to be a story about people wanting to do something good for kids, news people need to be sensitive about how viewers interpret these messages.

WZZM 13 ran several stories that were race-focused. The ABC-affiliate did a nice story on a racially mixed choir that would be performing some of Duke Ellington’s work. They also ran a good story on the Ottawa County Summit on Racism. The

Recommendation #2

Profile the efforts of individuals and organizations that have a commitment to racial diversity and racial justice.

story focused on the accomplishments of the education committee and recognized educational needs with an increasingly diverse student population.

WZZM 13 also ran a positive story on institutional changes made by St. Mary's hospital and the City of GR to respond to racial diversity in the community. St. Mary's hired a Director of Diversity and the City of Grand Rapids has begun publishing documents in Spanish. Both stories gave viewers clear examples of policies that institutions can implement that is sensitive to racial differences.

One story that channel 13 ran that perpetuated racial stereotypes was a story where two groups of senior citizens were interviewed about the upcoming governor race. Whether or not it was conscious on the part of the reporter or not one group was exclusively Black and the other White. Both groups were asked very different questions in such a way that could have been interpreted as bias. The Black senior citizens were asked if they wanted a governor who cared about people, but the White seniors were asked whether the governor should have good financial sense. There was also some class bias since the Black seniors were at the United Methodist Community House getting a free lunch and playing bingo, while the White seniors were retired government workers having a meeting. Again we are not suggesting that the reporter intended to create this bias, rather that viewers could interpret this as a bias.

Accusations of Police Racial Profiling Coverage

At a February GR City Commission meeting citizens came forward with more accusations of police abuse and racial profiling. All three stations did at least one story on the meeting and its aftermath. Fox 17 did a short notice about the meeting and then a follow up story about the GRPD's study. No public voices were heard in these stories.

Channel 13 ran a piece that featured Kent County Commissioner Paul Mayhue, who has been active for years around police abuse and racial profiling issues. Mayhue was interviewed in a church seated next to a man who has been harassed by the police. Unfortunately, we never heard from the man who claimed he was abused. WZZM 13 did give significant airtime to GRPD Chief Dolan who asserted that there is no pattern of abuse or racial profiling by his department. By ending with Dolan's comments it had the potential of diminishing the claims of abuse from the community. WZZM 13 also did not give viewers any coverage of the meeting itself.

WOOD TV 8's coverage was by far the best. We heard comments from 5 different citizens who claimed abuse and even saw photos of one of the victims after being beaten. By showing people at a public hearing it gave a more honest sense of what some members of the community felt about this issue. Chief Dolan was also interviewed in order to give his perspective. The only flaw of this story was how it was framed. Newsreader Tom Van Howe began the piece by saying that residents came to a City Commission meeting to express concerns over racial profiling. Van Howe then said that the meeting "boiled over." Using those terms potentially set viewers up in such a way as to make them feel that people got out of hand, when in fact the public comments that channel 8 ran were extremely articulate and reasonable.

Recommendations and Reporting

Here we will just look at how the three stations fulfilled the recommendations that have been used by the Media Action Team of the Racial Justice Institute during this study period. (Go to page 12 to see recommendations.) For two years running each of the three TV News stations have been aware of these recommendations.

Recommendation #1 - Needs significant improvement.

Recommendation # 2 - WZZM 13 - 3 stories, Fox 17 - 2, WOOD TV 8 - 1. Better than last year, but still needs improvement.

Recommendation # 3 - No real change from last year. Needs significant improvement. (see data on pages 8-11)

Recommendation # 4 - No real change from last year. Needs significant improve ment. (see data on pages 8-11)

Recommendation # 5 - Has happened with WZZM 13 and GR Press. Other news outlets need to take their lead.

Recommendation # 6 - MLK Day events were covered, but more could be done.

Recommendation # 7 - The coverage of the accusations of racial profiling by the police does address this recommendation, but significant improvement could happen with that issue and other forms of institutional racism in the area.

Recommendation # 8 - Since 9/11 there has been increased international coverage, most of which has perpetuated stereotypes of Arabs. More local resources could be used to offset that trend.

Racial Representation Study from MLK Day - Feb 28, 2002

	WOODTV8	WZZM13	FOX17
White Male	229	166	143
White Female	134	92	87
Total	365	258	230
Percentage	88%	80%	82%
Black Male	14	20	25
Black Female	13	27	19
Total	27	47	44
Percentage	6.5%	14.6%	15.7%
Hispanic Male	7	6	3
Hispanic Fem.	2	9	
Total	9	15	3
Percentage	2.2%	4.6%	1.1%
Asian Male	3		
Asian Female	1		
Total	4		
Percentage	1%		
Native Male			
Native Female			
Total	0	0	0
Arab Male	1		
Arab Female	2		1
Total	3	0	1
Percentage	.7%		.3%
Multiracial Male	5	2	1
Multiracial Fem	2		2
Total	7	2	3
Percentage	1.7%	.6%	1.1%
Total Voices	415	322	281



	W	B	H	As	N	MR	Ar
Citizens/consumers	39	3	6				
Neighbors	27	2				1	
Business	27	1					
Religious		3					
Police	12						
Elected/govt officials	51	2	1				1
Community reps	18	1				2	
Educator	3	3		1			1
Sports/Entertainment	30	2	2	1		2	
Health	17			2		1	1
Student	20		2				
School Administration	23	2					
Workers	15	1					
Victim	1	1	1			1	
Parent/family	40	5	1				
Lawyer/judge	8						
Fire department	5						
Researcher	8	1					
Candidates						1	
Military/Veterans	2						
Witness							
Social Worker							
Organized Labor	1						
Environmentalist	1						
Crime (perps/suspects)	22	28		3			13
	33%	42%		5%			20%



	W	B	H	As	N	MR	Ar
Citizens/consumers	35	11	3				
Neighbors	11	5	1				
Business	34	1	1				
Religious	9	2	1			1	
Police	12						
Elected/govt officials	30	5					
Community reps	7	1				1	
Educator	7	1	1				
Sports/Entertainment	11	4	2				
Health	8						
Student	13	3	1				
School Administration	11	3					
Workers	12	2	2				
Victim	6	1					
Parent/family	20	5					
Lawyer/judge	4						
Fire department	3						
Researcher	9						
Candidates	10	1					
Military/Veterans	5						
Witness							
Social Worker							
Organized Labor	2						
Crime (perps)	14	22	2				14
Percentage	27%	42%	4%				27%



	W	B	H	As	N	MR	Ar
Citizens/consumers	22	7					
Neighbors	11	6				1	
Business	38						
Religious		1					
Police	14	1					
Elected/govt officials	39	3					1
Community reps	10	4					
Educator	16	4					
Sports/Entertainment	10						
Health	7						
Student	9	4				2	
School Administration	22	9					
Workers	4		2				
Victim	2		1				
Parent/family	22	1					
Lawyer/judge	4						
Fire department	1						
Researcher	1						
Candidates		1					
Military/Veterans							
Witness							
Social Worker		1					
Organized Labor							
Crime (perps)	15	20	7				
	36%	48%	16%				

Recommendations to the Media

1. Be an advocate for racial justice in the same way that you are already advocates for issues like quality public education, health care and consumer safety.
2. Profile the efforts of individuals and organizations that have a commitment to racial diversity and racial justice.
3. Provide coverage that is above population percentages. For example, even though the Native American community is less than one percent of the population, they deserve more than one percent of the news coverage. News organizations should give voice to - and inform the public about - communities rarely heard.
4. Utilize minority opinions for non-race specific issues. Minorities can speak to issues of the economy, education, the environment, gender and politics.
5. Invite a racially and economically diverse group of men and women to meet periodically with news directors and reporters to insure ongoing dialogue around racial representation in the media.
6. Profile minority cultural events year round, not just during calendar specific times like Black History Month or Hispanic Heritage Month.
7. Provide more investigative reporting into the racism that exists in West Michigan, both personal and institutional.
8. Be more selective about the national and international news used on local broadcasts. Much of this news - news not produced here - perpetuates negative racial stereotypes. For example, in this community you could rely on university departments that focus on International Studies.

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