Press Coverage of Civil Disorders: A Case Study of Winston-Salem, 1967

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PRESS COVERAGE OF CIVIL DISORDERS: A CASE STUDY OF WINSTON-SALEM, 1967

BY DAVID L. PALETZ AND ROBERT DUNN

A variety of voluntary codes and guidelines—some devised by the police, some by city administrations, most by the media themselves—now govern the reporting of riots in many American cities. Designed to curb flamboyant or sensational accounts that might exacerbate racial tensions, these guidelines may also have unanticipated and less desirable consequences. The following case study analyzes the implications of one newspaper's coverage of one such disorder.

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RACIALLY larded civil disorders have occurred throughout American history. Until the advent of television, the press provided the basic source of information on these minacious disturbances. Yet, surprisingly, there are few attempts to evaluate, analyze, or even describe the way the press covered such events. Academics have been notably derelict.[1] This essay is one small attempt to rectify the scholarly omission. We briefly canvass the nature of newspaper coverage of riots during the period 1919-1943. Then we peruse the ways recent racial disturbances have been treated in the press. In the body of the paper, to examine a newspaper in action, we report on the results of a case study we conducted of the treatment by the *Winston-Salem Journal* of that city's November 1967 riot. This

[1] Such well-regarded works as Frank Luther Mott. *American Journalism,* New York, Macmillan, 1962 and Edwin H. Ford and Edwin Emery, eds., *Highlights in the History of the American Press,* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1954, do not consider the subject. According to the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York, Bantam Books, 1968, hereafter *President's Commission*): "Academic work on the impact of the media on race relations, its role in shaping attitudes, and the effects of the choices it makes on people's behavior, is in a rudimentary stage." (p. 389)

Works dealing specifically with the Negro are similarly derelict. Cf. "The Negro's Progress in Fifty Years," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* Vol. 49, September 1913, "The American Negro," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* Vol. 140, November 1928. See also Monroe N. Work, *A Bibliography of the Negro in Africa and America,* New York, H. W. Wilson Co., 1928.

leads to certain uneasy reflections on the present nature and future direction of riot coverage in the press.

PRESS COVERAGE OF RACIAL DISTURBANCES

According to the limited research actually conducted, prior to the 1960's racial disturbances extensive enough to be considered riots consisted primarily of violent clashes between whites and Negroes. In most instances black people were the victims of white aggression. Many attacks were stimulated by the local press. The classic example is the Washington, D. C. fray of mid-July 1919 when the *Washington Post,* with its vastly exaggerated tales of Negro rapists, played a major role in provoking the disturbance.[2] The press of East St. Louis is supposed to have played a similar role in provoking the riots that occurred in that city in the same month.[3] In Chicago, which also experienced major racial conflict in July 1919, the press gave Negroes scarcely better shrift.[4] As the Chicago Commission on Race Relations pointed out:

> Negroes in Chicago almost without exception point to the Chicago press as the responsible agent for many of their present difficulties. Throughout the country it is pointed out by both whites and Negroes that the policies of newspapers on racial matters have made relations more difficult, at times fostering new antagonism and enmities and even precipitating riots by inflaming the public against Negroes.[5]

When the riots occurred it appears the press tended to misreport events to the detriment of Negroes.[6] And when trials followed riot, much of the press viewed Negro defendants as guilty and presented their cases less than fairly.[7] Not all the press was culpable, but much of it deserved Seligmann's indictment:

> It will be the work of years to undo the poisonous and anti-social accomplish-

[2] See Arthur I. Waskow, *From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 and the 1960's,* Garden City, New York, Anchor Books, 1967, pp. 21-38. Waskow intermittently discusses press coverage of most of the race riots of 1919.

Herbert J. Seligmann of the NAACP, in *The Negro Faces America,* New York, Harper, 1920, comments in passing on the role of the press in his discussion of racial conflict in Longview, Texas, Knoxville, Omaha, Charleston, and Washington. See especially "Why Race Riots," pp. 35-63, and pp. 156-161.

[3] Elliott M. Rudwick, *Race Riot at East St. Louis, July 2, 1917,* Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1964, pp. 8-11, 24-26.

[4] Chicago Commission on Race Relations, *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot,* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1922, ch. 10, especially pp. 523-556. See also Waskow, chs. 4 and 5.

[5] *Ibid.,* p. 520.

[6] See the works cited previously, especially Rudwick, pp. 38-40, 70-72, and 244 (note 47).

[7] Rudwick, *op. cit.,* pp. 116-128; Waskow, passim.

ments of such organs as *The Omaha Bee, The Washington Post* and *The Times, The Chicago Evening Post, The New York Times,* in fact of the majority of American newspapers.[8]

The next major outbreaks of racial conflict occurred in Detroit, Harlem, and Los Angeles in 1943.[9] The dearth of research here is even greater than we encountered in summarizing the 1919 disturbances. In general the press appears to have been less virulent and more constructive,[10] but an accurate assessment would require the kinds of studies apparently not yet conducted.

Of the civil disorders taking place from 1964 onward, the most studied seems to be that in Los Angeles in August 1965. Much of the media converged on this affray as a news event *par excellence.* One television station even provided live coverage via helicopter. The media were accused of giving excessive publicity to the more intransigent blacks, of reporting inflammatory incidents, of provoking violence by their very presence, and, in one instance, of actually encouraging a rioter to throw a brick.[11] It is around this theme of riot exacerbation that the role of the media has been discussed. Certainly television has borne a substantial part of the criticism, but the press has not been immune.[12]

Clearly further empirical research is required. Therefore, we conducted a case study of press coverage of a specific civil disorder. Our purposes were to determine why and how the newspapers depicted the riot as they did. We also hoped to corroborate or refute the view

[8] Seligmann, *op. cit.,* p. 184.

[9] In the Los Angeles "zoot suit" clashes few Negroes were involved. The victims were Mexican-American *pachucos.*

[10] See, for example, Alfred McClung Lee and Norman Daymond Humphrey, *Race Riot,* New York, The Dryden Press, 1943. This work deals with the Detroit riot of 1943 and contains only brief and peripheral references to the role of the press—for example, p. 101.

[11] These themes appear in: *Violence in the City—An End or a Beginning?* A Report by the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, Los Angeles, December 1965, pp. 84–85; Staff Report of *Actions Taken to Implement the Recommendations in the Commission's Report,* Los Angeles, August 1966, p. 45; Robert Conot, *Rivers of Blood, Years of Darkness,* New York, Bantam Books, 1967, pp. 51, 154, 247, 428-429; Jerry Cohen and William S. Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn,* New York, E. P. Dutton, 1966, pp. 77, 87-88, 98; and Frederic C. Coonradt, *The Negro News Media and the Los Angeles Riot,* Los Angeles, The School of Journalism, University of Southern California, 1965.

[12] See *President's Commission,* ch. 15, *passim;* and *Conference on Mass Media and Race Relations,* New York, The American Jewish Committee, October 17-18, 1967, pp. 2-5. A typical position is Eugene H. Methvin, "Mass Media and Mass Violence," *The New Leader,* January 15, 1968. For a politician's attitude, see the comment by then Vice President Humphrey: "It is absolutely essential that TV in particular and radio and press secondarily, accept their responsibility in these riot situations." *Look,* Vol. 32, July 9, 1968, p. 46.

that the press, as part of the media, tends to exacerbate and exploit the disturbances. We selected the riot in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. At first we feared that because this riot took place in a southern town it might be too atypical, but our fears proved unjustified. Initial explorations revealed that in many ways Winston-Salem is a microcosm of larger American cities. In 1960 Winston-Salem had a population of 111,135. Afro-Americans were approximately one-third of this number; many of them had the same discontent with their educational deficiencies, economic inequality, and underprivileged status demonstrated in the larger metropolitan centers of the North.

THE WINSTON-SALEM RIOT

The following account of the purported proximate inciting incident and the subsequent civil disorder is a synthesis of the facts reported by the *Winston-Salem Journal, Charlotte Observer,* and the *New York Times.* It has been corroborated and supplemented by interviews with some of the editors and reporters of the *Journal* and discussions with individuals who claimed to have either witnessed or participated in the events described.

Just after midnight on Sunday, October 15, 1967, Patrolman W. E. Owens and his partner attempted to arrest James Eller, a thirty-two-year-old Afro-American, for drunkenness. Eller fled but was apprehended by the officers on his front porch. MACE was ineffective in restraining him and another squad car was called to help. At the city jail, Eller again attempted to flee. He was subdued when hit on the head with a billy club by patrolman Owens. He was released several hours later when his wife posted bond. Later that day he went to the emergency rooms of two hospitals, Baptist and Forsyth Memorial, but was admitted at neither. Subsequently, he entered Kate B. Reynolds Memorial Hospital where he underwent surgery after diagnosis revealed a fractured skull. He died on Saturday, October 28. Rumors of the incident, embroidered with grisly details, abounded in the Afro-American community, but nothing appeared in the local press until October 24, when the *Journal* printed a brief account. Apparently the police attempted to suppress the story. It is unclear when or how the *Journal* received its initial information.

Owens was relieved from duty on Friday, October 27, pending a departmental investigation. He was charged with murder by Mrs. Eller, who had signed a warrant. On Monday, October 30, Municipal Judge Leroy Sams dismissed the case.

Eller's funeral was set for Thursday, November 2. The Rev. J. T. McMillan, president of Winston-Salem's NAACP chapter, called for a protest march from the graveside to downtown Winston-Salem.

Meanwhile, Afro-American discontent increased. To many observers it seemed that the incident was a catalyst for long-smoldering grievances. Thus, although Rev. McMillan cancelled the planned march (perhaps as a result of pressure from city officials), many people were waiting at the cemetery while others gathered in downtown Winston to greet the returning mourners.

At the funeral McMillan announced that District Solicitor Thomas Moore was studying the Eller case and might call for a grand jury investigation. Apparently this was too little, too late. At least thirty blacks had assembled on the corner of Third and Church Streets in downtown Winston. Someone started a fire in a trash can. More blacks gathered and began throwing rocks, breaking windows, and starting small fires. Police reinforcements arrived and dispersed the crowd, which then broke into small groups, picked up additional members, and spread out, stretching the troubled area over several blocks. Additional policemen appeared on the scene with riot sticks, tear-gas guns, gas masks, and riot shotguns. The trouble spread.

By 6:15 P.M. Winston-Salem's Mayor M. C. Benton, Police Chief Justus M. Tucker, Fire Chief L. C. Williams, and other city officials reported to the Civil Defense Emergency Operations Center Control Room at City Hall. This procedure had been established for such emergencies, and in this room efforts to control and contain the disturbances were coordinated.

Some thirty state highway patrolmen arrived by 8:00 P.M. By Friday, 90 were present. The first unit of National Guardsmen (125) arrived by 10:20 on Thursday night. Seventy-five more followed. Sixty were placed at City Hall; the rest, their bayonets fixed, combined with city and state police in sealing off an eight-block section of the downtown area.

At the height of Thursday's disturbances, there were some five hundred people breaking windows, looting, starting fires, and throwing rocks at policemen, firemen, and passing cars. Between 6:00 P.M. and dawn, when the disorder subsided, 85 arrests were made (most of them for store-breaking and disorderly conduct), 44 people were injured (including 8 policemen), and approximately one hundred fires were started.

More Guard units arrived on Friday, bringing the number to one thousand. Bomb threats and rumors of more disorders were rife. At 5:00 P.M. a crowd of blacks gathered where the disturbances had occurred the previous night. At 6:00 P.M. Guard units sealed off an eight- to ten-block area of the downtown section. Mayor Benton ordered a city-wide curfew from 11:00 P.M. to 5:30 A.M.

The pattern of disturbance Friday was similar to that of the pre-

vious night. Looting and burning decreased somewhat but reports of sniping increased. Guardsmen were issued ammunition for the first time. Seventy arrests were made and 22 fires reported (not all of them necessarily involving arson).

On Saturday, November 4, the downtown area was again sealed off at dusk and a curfew declared. There were acts of looting, burning, and sniping, but in contrast to the previous nights no large crowd gathered. On Sunday five hundred National Guardsmen left and the curfew was lifted. Still there were rumors of impending violence; and scattered incidents of fires and sniping occurred. Early Monday morning a lumber company was completely gutted, allegedly by arsonists.

On Monday and Tuesday the last of the National Guard units left, state highway patrolmen withdrew, and the local police force reverted to eight-hour shifts. By Tuesday the Winston-Salem riots of 1967 were over. In the four-day period, November 2-5, almost two hundred individuals were arrested (150 with previous arrest records —not necessarily convictions). The charges were store-breaking, larceny, violating the curfew, carrying a concealed weapon, public drunkenness, and disorderly conduct. More than one hundred were injured. No one was reported killed, although one fatal heart attack was attributed to the disturbances. Estimates of property damage settled around $750,000. It was subsequently reported by the *Winston-Salem Journal* on December 5 that the average age of those arrested was 25.4 years, 2 per cent were under 16, 65 per cent were employed, 10 per cent were students, and 2 per cent were white. These figures must be treated cautiously, since the police arrested not only rioters but also other individuals suspect because of previous arrest and conviction records. It has proved impossible to determine to what extent the resolute show of force used in suppressing the riot blended into brutality, although the complete absence of such incidents would be surprising.

Going beyond the bare facts, our analysis revealed certain important, essential characteristics of the Winston-Salem civil disorder. The proximate cause was the death (or "murder," as one interviewee put it) of Eller. While some participants were criminals and others used the disorder as a means of trying to accumulate otherwise unobtainable worldly possessions, for many more it was an attempt to strike back at years of indignity and deprivation inflicted upon them and their forbears. Their immediate focus were the police, stores, and other symbols of white power. Thus, when faced by what must have been overwhelming force, the rioters did not immediately desist, but continued the disturbance through Sunday. And, while some looted, others were bent on destruction alone. In addition, it is evi-

dent that those who rioted were regarded with favor, or at least not with disfavor, by many other Negroes who themselves played no active part in events. In other words, the causes and conduct of the Winston-Salem riot differed little from that of its Los Angeles and other predecessors in being a form of social protest, although absolute property damage and loss of life were substantially less.

Given this background, then, how did the *Winston-Salem Journal* cover the riot? Did the *Journal's* coverage differ from that of the *Charlotte Observer* or *New York Times* in any way other than extent? What facts were emphasized? Were any major events omitted?

THE WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL

Both Winston-Salem papers, the morning *Journal* (1960 daily circulation 76,244) and the evening *Twin City Sentinel* (1960 circulation 44,049) are owned by the Piedmont Publishing Company (Sunday's paper is combined—1960 circulation, 90,701). *The Sentinel's* role was to recapitulate and update the stories appearing in the *Journal.* Since the *Journal* was actually more involved in the firsthand accounts of the disturbances, this analysis will concentrate on its coverage.[13]

It must be emphasized from the start that the *Winston-Salem Journal* is a respected and responsible newspaper with a progressive attitude on race relations.[14] It subscribes to and uses the *New York Times* news service. Ralph McGill, James Reston, David Lawrence, and William F. Buckley, Jr. grace its editorial page. It has editorialized in support of federal legislation for the cities.[15] For its help in obtaining an OEO-supported legal service program in North Carolina, it received an award from the National Legal Aid and Defender Association. Indeed its publisher and editor, John W. Carroll, was the recipient of an honorary doctor of laws degree at Duke University's 1968 commencement. Furthermore, the *Journal's* riot coverage was of uncommon importance. It seems that on the first night of rioting, all radio and television stations reported nothing. Their first involvement came when they requested National Guardsmen to report for

[13] We are indebted to the staff of the *Journal* for their generous cooperation. Without them this project would have been impossible. All interpretations, analysis, and conclusions are our responsibility.

[14] For a general discussion of the southern press, see Roger M. Williams, "Newspapers of the South," *Columbia Journalism Review,* Vol. 6, Summer 1967, pp. 26-35. Without referring specifically to the *Winston-Salem Journal* he observes that the *Charlotte Observer* "is the best paper in a state of good papers." (p. 29) Winston-Salem lacks a Negro newspaper.

[15] For example, July 27 and August 3, 1967. Henceforth, all dates will refer to the *Winston-Salem Journal* unless otherwise indicated.

duty. This reticence apparently was the result of previous agreement: its purpose, to avoid inflaming the situation. This meant that Friday's *Journal* was virtually the public's sole source of information from the media.[16]

COVERAGE BY THE JOURNAL

On August 3, 1967, the *Journal* provided a percursor of its coverage to come. On that date it published a story on a joint news conference given by Winston-Salem's mayor and police chief. Mayor M. C. Benton was quoted as saying that "racial violence is not expected in Winston-Salem this summer." But, he added, "if trouble does develop, the city is ready to take vigorous action. Live ammunition would be used; the National Guard would be called in if needed."[17] The *Journal* quoted Police Chief Justus M. Tucker as saying "trouble is less likely to come from Negroes staging a racial protest than from 'thugs and hoodlums' who see a chance to profit from looting."[18] The inferences here are plain; if a riot occurred it would be the work of the criminal few, and would be vigorously suppressed. When disturbances did arrive, some three months later, this was the image conveyed by the *Journal.* In so depicting the riot, the *Journal's* staff seem to have been motivated to contribute to curbing violence and reducing racial tensions. These two somewhat overlapping objectives were sought not by a calculated suppression of facts, but by selection and placement. The guidance for this approach came in the form of instructions issued by editor-publisher Carroll. As formally updated after the disturbance, these can be summarized as follows: making information as precise and specific as possible; fixing the limits of the affected area and indicating surrounding tranquility; avoiding words that convey an exaggerated idea of the turmoil; not recapitulating in any more detail than necessary the grievance that set off the rioting; omitting late-breaking news of violence that might subsequently prove to be exaggerated or might have been suppressed before the

[16] This mitigates the problems that would normally be provoked by studying just the newspaper and ignoring the other media. The existence of television is a research challenge to scholars which we do not appear to have overcome. Newspapers provide a record, whereas in most cases television does not: the news program shows the riot in all its gory details but, once over, is gone. Videocorders permit us to capture the television program but their cost is high and the expense of videocording all the data from television is prohibitive. Furthermore, to capture different stations (which invariably schedule their news programs at the same time) requires more than one set and more than one videocorder. Clearly we need better research tools for such data retrieval and retention.

[17] P. 1.

[18] *Ibid.*

reader received his paper: "When in doubt, leave out," was the admonition; avoiding rumors, predictions of future trouble, and threats of further violence; using photographs that would discourage rather than inflame lawlessness.

To a substantial extent the *Journal's* coverage seems to have conformed to these instructions. It is possible, however, to divide the *Journal's* articles on the riot during the period November 3-6 into two categories. The first is news stories. These consisted of accounts of the major events of the previous night and included the more significant incidents, number of arrests, hospitalizations, fires, and quotes from those responsible for curtailing the riot. The second type we shall characterize as features. These focused attention on specific incidents in substantial detail and often involved interviews with such individuals as important Negro citizens and the National Guard commander. Included in this category is an article on the actions of the local poverty program workers in damping the fires of discontent. Selection and placement of material to accomplish the objectives of curbing violence and reducing racial tension appeared to some degree in the news stories but was more pronounced in the features.

We shall now provide some examples to illustrate how the *Journal* presented the riot to its readers in the way we have described.[19]

The exact limits of the disturbance were defined and reference was made to the vast majority of the city which was peaceful and, purportedly, unaware of the trouble. This latter point was emphasized in a separate feature story.[20] As the November 3 news story phrased it: "As the rioters moved through downtown last night, most of the city went on about its business as usual. Many people probably never knew what was going on."[21]

Conversely, the fact that the riot was continuing and that police could not predict when they would have it under control, while placed on Friday's front page, was printed in a brief article at the bottom of the page.

[19] Our approach may suggest that the *Journal's* coverage was more designed and calculated than the confusion of reporting a riot allows. But in such cases even limited guidelines can have a major impact in orienting reporters and rewrite men. And what we depict is characteristic of the paper's presentation of the riot. Furthermore, not all of Carroll's instructions are compatible: a picture of a black being arrested may discourage violence while emphasizing the race angle. Finally, we exclude editorials from our ken, because they do not represent actual reporting on the riot. In its editorials the *Journal* criticized police treatment of the Eller incident, emphasized the absolute necessity of establishing and maintaining law and order, and reiterated that the city must keep up its efforts to improve life for all Winston's citizens.

[20] November 3, p. 20.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

In its phrasing, the *Journal* was careful to avoid words that might inflame the situation or increase community fears. Thus "roving gangs" was used instead of "mobs." At the same time, those references to the Eller case as the inciting incident that were printed, were worded to diminish the charge of police brutality: on the day of the riot an account stated that the disturbances were ". . . in connection with unrest created by the recent death of James Eller, Negro, who died after injuries believed sustained when he resisted arrest and was hit by Patrolman W. E. Owens."[22] In comparison the UPI account said that Eller died "after he was blackjacked by a white policeman."[23] And when, on Saturday, November 4, the *Journal* briefly recapitulated the Eller story, it was placed on page 4.[24] Only on Thursday, November 9, when the riot was over, was the Eller story presented completely.

The *Journal* attempted to reduce the racial issue. The fact that Negroes were rioting was never mentioned in a headline, and only occasionally in all the news accounts.[25] The November 3, page one, headline read: "Gangs Riot, Loot, Set Fires Downtown: Police, Patrol and Guard Check Rioters."

The existence of white looters and Negro arresting officers[26] was mentioned. And the use of photographs showed that Negroes were working on the side of law and order.[27]

The paper did not, of course, blur the issue completely; it was perfectly clear that most of the rioters were Negroes. But the *Journal* stressed that those involved were "hoodlums," atypical of the Winston-Salem Negro.

No predictions of future trouble or threats of further violence seem to have been carried. Indeed, the November 3 *Journal* contained an article stating that the District Solicitor was investigating the Eller case and the murder charge against W. E. Owens was revived and placed on the docket of the County Superior Court.[28] This was adjacent to an article on the Eller funeral.

Rumors were rigorously excluded. One widely circulated story emanated from FBI officials who informed police that Rap Brown was coming to Winston-Salem. A check of the airlines revealed an

[22] November 3, p. 1.

[23] *New York Times,* November 4, p. 20.

[24] An additional reason for the brevity of the story may have been the reporter's inability to obtain an interview with the Eller family.

[25] November 3, p. 1.

[26] November 3, p. 1 and p. 20.

[27] November 6, p. 1 and the *Winston-Salem Sentinel,* November 6, p. 1.

[28] November 3, p. 1. On December 14 the grand jury decided that there was no basis for holding Owens for trial for manslaughter.

R. Brown scheduled on a night flight into the city. R. Brown had made arrangements to rent a car from a local agency. Officials waited tensely as the plane landed, only to discover that R. Brown was a white salesman. More rumors concerning Brown circulated in the community. One Negro maid, for example, told her white employer that Rap Brown was staying in the house across the street from her. Other stories involved unreported deaths of a National Guardsman and looters. None of these appeared in the *Journal.*

Photographs that were printed in the *Journal,* which were inclined to discourage violence and suggest that rioting did not pay, included an armored carrier, National Guardsmen awaiting assignment,[29] a black with hands on head being taken into the fingerprinting room, and a police lieutenant with some of the items recovered from a looter.[30] Other pictures showed National Guardsmen manning a 30-caliber gun, and National Guard equipment put aside while its owner was eating.[31] On Monday, November 6, the entire page nine was devoted to pictures showing Fire Chief Williams watching a fire, firemen extinguishing a blaze, and similar tributes to the dedication of those charged with calming the city.

Going beyond the specific instructions, in its attempt to discourage lawlessness the *Journal* printed two features as well as several references in news stories concerning pleas for peace by Negro city officials and Negro leaders, including Rev. McMillan of the NAACP.[32] Indeed, a headline on Friday read: "Rioting Here Is Deplored by NAACP." Other attempts at curbing the lawlessness included printing lists of those arrested and standing trial.[33]

Finally, the *Journal* seems to have tried to create the impression that Winston-Salem was not just another casualty of a Negro riot. In contrast to other riot-torn cities, the *Journal* emphasized that the disturbance did not spread through the entire city nor involve massive participation; as the paper's story put it: "Unlike the riots in Newark and Detroit, no large numbers of Negroes joined the roving gangs."[34] Further, it was pointed out that those charged received speedy trials and convictions.[35] And the *Journal* stressed that local poverty workers were discouraging rioters, not encouraging them.[36] The only published article on Afro-American opinion was written by the *Journal's* soli-

[29] November 3, p. 1.
[30] Both on November 5, p. 1.
[31] Both on November 5, p. 9.
[32] November 3, p. 1 and November 4, p. 1.
[33] November 4, p. 4, November 6. p. 6.
[34] November 3, p. 1, col. 1 and col. 5.
[35] November 5, p. 1.
[36] November 4, p. 6.

tary Afro-American reporter, Luix Overbea, and appeared on page fifteen.[37] It was headed "Negro Reaction to Riot Varies" and portrayed a variety of feelings. Virtually the only indication in the paper that some Afro-Americans did not oppose the disturbances, it contained the words: "Although most civil rights leaders deplored the action, the 'man on the street' was sympathetic with the idea of violence." And: "The mood of the Negro seemed to be one of anger." This was one of two articles written by Overbea on Afro-American opinion. The second was, according to Overbea, much tougher and more threatening. He felt it to be a more realistic account of Afro-American feeling. The second article was not published.[38] In addition, a white reporter interviewed some of the black militants; his article did not appear.

JOURNAL'S AUTHORITY ORIENTATION

What we have described, then, is a way of publishing the riot news which, without violently distorting the information obtained by reporters, was directed at calming racial tensions and curbing violence.[39] In so acting, the *Journal* did not adequately represent the Afro-American attitude. In fact, with its statements by Negro leaders and the pictures and references to those Negroes attempting to curb the destruction, it created the impression that the majority of the Afro-American community was against the violence. This was debatable at best and may well have been completely erroneous. It could be argued, however, that given the information obtained by the reporters, riot news was not unduly distorted. But there was a further slant to the *Journal's* coverage which, while inadvertent, also helps to explain why the paper concentrated so heavily on suppression of the riot and displayed no understanding or empathy for those engaged in civil disorder: the *Journal* presented the riot almost exclusively from the perspective of law enforcement and city officials. This occurred both in news stories and features. A few examples must suffice. On the first night of the riot the mayor was quoted as saying that the "trouble came from 'unorganized roving gangs and hoodlums.' "[40] The same news story continued: "At 12:55 A.M. the mayor said: 'It looks like things have quieted down considerably. This is what I expected at

[37] November 3.

[38] According to Wallace Carroll the story was not published because the city editor considered it poorly organized; personal letter, January 25, 1968.

[39] This is not to assume that such coverage was necessarily successful in achieving its intended objectives.

[40] November 3, p. 1.

this late hour. Most of the young hoodlums are young people, and I imagine they are worn out.' " A feature article described what it was like to be a National Guardsman when a sniper shoots.[41] In fact, apparently the only UPI article printed dealt with a Guardsman who was almost shot by a sniper but the bullet, while penetrating his coat, missed his body.[42]

The zenith of this coverage was reached with a feature devoted to the control center at City Hall (including photograph).[43] Exemplifying this approach, a final article on Tuesday, November 7, began: "In the police command post in the basement of City Hall, the telephone rang seldom yesterday."

The *Journal's* white authority orientation resulted in part from the way the paper's staff were organized to report the riot. The *Journal* editors had no preplanned method for reporting such racial disturbances; they merely attempted to cover the events as if they were normal criminal activity writ large. Approximately nine reporters were sent to gather material. Several of these were located at City Hall, while some traveled with police. A few traversed the city tracking down rumors. During the curfew nights these reporters were given passes and allowed to travel freely. They were dispatched to the scene, however, by their editors at the newspaper office. The editors used a police-broadcast radio to become informed of incidents and as a guide to the nature and extent of the riot. Thus, little or no attempt was made to cover the stories from the perspective of those engaged in the violence. Because of the heavy reliance on the City Hall control room, where the mayor, police chief, and other enforcement officials were accessible and as accommodating as possible, and because reporters traveled with police, the story was seen almost exclusively as a successful encounter of law and order and legitimate authority against blatant lawlessness. This, of course, was the truth; it was not the whole truth.

Second, the way the *Journal's* stories were written helps explain the nature of its coverage. Most of the news stories were written by a veteran reporter who remained at the *Journal* office. The reporters communicated their information to him but he, in essence, assembled and wrote it up. This further limited the opportunity for a diversity of viewpoint and perspective. In addition, the *Journal* has only one black

[41] November 4, p. 1.
[42] November 6.
[43] November 5; see also November 4, p. 5 and 6.
[44] Afro-Americans are conspicuous by their absence from the American press. According to *Newsweek*, Vol. 70, December 4, 1967, a survey by the Associated Press

reporter;[44] his experience in trying to convey a more accurate assessment of Afro-American views has already been discussed.

OTHER PRESS COVERAGE

It is appropriate to look briefly at coverage of the riot by both the *Charlotte Observer* and the *New York Times* to see in what ways their distance from events, and use of the AP and UPI wire services, resulted in coverage differing from that of the *Winston-Salem Journal.*

On November 3, an AP story appeared on page one of the *Charlotte Observer's* state section. The following day coverage was elevated to the front page with a story by an *Observer* state reporter, Dwayne Walls. On November 5 and 6, the *Observer* used UPI stories in the state section. Thus distance decreased the significance with which the story was treated. It also, however, facilitated other differences from the *Journal's* coverage. Wall's article quoted Mayor M. C. Benton as saying that for about an hour shortly after midnight "it looked as if we were going up in smoke." This was not reported in the *Journal.* Walls's article also included a thorough summary of the Eller case. To obtain as complete a background required reading several back editions of the *Journal.* Clearly the *Observer* could discuss Eller's death without inflaming the situation. The UPI story of November 6, as printed in the *Observer,* characterized the disturbances as "the worst riot in modern times in North Carolina." Such an appellation never appeared in the *Journal.*

On the other hand, the *Charlotte Observer* contained several errors. The November 3, AP story was headlined "Negroes Demonstrate in Winston-Salem," an assertion repeated in the story. The article was written early in the evening, probably before the arrival of the state AP reporters.[45] The *Journal* staff phoned the first accounts of the disturbances to Raleigh, where a rewrite man actually wrote the story subsequently sent out over the AP wires. Apparently the rewrite man, when given an account of the events, confused the planned march

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Managing Editors Association revealed 236 Negroes on the staff of 300 member newspapers. Of these, 119 were reporters, 13 deskmen, 19 photographers, one assistant editor, and the rest copy boys and library clerks. In 1964 the American Newspaper Guild could name only 45 Negroes working as reporters, copyreaders, photographers, or deskmen on metropolitan daily newspapers in the United States. Even the most generous estimate put Negro employment in these jobs at 100, out of a total employment of 50,000. Paul L. Fisher and Ralph L. Lowenstein, eds., *Race and the News Media,* New York, Praeger, 1967, p. 8.

[45] The *Journal* receives both AP and UPI wire services, but for some reason covers only for the AP. Thus when the riots occurred the *Journal* was responsible for filing the story with AP until the AP could get a state reporter into Winston.

which was cancelled with the disturbances and labeled the actions "demonstrations." The *Journal* never used that word.

In another error, the *Observer's* Dwayne Walls reported:

> Most of the unrest and anger among the city's Negro population was put down soon after the rioting began when Superior Court Solicitor Thomas W. Moore, Jr., announced his decision to reopen the case of a white policeman charged with murdering a Negro during an arrest.[46]

On the contrary, the manifestations of Negro unrest and anger—looting, burning, rioting—occurred after Moore's announcement.

The *New York Times* carried stories on the disturbances on November 3 and 4 only. The first was AP, the second UPI. They were placed on pages thirty and twenty respectively. Both stories clearly identified the events as racial disturbances. Indeed, the AP story was headlined "Racial Outbreak in Winston-Salem." That Negroes were burning and looting as the result of the death of a Negro was stated in both articles in contrast to the *Journal's* attempt to play down the incident. Moreover, words and phrases eschewed by the *Journal* were printed in the *Times,* especially in the UPI story. Thus, rather than "violated," the curfew was "defied"; it was not just a curfew but a "tight curfew"; and Eller died after "he was blackjacked by a white policeman." Clearly, publication at a distance permitted and even encouraged the wire services to provide an interesting and dramatic account designed to sell papers (not the *Times,* of course). The UPI and AP were not under the constraints and inhibitions of the *Winston-Salem Journal.* Yet, despite these differences, their presentation, as reflected in the *New York Times* and *Charlotte Observer,* tended to be similarly supportive of authority.

TRENDS AND IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA RIOT COVERAGE

The *Winston-Salem Journal,* we have discovered, tried to diminish racial conflict and curb violence. Yet the debate over media riot coverage has revolved around the tendency of television, press, and radio to inflame and exploit the disturbances. Perhaps the *Journal's* coverage is an aberration. For obviously there is always substantial pressure on the mass communications media to portray civil disorders *in their cities* to the fullest extent; where there is competition, one station or newspaper's reticence may not be emulated by another's, and flamboyant treatment may reap its reward of a larger audience or readership. And even where a community's press has one owner, as in Winston-Salem, other media still offer competition. There is, however, a discernible pattern away from cavalier and exaggerated

[46] November 4, Sec. A, p. 1.

reporting of racial disturbances. Indeed, we may be turning to the opposite extreme. This movement is variously encouraged by the President's Commission, the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles riot, national governmental agencies, local authorities, and the media industry itself. It is most obvious in television, which is the more immediate and graphic in impact, but radio and the press are also involved.

This trend is revealed in the increasing adoption of guidelines for covering civil disorders. Thus the Community Relations Service, now located in the Justice Department, conducted a survey of eleven cities for the President's Commission.[47] This revealed various voluntary codes in operation, some devised by the police, some by city administrations, and others developed by the media. Essentially there are three alternative plans, each named for its city of origin.[48] The Omaha guidelines require that reporters wait thirty minutes before reporting anything about a disturbance. St. Louis involves newsmen clearing information through a police information center. And Chicago has reporters embargo all news until the uprising is completely under control. It is unclear to what extent these codes have met with widespread acceptance, or even complete observance in the cities involved, but the Service concluded that "no one viewed codes or guidelines as useless or harmful,"[49] and that they "had made a constructive impact on the local news media."[50] Furthermore, "where individual media have found their city's guidelines repugnant . . . and developed their own in response, the individual guidelines have tended to be more restrictive than those proposed for all media."[51] As an example, "the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* encourages its reporters to always make their stories on tense racial situations as dull as possible."[52] That the guidelines are increasingly effective can be determined by a Community Relations Service summary of media coverage of civil disturbances in Detroit, Newark, Buffalo, and Houston in 1967:

> In all four cities last summer neither broadcasters nor editors rushed to overplay initial reports of the incidents. First day accounts on the air and in news

[47] "An Evaluation of News Media Codes and Guidelines" (hereafter *Evaluation*), unpublished compilation available from the Community Relations Service. The cities were Buffalo, Chicago, Indianapolis, Jackson (Michigan), Kansas City (Missouri), Los Angeles, Omaha, Philadelphia, San Francisco, St. Louis, and Toledo.

[48] These are specified and described in *Evaluation, passim.* See also *Newsweek,* Vol. 70, July 24, 1967.

[49] *Evaluation,* p. 1.

[50] *Ibid.,* p. 2.

[51] *Ibid.,* pp. 3-4.

[52] *Ibid.,* Section on St. Louis, p. 2.

columns in the four cities indicated little desire for cut-throat competition to get a more sensational angle.[53]

Whether guidelines are adopted formally or merely internalized by reporters and editors, or ignored, there seems to be an increasing tendency by the mass media to exercise restraint in covering racial disturbances. Rather than inflaming riots, they delay reporting an occurrence and mitigate its extent. Thus the *Winston-Salem Journal,* in depicting that city's civil disorder, may only have provided a prototype of such coverage. We would suggest, therefore, that debate is being conducted in misleading terms. It is now more instructive to examine the causes and implications of media restraint than bemoan excesses.

A complex of reasons probably explains this trend to media reticence. Seeing and hearing criticism of their brethren in other cities may encourage the media managers to adopt codes to avoid such vulnerability in their own bailiwick. Adherence may reflect a sense of guilt that past coverage encouraged violence. Many of the cities with codes experienced racial disorder, which is clearly conducive to subsequent caution. In other instances adherence to the codes may manifest a sense of civic responsibility. For television, they may be a way of avoiding governmental investigation or sanctions.[54] And, while not actually propounding or endorsing guidelines, the Community Relations Service has encouraged a series of conferences and discussions concerned with reviewing media riot coverage and city and police information practices. In such meetings, discussions of the use of guidelines, combined with criticism and self-criticism, tend to lead to code adoption, or at least a more circumspect treatment of future disturbances by the media.

But there is more to this infusion of codes and circumspection than guilt or governmental encouragement. Consciously or not, many of the media act to maintain sociocultural consensus by presenting appropriate behavior and omitting items that might jeopardize it.[55] The

[53] "The News Media and Racial Disorders—A Preliminary Report," the Office of Media Relations of the Community Relations Service of the Department of Justice, reprinted in *Columbia Journalism Review,* Vol. 6, Fall 1967, p. 4.

[54] According to *Variety* (May 22, 1968): "Race riot coverage by television stations has been intensely studied by Congressional investigators." The reference is to studies by investigators from a subcommittee of the House Interstate and Foreign Commerce Committee headed by Chairman Harley Staggers (D, W. Va.). The article continues: "Broadcasters have come up with a remarkably clean slate in view of the pressures and uncertainties of broadcast journalism."

[55] This position is cogently argued by Warren Breed, "Mass Communication and Sociocultural Integration," in Lewis Anthony Dexter and David Manning White, *People, Society, and Mass Communications,* New York, Free Press, 1964, pp. 183-199; and Andrew Kopkind, "Times' Square," *The New York Review of Books,* Vol. 8, May 4, 1967, pp. 12-15.

result is to protect power and class in the social structure.[56] When riots occur, they are viewed as disruptions of consensus and threats to the community. All may not be well in the society, but this is no way to change the situation. This general attitude is abetted by the way the press is organized and manned to obtain and publish news. As we showed in our examination of the *Winston-Salem Journal,* reporters viewed events from the perspective of the city's authority structure. As riots continued to disrupt American cities, therefore, it was inevitable that the media should start to err on the side of restraint. Such a countervailing inducement as the hope of increasing circulation through flamboyant racial coverage lost its attraction. Besides, restraint apparently seems compatible with media freedom; after all, the guidelines are voluntary.

We have, then, a reinforcing pattern at work in media coverage of riots: first, deliberate restraint; second, unintentional distortion resulting from concern with authority and the particular way the media are organized to gather civil disturbance news. Obviously this description applies with varying degrees of accuracy to the vast number of American newspapers, television, and radio stations. And certainly riot coverage is exemplary compared to the anti-Negro attitudes of the press briefly portrayed at the start of this essay. Yet there is cause for discontent. In 1919 newspaper hostility to the Negro was overt; that of the *Journal,* and many other newspapers, is inadvertent. For whatever else they are, Afro-American initiated and dominated riots are assertions of identity and self-respect—in essence black power. Black children in Watts now chant, "We're from Watts, mighty Watts." This is not to argue that the press should encourage disturbances because they are healthy for the black psyche, but in diminishing them when they occur it fails to project the opinions and attitudes of Afro-Americans to its readers. This kind of coverage does not contribute to an understanding of the nature of Afro-American grievances or of conditions in that community. Blacks lose because their self-assertion is not fully represented; whites are deceived as to the extent and nature of black discontent and, therefore, of the potential or actual danger their city faces. In both cases the newspaper fails to provide a truthful, comprehensive, and intelligent account of the day's events.

[56] This type of media role and reaction may be even more pronounced in small or medium-sized American towns such as Winston-Salem than in larger cities where, in some instances, the media are less involved in the social and political system. In many ways the *Durham Morning Herald* is a classic example of a newspaper which, through its organization, personnel, and policy, is allied to the local community power structure. See David L. Paletz *et al., A Study of the Organization, Content, Policy, and Effects of the Durham Morning Herald,* unpublished manuscript, May 1968.