KERNER PLUS 20

Minority News Coverage in the Columbus Dispatch

by Edward C. Pease

An examination of news content about minorities in the Columbus Dispatch finds little change in amount of coverage between 1965 — three years before the Kerner Commission Report — and 1987 but some improvement in the kind and tone of minority coverage.

At the meeting of the Minorities Committee during the American Society of Newspaper Editors annual convention in Washington in April 1988, one committee member noted a missing element in the ASNE’s considerable efforts in the area of minorities in the newspaper business. Most of ASNE and other industry emphasis has been on recruiting minorities to the news business, and on keeping them once recruited. All well and good, the editor told the Minorities Committee meeting, but what about content in America’s 1,650 daily newspapers? How is the newspaper industry doing in terms of coverage of minorities and minority concerns?

The question is both appropriate and overdue. Addressing that question, however, may broach a new problem for the newspaper industry. If concerted, industry-wide efforts by such leading organizations as ASNE, the American Newspaper Publishers Association, the Associated Press Managing Editors Association, the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication and others to recruit

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minorities have generated only minimal progress, and that mostly in the last three or four years, then the prospect of examining the sacred cow of individual newspapers’ content is indeed a daunting one.

Quite rightly, editors and publishers would resist any dictates regarding their papers’ content, and although there is a danger that evaluation of content would be dismissed resentfully as meddling by critical outsiders, the issue of how newspapers cover all segments of society is a legitimate concern and must be addressed.

That future political obstacle notwithstanding, the fact that industry representatives are beginning to turn their attention from the thorny problem of numbers that has occupied most of their energy to deeper issues of press performance regarding how newspapers cover minorities in society is a positive step toward correcting press shortcomings identified in 1968 by the Kerner Commission.

Rationale and Background

The Kerner report was the product of a nine-month study of a blue-ribbon presidential task force charged by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1967 with investigating the causes of urban racial violence that swept and shocked the nation. The report made two primary recommendations to the news industry: to expand its coverage of and relations with nonwhite segments of society, and to get more minorities “on the inside,” as reporters, editors, publishers and other newspaper decision-makers. Industry efforts have focused on the latter. This study is a pilot attempt to examine the extent to which newspapers have changed the way they cover minorities in their communities since the mid-1960s.

The present research seeks to develop appropriate and meaningful research methods to gauge press performance in the area of minorities in society, and to produce results that will help guide newspapers in integrating their news coverage and content as they try to integrate their newsrooms and other departments.

The “guinea pig” for this pilot study was the Columbus Dispatch, now a monopoly and historically a dominant daily newspaper in a Midwestern metropolitan area that, although the state capitol and a major city, retains a distinct regional character with the feel of an “average” American hometown community. In critiquing the American press in 1968, the Kerner Commission aimed its comments at mainstream newspapers with authoritative voices in local and state affairs. The Dispatch is such a newspaper. The object of the study was to evaluate differences between how the
The unrest that often accompanied the rise of the civil rights movement in the 1960s was, on the whole, covered by the American press. What was much less well covered were the root causes of the violence. As a result, the American press and the American public were part of a nation with its collective head buried, ostrich-like, in the sand rather than acknowledge the reality of civil unrest and race issues confronting the United States in the 1960s.

*Dispatch* covered news stories relating to minorities in the 1960s, pre-Kerner, and how the amount, tone and content of that coverage evolved over the 20 years between release of the Kerner Commission report in 1968 and now.

The study sought to analyze to what extent the depth, breadth and content of *Dispatch* coverage of minority-related issues changed, and to identify, if possible, and to document and quantify manifest *Dispatch* reactions to Kerner Commission recommendations of greater press efforts to foster understanding of pressures and concerns of minority segments of the Columbus community. In addition to simply measuring the extent of current minority coverage by the *Dispatch*, the study sought to measure and describe changes over the pre-Kerner/post-Kerner period.

In 1968, when LBJ’s National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders released its report, the nation was in the midst of acute national and international upheaval; a growing war in Vietnam dominated international news and a domestic revolution in the form of the civil rights movement strove to impress itself upon the national consciousness.

“Our nation is in the throes of a social revolution,” wrote syndicated columnist Alice Widener in a column appearing in the *Dispatch* in March 1965, “and nobody can predict whether we will be the better or worse for it.”1 Widener wondered if “future historians ... (would) determine why it was that a nation grown so great as ours is today was plunged into such disorder.”2 In spite of themselves, Americans in the mid-1960s were being forced to acknowledge the black underclass.

In 1965, when Widener expressed her uncertainties about the future, the federal government was trying to reconcile discriminatory housing and voting laws with President Johnson’s dream of a Great Society; as a backdrop (or sideshow) to this national policy debate, blacks and Ku Klux Klansmen were marching against each other in Montgomery, Alabama. The national reluctance to acknowledge the
Social pressures upon society was reflected in the press, whose indecision over how to cover what clearly was news in every tradition sense — violence, dissent and society disorder — about a formerly inconsequential and ignored segment of society — blacks — was painfully evident. It is interesting to note how some of the press in the 1960s became schizophrenic in attempting to reconcile coverage of news of civil rights progress with attitudes in their communities reflected by the countenanced existence of groups such as the KKK.

Urban racial violence in the spring and summer of 1967 capped several years of sporadic violence accompanying the civil rights movement. Black-white confrontations accompanied the rise of the civil rights movement, and had regularly sparked violence through the 1963-67 period and beyond. That inter-racial civil violence was, on the whole, covered fully by the American press, notwithstanding the

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...national schizophrenia on such social issues, as noted above. But what was much less well covered by the press were the root causes of the violence.

As a result, the American press and the American public were a nation with its figurative collective head buried, ostrich-like, in the sand rather than acknowledge the facts of civil unrest and race issues confronting the United States in the 1960s. The American ostrich was shocked, surprised and scared when the civil rights movement burst into violence and death in 1967 and could be ignored no longer. Alice Widener’s Dispatch column may be representative of a nation; Americans were surprised and confused by the racial violence of the mid-1960s — how could this have happened and where did it come from? The press played a role in that confusion by failing fully or completely to fulfill its function of watchdog and surveillor of the societal environment; society was uninformed.

Shepard Stone, who in the 1960s directed the Ford Foundation’s International Affairs Program, warned the Kerner Commission in 1967 that the press could “...be responsible in part for erosion and disintegration” of American cities and the multiple societies that knit them together if it did not drop its social blinders and
opand its coverage. “A race riot is news,” he said. “But there was news, significant news, in the city before the riot, news of the conditions and forces that led to it. The U.S. press generally ... has not reported the underlying facts.”

Stone’s remarks addressed a long-standing and continuing dilemma in news reporting, the distinction between spot-news coverage v. process- or issue-oriented coverage. As McCombs and others have noted, the media tends to respond well to individual, isolated, time-bounded and distinct events, “but when it comes to reporting the broad secular sweep of history, the major trends and thrusts of the times, the press often lags significantly behind other public institutions.”

This clearly had been part of the problem when fires and riots broke out in U.S. cities in the spring and summer of 1967 — the press had not noted the growing pressures building in the black community. Even as the Congress had been working for years on legislation to improve equality for blacks in areas of housing and voting, among others, the press had been satisfied simply to cover developments, without probing beneath the surface.

So it was that the press and American public both were largely surprised by the outbreak of escalating urban violence in 1964, 1965, 1966 and, especially, 1967. In spring 1967, clashes among blacks, whites and police resulted in injuries, damage and death in dozens of American cities. But the worst of the violence took place during a six-week period from mid-June through July, when violence spawned by the police shooting of a single black man in Tampa turned into full-scale racially oriented rioting throughout the country, including violence that left 66 dead in Newark, N.J., and Detroit alone.

After the worst of the violence had died down, President Johnson established the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate what had happened, why it had happened, and what could be done to prevent it from ever happening again. In appointing the 11-member Kerner Commission, named after its chairman, Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner, Johnson delivered this charge:

“...The only genuine, long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack — mounted at every level — upon conditions that breed despair and violence. All of us know what those conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs. We should attack these conditions — not because we are frightened by conflict, but because we are fired by conscience. We should attack them because there is simply no other way to achieve a decent and orderly society in America.”

Johnson also specifically charged the commission with examining and evaluating the influence and performance of the news media in the events leading up to and
The press had been satisfied simply to cover developments that led to violence in the black community without going beneath the surface.

During the summer riots of 1967. In its March 1968 report, the Kerner Commission found that although the press had provided adequate coverage of the civil disorders and violence, the media had "...failed to report adequately on the causes and consequences of civil disorders and the underlying problems of race relations. They have not communicated to the majority of their audience — which is a sense of the degradation, misery and hopelessness of life in the ghetto." Further, the commission found that the press had largely ignored the black community, both as a source of news and as an audience: "Far too often, the press talks about Negroes as if Negroes do not read newspapers or watch television, give birth, marry, die or go to PTA meetings." Indeed, the Kerner Commission's examination of the American press during the period leading up to the violence of 1967 indicated that blacks, as well as other racial and ethnic minorities, were forgotten and ignored, a people separate and unequal in the eyes of the press, as in the eyes of other institutions of American society in the 1960s and 1970s.

The Kerner Commission's recommendations to the press in 1967, which the newspaper industry has struggled to varying degrees and with limited success to implement over 21 years, include two specific charges pertinent to this study of paper content about and for minorities in 1988. The commission reported:

- Expanded coverage of the black community and of race issues through permanently assigned reporters and establishment of more and closer links to and with the black community. And,
- Integration of blacks into all aspects of news coverage and content, recognizing them as a group within the press' larger circulation and coverage area.

Short, the Kerner Commission 20 years ago urged the newspaper industry to acknowledge the existence of minority subgroups within their communities, to recognize their needs and to provide coverage of issues about and for those groups progressively and fairly as the newspaper covers the rest of the community. By such coverage had not been standard throughout American journalistic history; Martindale, Simpson, Gist, Johnson, Sears and McConahay, Car-Palletz and Dunn, and others, provide a historical and more recent look at the traditional negative depictions of minorities in the view of blacks, and that view has not been good. The question in the present study is the extent to which such traditionally negative depictions of minorities in
American press, and coverage of issues important to racial and ethnic groups, have improved since the Kerner Commission indictment of the press in 1968.

Industry Efforts

In 1978, ASNE set a goal of “parity” in the newspaper business by the year 2000, that is, that U.S. daily newspapers should aggressively retool their personnel so that their newsrooms reflect local community demographics.\(^{17}\) By April’s ASNE national convention, progress in minority recruitment and hirings had been made; in 1987, 7.02 percent of all American daily newspaper newsroom personnel were nonwhite, up from 6.56 percent in 1986, but more than 56 percent of all American daily newspaper newsrooms had no minority faces at all.\(^{18}\) (The numbers for 1988, reported in April 1989, were 7.54 percent of newsrooms, 54 percent of dailies with no minorities.)

Although that 7.54 percent figure represents gains since the Kerner Commission reported 5 percent minorities in newsrooms in 1967, the gains are agonizingly slow and compare unfavorably with national population statistics. In 1987, about 28 percent of the U.S. population was minority\(^ {19}\) — black, Hispanic, Asian American or American Indian — and it is estimated that whites may well no longer constitute a majority of the population within 100 years.\(^ {20}\) As an expression of the newspaper industry’s commitment to increasing minority representation in the newsroom, note this statement from the Associated Press Managing Editors Association Minorities Committee report in 1984:

“We believe that our future depends on it. Without continued gains in the numbers of minorities representing us as photographers and reporters and artists and editors, we likely will eventually lose the faith of both our minority readers and any prospective minority journalists. If minority students don’t see minority journalists in the industry, they won’t see any place for themselves in it either.”\(^ {21}\)

The industry has come to the realization that there are compelling philosophical and practical reasons to be concerned with increasing ethnic and racial diversity in newspapers. Philosophically, newspaper industry efforts at improving minority representation in the newsroom are, as LBJ said in his charge to the Kerner Commission, “fired by conscience”\(^ {22}\); how can an information medium continue to be a true mass medium in a democratic society when its news product is becoming increasingly less important to a segment of the society now approaching 30 percent? Although any journalist will argue that he or she can cover any kind of story
There are two compelling reasons for the newspaper industry to concern itself with minority audiences:

Philosophically, it is right; economically, it is essential.

regardless of race, religion, color or creed, that journalist may also acknowledge that different backgrounds breed different perspectives, and a wider range of perspectives can only benefit any newsroom.

The practical concern is, not surprisingly, economically based: If newspapers become less salient to that growing segment of society, members of which don’t buy or read a newspaper that doesn’t fill their needs, how long will it take before advertisers look elsewhere for means of conveying their sales messages to that public? Stated more positively, the newspaper industry can see that there is a large body of disenfranchised potential readers out there, and making the news product better fill those readers’ needs makes good economic sense.

As efforts continue to increase newsroom diversity, then, it is prudent to attack the problem from the other direction, in the area of news content, to start to gauge just how salient news content might be to minority readers, how much that content might affect their lives, their careers, their neighborhoods.

These are the basic research questions behind this study: How much minority-related news coverage appears in the Columbus Dispatch in 1987, as compared to minority news in the Columbus Evening Dispatch of 1965 (before

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the worst of the racial violence that prompted President Johnson to convene the Kerner Commission? And, how much has that content changed in 22 years to reflect suggestions for full coverage of the concerns of all segments of society promulgated by the Commission?

Hypotheses

The study had three hypotheses and sought to answer six research questions. The hypotheses were:

1. That the ratio of process/issue-oriented news to spot/event-oriented news will increase from pre-Kerner to post-Kerner, although the percentage of minority-related spot-news items will remain significantly higher than minority-related process-oriented news items;
2. That the amount of minority-related news appearing in the Dispatch — both in terms of numbers of stories and percentage of total news content — will be greater in 1987 (post-Kerner) than in 1965 (pre-Kerner);
3. That the ratio of good news to bad news minority-related content will be higher in 1987 than in 1965, although the percentage of bad news will remain higher than that of good news.

The study’s six research questions:

1. What proportion of the combined Monday-Saturday news item content in each sample is devoted to minority-related news?
2. How has that proportion changed, 1965-1987?
3. What proportion of minority-related coverage in each time period is positive and what proportion is negative?
4. How has that proportion changed, 1965-1987?
5. What proportion of minority-related news items in each time period is event-oriented and what proportion is process-oriented?
6. How has that proportion changed, 1965-1987?

If not as a result of the recommendations of the Kerner Commission, then as a natural consequence of the passage of time and changes in American society, it was anticipated that minority coverage in the Dispatch would have shown a marked increase over the 22-year period from 1965 to 1987. In 1960, the U.S. Bureau of Census set Columbus’ population at 471,316, including 78,052 minorities (16.5%); in the 1980 census, Columbus had a population of 833,648, including 141,111 minorities (17%), indicating a relatively stable white/nonwhite demographic ratio. That being the case, it might be expected that, with racial demographics
or less constant over the 22-year period under examination, changes in news coverage of minorities would not be attributable to population movements, but rather to less tangible factors, such as editorial judgment, societal and cultural change and, perhaps, resonance with issues raised by the Kerner Commission report. More than seeking simply more coverage of minority issues in 1987 than in 1965 — a quantitative difference — the researcher might anticipate a qualitative difference in the kind, tone and placement of minority-related news.

Seeking to improve minority representation in the newsroom, the newspaper industry has gauged success or failure by numbers and percentages — ASNE's 1987 percent figure or this year's 7.54 percent, for instance. A similar criterion might be applied in gauging changes in what appears in newspapers about and for minorities. In the present study, then, applying the ASNE "parity" goal, one might hope for improvement between 1965 and 1987 in Dispatch minority content toward 17 percent, the 1980 Bureau of Census minority population figure for Columbus.

Methodology

The subject of this pilot study was the Columbus Dispatch, which in the 1960s was the Columbus Evening Dispatch. The paper was selected as an example of a kind of established, "main-stream" newspaper toward which the Kerner Commission directed its criticism. Further, the Dispatch was publishing throughout the period in question in a community that was neither completely white nor black, one of those that experienced the most serious racial violence during the civil rights era.

The study examined and analyzed the minority-related news content of the Dispatch in constructed two-week periods in 1965, before the violence leading up to the racial riots of 1967, and in 1987; 1987 was selected to avoid any coverage of the 20th anniversary of the Kerner Commission report. In 1965, the constructed two-week period was from March 1, 1965, through May 29, 1965; the 1987 sample was taken from September 1, 1987, to November 21, 1987. Monday through Saturday papers were examined in each time period for a total of 24 newspapers. The 1965 time period was selected for comparison because it pre-dated the racial violence of 1967, and resulted in formation of the Kerner Commission and dominated national headlines. The 1987 period was the most recent available. In this way, the study sought to examine the most "typical" available periods of Dispatch news coverage, unfiltered by extraordinary news events such as racial riots or other dominant events usual minority-related news.

The total news content, excluding sports and entertainment, of all 24 editions of
the *Evening Dispatch*, in 1965, and the *Dispatch* of 1987 was coded by two doctoral students at Ohio University, with a 10 percent sample of their coding results checked for reliability by a sophomore journalism major, whose over-all reliability in coding decisions with the coders' decisions was 87.6 percent. Modifications in the coding instrument were then made and all items recoded for a final intercoder reliability value of 94.7 percent over nine coding categories; each coder made nine coding decisions on each of 138 stories, or 1,242 coding decisions. The high reliability level was 100 percent in two categories (with art and story placement); the low was 79 percent (in Deustchmann/Stempel news categories).

The unit of analysis was the minority-related news item — stories, features, letters to the editor, editorial cartoons and art. The items were selected from the total news coverage of the 24 issues examined if they referred to blacks, Negroes, the civil rights movement, race, racial issues, racial or ethnic discrimination, or other minority race-oriented topics, or if the items referred specifically to identifiable minority individuals or groups. News items only were coded, with specifically entertainment and sports items excluded; this was felt to be most appropriate since the Kerner Commission's criticism of press coverage of minorities concerned general news and public affairs coverage. Coders were instructed to code each of 138 minority-related items found in the four constructed weeks (81 of 2,514 news stories in the 1965 time period, and 57 of 1,706 news stories in the 1987 period).

The coders were instructed to code each story in the following nine categories: First, was the story spot or event news-oriented or process/trend-oriented? The former was defined as concerning individual, time-bound events — such as a crime, a meeting, an accident — and the latter as concerning topics that were not time-bound — such as personality features or news analyses — or that treated broader issues, background, explanation of events — such as ideas, developments, concerns, trends. Schramm provides some guidance in making these decisions; he distinguished between news reports that "furnish immediate rewards," such as accidents and disasters, and those that provide "delayed rewards," such as news of public affairs, social issues and trends, science and education. Coders agreed on 133 of 138 total items, for a reliability value of 93.4 percent.

Second, the coders were asked to decide if the news item was good news or bad news. Good/upbeat news was defined as items that reflected positively on, toward or about minorities; bad/downbeat news was defined as items reflecting negatively on, toward or about minorities. An indeterminate, or neutral, category was available, but the coders found it unnecessary; coders had little disagreement on whether
items were good news or bad news for or regarding minorities. Reliability in this category was 87.7 percent, with coders agreeing on good-bad differences 121 of 138 times.

Third, the coders had the lowest agreement on the third coding decision, in which they were asked to analyze each item according to a 14-item modified Deutschmann news category classification, adapted by Stempel. The categories are:

- Politics and Government Acts: Government acts and politics at local/state/national/international levels.
- War and Defense: War, defense, rebellion, military activity, foreign and domestic.
- Diplomacy and Foreign Relations: Foreign and domestic.
- Economic Activity: Business news, wages, prices, labor, commerce, natural resources.
- Agriculture: Farming, crops, agricultural economics.
- Transportation and Travel: Including economic aspects.
- Crime: All crime, including criminal court.
- Public Moral Problems: Human and societal relations, including civil court, race relations, drugs/alcohol and domestic problems.
- Accidents and Disasters: Man-made and natural catastrophes.
- Science and Invention: Science other than health, medicine and defense-related.
- Public Health & Welfare: Health, medicine, social issues, safety, welfare of children and families, marriage.
- Popular Amusements: Entertainment and amusements, sports, entertainment media.
- General Human Interest: People, weather, animals, youth and "cute children."

In addition, all items were coded for:

- Length – less than 6 inches; 6 inches-10 inches; more than 10 inches;
- Placement – Page 1, section front or inside;
- Dateline – international, national, regional, state or local;
- Byline – staff-written or wire-written;
- With or without art;
- Was that art positive or negative in tone and content.
Findings

The place to start in assessing the evolution of the Columbus Dispatch's performance in reporting minority news is the raw percentage figure reported in Table 1. This result refers to Hypothesis 2, that the Dispatch would run more minority-related news items in 1987 than in 1965. That was not the case.

In fact, despite the passage of time and the attitudinal evolution of American society that had undeniably taken place since 1965, Table 1 indicates only a miniscule increase in the percentage of Dispatch news items regarding minorities, from 3.22 percent of all news items in 1965, to 3.34 percent in 1987, a near-indiscernible increase of 0.119 percent. There were more minority-related items in the 1965 sample—81 of 2,514 items in 1965, an average of 6.75 minority items per day in the 12-paper sample, compared to 57 of 1,706 in 1987, for an average of 4.75 minority news items per day—but the number of stories appearing in the 1987 Dispatch dropped nearly 32 percent.

Hypotheses 1 and 3, however—that there would be more process-oriented news in 1987 and that the proportion of positive news about minorities would increase—were confirmed in the present study; process news was up in 1987, and the tone of all minority-related news became much more positive. Table 2 reports straight percentage shifts in style, tone and news category; Table 3 indicates shifts in mean story length, placement, dateline, source and art. Here, some things did change at the Columbus Dispatch. The largest percentage change was in the tone of art accompanying minority-related news. In 1965, coming into the height of the civil rights movement, 64 percent of all minority-related art was negative; by 1987, that had more than turned around, with 86 percent of such art classified as positive.

The next largest change is in Dispatch coverage of social issues regarding

| TABLE 1: 1965-1987 Comparison of Ratio of Minority-Related News Items in the Columbus Dispatch as Percentage of Total News Items. |
|---|---|---|
| Minority News Items | Total News Items | % |
| 1965 | 81 | 2,514 | 3.22 |
| 1987 | 57 | 1,706 | 3.34 |
| Percentage Change | | | 0.12 |
TABLE 2: Minority-related News Coverage in the *Columbus Dispatch* in 1965 and 1987 as Ratio and Percentage of Total News Content, with Percentage Change.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Category</th>
<th>1965</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1965 Ratio</td>
<td>1987 Ratio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Style</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spot News</td>
<td>61/78 (78.2%)</td>
<td>32/53 (60.4%)</td>
<td>- 17.8**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process News</td>
<td>17/78 (21.8%)</td>
<td>21/53 (39.6%)</td>
<td>+17.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Tone</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad/Downbeat</td>
<td>51/74 (68.9%)</td>
<td>20/48 (41.7%)</td>
<td>- 27.2**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good/Upbeat</td>
<td>23/74 (31.1%)</td>
<td>28/48 (58.3%)</td>
<td>+27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Category</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Politics &amp; Gov.</td>
<td>15/81 (18.5%)</td>
<td>10/41 (24.4%)</td>
<td>+ 5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic Activity</td>
<td>0/81 (0%)</td>
<td>5/41 (12.2%)</td>
<td>+12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Issues</td>
<td>33/81 (40.7%)</td>
<td>5/41 (12.2%)</td>
<td>- 28.5**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>7/81 (8.6%)</td>
<td>10/41 (24.4%)</td>
<td>+15.8**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Welfare</td>
<td>11/81 (9.9%)</td>
<td>0/41 (0%)</td>
<td>- 9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education &amp; Religion</td>
<td>0/81 (0%)</td>
<td>2/41 (4.9%)</td>
<td>+4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Interest</td>
<td>4/81 (4.9%)</td>
<td>7/41 (17.1%)</td>
<td>+15.75*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accidents &amp; Disasters</td>
<td>0/81 (0%)</td>
<td>1/41 (2.4%)</td>
<td>+2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign Affairs</td>
<td>0/81 (0%)</td>
<td>1/41 (2.4%)</td>
<td>+2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment</td>
<td>1/81 (1.2%)</td>
<td>0/41 (0%)</td>
<td>- 1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* X² significant at p < .05; ** X² significant at p < .01; *** X² significant at p < .001

Parenthetical percentages are minority items as a percentage of total in each category.

Four of the 14 Deutchmann/Stempel coding categories appeared in neither sample: War and Defense, Diplomacy and Foreign Relations, Agriculture and Transportation and Travel.

minorities, down 28 percent from 41 percent of all minority-related items in 1965 to 12 percent in 1987. This is not surprising, as civil rights and race relations were less newsworthy issues in 1987 than in 1965. Not unrelated is a 20.5 percent decline in the proportion of national news about minority affairs. In addition, the tone of *Dispatch* coverage of minority issues, and the spot/process news balance, both shifted significantly from 1965 to 1987 — by 27 percent in news tone, to 58 percent positive, and by nearly 18 percent in news style, to nearly 40 percent process news (though still 60 percent spot coverage). In addition, much more of minority-related
news in 1987 was produced by Dispatch staffers, up 15 percent to 52 percent of the total.

Despite the low amount of Dispatch minority-related news content in either period as compared with minority population, there is good news to report. As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, seven of the nine categories on which Dispatch news items were coded yielded statistically significant results from the 1965 sample to 1987.

The shift from minority spot news to process news indicates a trend away from ambulance-chasing coverage of minorities toward the kind of considered balance suggested by the Kerner Commission, although most minority news in the Dispatch

**TABLE 3: Minority-related News Coverage in the Columbus Dispatch in 1965 and 1987 in Six Coding Categories as Ratio and Percentage of Total News Content, with Percentage Change.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding Category</th>
<th>1965</th>
<th>1987</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story Length</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short (&lt;6 inches)</td>
<td>36/79 (45.6%)*</td>
<td>23/55 (41.8%)</td>
<td>-3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium (6-10 inches)</td>
<td>14/79 (17.7%)</td>
<td>16/55 (29.1%)</td>
<td>+11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long (&gt;10 inches)</td>
<td>29/79 (36.7%)</td>
<td>16/55 (29.1%)</td>
<td>-7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story Placement</strong></td>
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</tr>
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<td>Page 1</td>
<td>4/81 (4.9%)</td>
<td>1/57 (1.8%)</td>
<td>-3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section Front</td>
<td>3/81 (3.7%)</td>
<td>8/57 (14.0%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inside</td>
<td>74/81 (91.4%)</td>
<td>48/57 (84.2%)</td>
<td>-7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dateline</strong>*</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
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<td>4/56 (7.1%)</td>
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<td>43/79 (54.4%)</td>
<td>19/56 (33.9%)</td>
<td>-20.5</td>
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<td>-7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local</td>
<td>26/79 (32.9%)</td>
<td>32/56 (57.1%)</td>
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<td><strong>Byline</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wire Service</td>
<td>47/74 (63.5%)</td>
<td>26/54 (48.2%)</td>
<td>-15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff-written</td>
<td>27/74 (36.5%)</td>
<td>28/54 (51.9%)</td>
<td>+15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has Accompanying Art*</td>
<td>24/81 (29.8%)</td>
<td>28/57 (49.1%)</td>
<td>+19.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Yes, Art is Positive***</td>
<td>9/25 (36%)</td>
<td>24/28 (85.7%)</td>
<td>+49.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* X2 significant at p < .05; ** X2 significant at p < .01; *** X2 significant at p < .001

* Parenthetical percentages are minority items as a percentage of total in each category.
in 1987 was still event-oriented, which may indicate a reactive, rather than proactive, news coverage philosophy. This is not necessarily a condemnation; most news coverage is and must necessarily be reactive to events.

Discussion

As discussed, minority-related coverage became less “bad” and more “good” between 1965 and 1987; even though there wasn’t much more news about minorities in the Dispatch in 1987 (3.22 percent in 1965 and 3.34 percent in 1987, up 0.119%), there were fewer negative items in 1987. Further, in the 14 Stempel-Deutschmann news categories, significant changes were recorded in the Dispatch’s coverage of social issues, which declined with the activism of the national civil rights movement, and in crime coverage, which increased nearly 16 percent as a proportion of total minority news items from 1965 to 1987. This finding may work against the decline in spot news coverage reported above, because all crime news was classified as event-oriented, and more than half of all social issue news in 1965 was spot-news of civil rights movement developments; stories about the civil rights movement in 1965 were largely classified as “bad” news. The decline in social issue coverage from 1965 to 1987, then, may be a function of less bad news about minorities in the 1960s-era struggle for equality, rather than of an increase in positive minority news; apparently, lacking a time-bound, national and dramatic theme like the civil rights movement, the Dispatch in 1987 found little happening in Columbus regarding minorities and social issues.

There was no significant change in minority news story length or placement from 1965 to 1987, but the focus of Dispatch minority coverage shifted over the period from national to local and more of the minority coverage was staff-generated, which could indicate reaction to Kerner-era urgings to spend more time and effort covering local minority concerns, in addition to influences of the decline in national civil rights movement news. More Dispatch news items about minorities were accompanied by artwork in 1987, and much more of that artwork
was positive.

The kind of minority-related news content run by the Dispatch in 1987 bore little resemblance at all to 1965 minority news content. A Spearman's rho test of scores of the 10 Stempel-Deutschmann news categories appearing in either time period yields a value of 0.29, indicating substantial change in what kinds of minority news Dispatch editors considered newsworthy in 1987. This result is a mixed blessing, given that the top-rated minority-related news category in 1965 was "social issues" (Stempel-Deutschmann category no. 8) — not surprising during the growing civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s — and that the top 1987 minority news category honors were split between "politics/government" and "crime." "Human interest" was third.

Minorities seem to have made little progress since 1965 in terms of having their voices and concerns heard, their problems discussed, their triumphs and sorrows reported and their opinions considered.

Conclusion and Discussion

Analysis of the categories of minority-related news story content from 1965 to 1987 indicates considerable change in what Dispatch editors considered important news. The fact that the emphasis changed from "social issues" and "politics/governmental acts" to "crime," a rise in "politics/governmental acts," and "human interest" categories is open to interpretation. In part, changes in societal conditions surely account for some of that shift. Although there are some positives to the shifts in the way the Dispatch has covered minorities, one might examine with skepticism the fact that 1987 Dispatch coverage of minorities keyed on crime, politics/government and human interest, topics that are easy to cover, either because they are "brights" — as is the case in human interest stories — or because they are time-bound events with official sources, police or government functionaries. Even the Dispatch of 1987 was not reporting much in the way of McCombs' "broad secular sweep of history, the major trends and thrusts of the time," at least as far as Columbus' 141,111 nonwhites were concerned.

In defense of Dispatch's 1987 coverage, it is certainly possible that, as society changed, there became less tendency to identify people in news items by their race, which might result in fewer items in the 1987 sample that were identifiable about minorities. Thankfully, the kind of 1960s-era coverage that permitted crime stories, for instance, about "negro suspects" disappeared by 1987; standards of newspaper
Journalism in the 1980s preclude any mention of race or ethnicity in most breaking news stories except in extraordinary circumstances. This might well have contributed to fewer identifiable minority-related stories in the 1987 sample than might in fact have existed.

In addition, it is certain that in 1987 there was less distinction between issues that might be exclusively minority or white concerns, and so a blurring has occurred that might serve to hide otherwise codable items.

Despite these reasonable challenges, however, there is little indication from these results that the Dispatch did any better in 1987 than in 1965 in terms of exposing the greater Columbus population to pressing concerns and issues confronting its minority members. The Kerner charge to the newspaper industry was to give greater exposure and consideration to concerns of “underclasses” in society. It may be that minority residents of Columbus in 1987 had no particular concerns or problems that the population at large did not share, which would explain why the present study couldn’t identify many such stories in the Dispatch sample. That explanation, though plausible, seems unlikely.

The study does indicate is that, in Columbus at least, minorities seem to have made little progress since 1965 in terms of having their voices and concerns heard, their problems discussed, their triumphs and sorrows reported and their opinions considered. At least, those things aren’t happening at the Columbus Dispatch. The results suggest that precepts formulated by the Kerner Commission in 1965 and given national newspaper industry support today — suggestions about the role of the press in American life aimed at avoiding “separate and unequal” societies — have, in one major Midwestern city at least, not yet seen fruition.

Given the quantitative lack of increase in Dispatch minority coverage from 1965 to 1987, it is difficult to applaud the press in Columbus for its enthusiastic pursuit of the aims espoused 20 years ago by the Kerner Commission. There was no more

It is difficult to say that minorities are not still a social underclass in America, when the level of coverage has not improved since the ’60s, and the largest news content categories concern public bureaucracy and crime.
minority news coverage by the Dispatch in 1987 than there was in 1965, when much of that coverage related to growing civil unrest — it is difficult to say that minorities are not still a social underclass in America, when the level of coverage has not improved since the ’60s, and the largest news content categories concern public bureaucracy and crime. Although the proportion of Columbus’ minority population hasn’t changed much in 22 years, surely Columbus society has changed in ways other than is indicated by a 16 percent jump in the proportion of minority crime coverage.

If newspaper industry leaders are indeed interested in improving the quality of newspaper coverage of minorities in American society, this study might be a means of providing benchmark data from Columbus and other cities against which to gauge present and future performance. As mentioned above, however, unflattering results such as those uncovered in this study could prove counter-productive if rejected out-of-hand as critical carping by outsiders. But the question of press performance vis a vis coverage of minorities is one that should regularly be reviewed and, despite sensitivities of editors to anything that might be seen as “tampering” with content, dismissing results such as those found in this study without closely examining possible ramifications would be harmful to the newspaper industry and to American society as a whole.

That danger notwithstanding, this study offers a potentially valuable tool for the industry in evaluating its progress in the area of minority representation in newspapers and as concerns their voice in American society, beyond the progress achieved through recruitment by the newspaper industry. If it is indeed true that an increase in the diversity of voices and viewpoints within a newsroom is reflected in wider understanding of minority concerns in a community, then an increase in the number of minority reporters and editors since 1968 should be reflected to some degree in news content. In Columbus, at least, such has not been the case. Further research, in the form of expansion of this pilot study to examine the performance of other major U.S. newspapers, is needed to test whether the newspaper industry has, in fact, made any progress at all along the road mapped out for it by the Kerner Commission 20 years ago. It’s been a long road. Still is.

References

2. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 10.
8. Ibid.


22. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Address to the Nation," *op. cit*.


27. McCombs, *op. cit*.