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Interjournalistic discourse about African Americans in television news coverage of Hurricane Katrina

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Abstract
This article examines how on-air conversations between journalists indicate how US television coverage of a race-related crisis can reflect racial ideology. Using critical discourse analysis, we examined interjournalistic discourse about African Americans in national network and cable news programs that aired after Hurricane Katrina reached New Orleans. While we expected conversational semantic items from conservative Fox News to reflect racial ideology, we also found such discursive elements from politically moderate and progressive news organizations such as CBS, CNN, and MSNBC. These findings are consistent with Anxiety Uncertainty Management theory, which predicts that exposure to stressors in unfamiliar settings causes individuals to think in ethnocentric, dichotomous, stereotypical ways. Our research underscores the impact of white
privilege on language, communication, and news production, and the need for cultural competence training to enhance journalists’ ability to discuss racial matters with ease.

Keywords
African Americans, Anxiety Uncertainty Management theory, discourse semantics, Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans

Since the 1960s, mainstream news organizations in the United States have been progressive allies of black Americans by reporting on race with compassion and reason (for example, see Bass and Nelson, 1999; Huie, 2000; Newkirk, 2002; Wicker, 1980). Indeed, a grateful Dr Martin Luther King (1963: 30) credited reporters’ ‘gigantic circling spotlights’ for helping to expose America’s worst civil rights abuses.

At the same time, there is considerable empirical evidence that news organizations function as mechanisms through which influential whites and white-owned institutions perpetuate racial ideology (Rowley and Chavous, 2003) – beliefs, opinions, and attitudes that universalize whites’ concerns, and that perpetuate white-over-black power relations (Campbell, 1995; Dixon and Linz, 2000; Entman, 1990, 1992, 1994; Fischer and Lowenstein, 1967; Gilens, 1996; Gilliam et al., 1996; Heider, 2000; Johnson, 1987; Johnson et al., 1971; Martindale, 1986; van Dijk, 1988, 1991). Much of this scholarship is based on content analyses or, more rarely, newsroom ethnographies, in which researchers scrutinize either the product of newsroom practices, or the practices themselves.

But racism ‘is a discourse as well as a praxis’ (Shohat and Stam, 1994: 19). To the extent that media professionals participate in such discourse, journalists’ conversations with each other during a race-related crisis might reveal problematic racial attitudes and concepts. In this article, we analyze racial ideology in a rarely explored aspect of television news – verbal interaction we call interjournalistic discourse – during the most significant racial crisis in recent memory: the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

After Katrina, journalists faced stressful and traumatic working conditions, and heightened uncertainty and ambiguity. We contend that such conditions are likely to produce on-air interjournalistic dialogue that reflects ethnocentric, stereotypical, prejudicial comments about African Americans. Our goal in this article is to illuminate some of the ways in which television news reporting of racial crises can link stress, unfamiliar environments, and racial ideology. Ultimately, analyzing interjournalistic discourse may represent an underutilized method for recognizing institutional racism and ultimately for resisting mass-media propagation of racial ideology.

Background

Interjournalistic discourse

Public discourse between journalists has not always been a feature of news broadcasts. In the 1960s, the directional flow of nearly all television utterances in the US was reporter to audience. But with increasing postmodernist suspicion of top-down ‘one reporter, one camera’ news reporting (Butler, 2003; Legge, 1998), and the proliferation of soft news, which emphasizes folksy entertainment (Baum, 2002; Patterson, 2000), audiences’
expectations – and broadcasters’ practices – changed. With this change came the rise of interjournalistic discourse, of which we focus on two types – casual conversation between colleagues and more-formal interviews of journalists by journalists.

The trend toward casual conversation emerged in the late 1960s, when two anchors at Chicago’s WLS-TV started to discuss on-air with each other the stories they were reporting, thereby ushering the era of ‘happy talk’ (Allen, 1999: 74). By the 1980s, the Eyewitness News model, in which a ‘family’ of news, sports, and weather personalities exchange bland pleasantries, had spread to the networks. Today, journalists on network and cable news programs routinely banter with each other, particularly in transition from a taped news story to a live broadcast.

Interviews of journalists are a little recognized subgenre in the discourse literature on interviews (Bell, 1991; Blum-Kulka, 1983; Greatbatch, 1988; Heritage, 1985; Jucker, 1986) but they are the hallmark of public affairs programs such as Countdown with Keith Olberman (MSNBC) and media critiques such as Reliable Sources (CNN). To the extent that it reflects racial ideologies (Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Galasinski, 2000), interview discourse, like casual banter, may highlight important elements of news discourse that typically escape critical scrutiny.

**Theoretical considerations**

What journalists think may not always coincide with what they say, particularly with regard to race (Crocker et al., 1998; Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978; Schuman et al., 1997; van Dijk and Kintsch, 1978). Most white journalists are respectfully wary of offending minorities, a concern that can obfuscate rather than illuminate reporters’ actual racial perspectives. That is why we agree with Chaisson (1995) that studying reporters during crises can be revealing. Scholars of crisis journalism know that journalists have more autonomy in an emergency than during routine news production (Quarantelli, 1991). This suggests that the unpredictability of events during a crisis combined with the relentless time pressure of daily news production encourages reporters to speak more freely or more spontaneously than usual. In crisis-related discussions involving race or racism, we would not expect interjournalistic discourse to reflect careful pre-selection of non-racist language, nor advanced preparation that respects complexity and nuance, nor framing of stories in ways that considers different constituencies. Rather, a discourse analysis is likely to reveal unguarded, unscripted, candid racial remarks, whether in formal interviews or in casual banter.

We suspect that these remarks are likely to be initiated by stress. Covering Katrina was extraordinarily stressful for reporters, who witnessed mass-scale human suffering and devastating property losses in the wake of government confusion and ineptitude. Indeed, the appropriateness of journalists showing their emotions on the air became the subject of news programs (see Blitzer et al., 2005; Hammer et al., 2005). Employees who endure such stressful work environments typically experience an emotional response that includes heightened anxiety, uncertainty, and fear (Cartwright and Cooper, 1997).

These three emotional states are particularly relevant when assignments take reporters to unfamiliar settings. Indeed, Anxiety Uncertainty Management (AUM), a theory arising from the study of intercultural communication, posits that interaction involving unknown people or unfamiliar cultures gives rise to anxiety, uncertainty, and fear – the same responses generated by workplace stressors (Gudykunst, 1995; Neulip and McCroskey,
In turn, AUM predicts that anxiety, uncertainty, and fear give rise to ethnocentrism, dichotomous (Us–Them) thinking, and reliance on stereotypes. Thus, AUM allows us to suggest that ethnocentric, dichotomous, and stereotypical thinking by reporters appeared in the intercultural milieu of New Orleans after Katrina, when reporters experienced significant stressors, and these mostly white, middle-class, ‘out-of-town’ journalists were immersed among many thousands of unknown persons – mostly black low-income local residents – in an unfamiliar culture.

Whether an individual journalist expresses these discursive tendencies probably depends on a number of factors. One rather obvious contributor would appear to be the degree of discomfort that a reporter may feel toward African Americans. Because most whites feel more anxious than do blacks during interracial encounters (Crocker et al., 1998; Trawalter and Richeson, 2008), settings such as the Lower Ninth Ward, and especially the densely populated Superdome and Ernest N. Morial Convention Center, would have created race-related anxiety for many white journalists, for whom the unfamiliar racial terrain created heightened ethnocentrism, heightened dichotomous thinking, and heightened reliance on stereotypes compared to their African American colleagues.

Further, we would expect reporters on news programs by conservative media organizations, where policy positions on racial issues often stridently oppose those of communities of color, to converse about African Americans in ways that are consistent with racial ideology. We would not expect discourse by politically moderate or progressive organizations to contain such adversarial racial discourse.

But to understand how a racial crisis can encourage a reporter to articulate a racial utterance that under normal conditions might go unsaid, we must reexamine the role of stress. Journalists prize objectivity, and part of their self-presentation involves projecting fairness and evenhandedness (Schudson, 2003). They may be motivated to appear unprejudiced both because of social norms that dictate respectful treatment of others (external controls), or because of a genuine commitment to egalitarianism and social equity (internal controls) (Plant and Devine, 1998), or both. Most journalists, having internalized respectful attitudes toward persons of color that years of fair-minded reporting has helped to establish, are doubtless motivated more by internal than external controls over racist attitudes and behavior. Regardless of the source of such controls, however, stressors complicate self-presentation. As Saarni and Hannelore (1999: 97) point out, ‘In stressful situations, the behavioral and expressive conduct that is usually controlled and constrained may be jeopardized, and the capacity for self-control may be reduced.’ Thus stressors appear to play two roles in the production of race-related interjournalistic discourse: they launch the emotional response that culminates in ethnocentric, dichotomous, stereotypical thoughts; and they diminish any restraints that normally prevent those thoughts from being expressed.

We propose a simple model that illustrates how the chaotic, unpredictable nature of crisis journalism and the unfamiliarity of the journalistic milieu create anxiety, uncertainty, and fear for reporters, resulting in ethnocentric, dichotomous, and stereotypical thinking (internal responses) for journalists. In post-Katrina New Orleans, these thoughts are especially likely to emerge from white reporters, who feel uncomfortable amidst low-income African Americans and an unfamiliar culture, and from reporters at conservative news organizations. But any reporter is likely to articulate racial ideology after exposure
to stressors, which impede journalists’ ability to present themselves as unbiased and impartial (external response) (Figure 1).

If our model is correct, several elements should be apparent in Katrina-related interjournalistic discourse from white reporters and white-owned news organizations: 1) evidence of crisis-related stressors; 2) unfamiliarity with the residents and culture of New Orleans’ African American community; and 3) semantic structures that reveal racial ideology. We sought to identify all three elements in an effort to better understand how television news during a crisis can reflect racial ideology.

**Methods**

Our methodological starting point is critical discourse analysis (CDA). Whereas a conventional discourse analysis might view a structural description of journalists’ spoken words against likely acts of news audiences’ interpretation and memory (van Dijk, 1991), the task in CDA is more pointed: to look for the ideological significance of the word choices speakers make (Cameron, 2001). With CDA, one assumes that there are connections between ‘forms of meaning, in this case racist significations, and forms of power’ (Weatherell and Potter, 1992; 13). Indeed, the goal is ‘to make more explicit the ways power abuse, dominance and inequality are (re)produced by ideologically based discourse’ (van Dijk, 1995: 243). Thus, we use CDA to inquire into power relations mediated by newsworkers whose discursive acts reflect racial ideology.

We used LexisNexis Academic Universe, an online database, to retrieve transcripts of news broadcasts made during the second week after the hurricane reached New Orleans (5 September 2005 to 11 September 2005), when our preliminary analysis suggested that televised news reports focused more on the human costs of the delayed rescue effort than on environmental devastation. For diversity, we obtained transcripts from one traditional broadcast network (CBS), one mainstream cable network (CNN), and two overtly partisan cable networks – one conservative (Fox News) (Ackerman, 2001) and one progressive (MSNBC) (Karlin, 2009; Stein, 2009). Using the search string [(Katrina AND New Orleans) OR (Katrina AND television) AND (black! OR African!)], we identified 65 news programs in which reporters mentioned the keywords during interjournalistic discourse.
We identified the race of the reporters, to the extent that such a designation was apparent, by conducting Google searches for photographic images. To account for precursors to AUM-related discursive tendencies, we examined the transcripts to determine whether reporters spoke of stress as they covered Katrina, and we looked for evidence that reporters were unfamiliar with the city’s low-income African Americans and their culture.

Of the 65 news programs wherein reporters mentioned the keywords, 10 (15%) contained language indicating racial ideology. From each of the four news organizations we selected one such program that reflects noteworthy white-over-black interjournalistic discourse: The O’Reilly Factor (Fox News, 7 September 2005); The Situation (MSNBC, 5 September 2005), CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer (11 September 2005), and CBS Evening News (10 September 2005). Although we used these case studies to examine in detail the ways racial ideology can appear in interjournalistic discourse, we do not suggest that they represent network coverage as a whole. At the same time, the presence of racial ideology in all four networks in our sample, albeit in different forms, indicates that racial ideology is not unique to broadcast, cable, conservative, or progressive news operations.

We used van Dijk (1995) as a framework for identifying three types of semantic items in these transcripts that reflect racial ideology: lexicalization, propositional framing, and focus (Anon., 1985). Lexicalization, or word choice, is ‘the major dimension of [ideologically controlled] discourse meaning’ (van Dijk, 1995: 259). Lexical analysis distinguishes among subtle shades of meaning. For example, to say, ‘Black teens burglarized the store’ is different from saying, ‘Black teens robbed the store.’ Burglarizing implies entering unlawfully with intent to steal; robbing implies stealing under threat of force or violence (Anon., 1985: 1066). Thus, the word ‘robbed’ constitutes a more powerful indictment, because it connotes that the teens threatened to injure or kill someone (thus causing potentially irretrievable loss) rather than causing the loss of property (which can be replaced). Using ‘robbed’ is thus more consistent with racial ideological thinking that justifies social control of black deviants because of the alleged threat that they pose to white (and other) innocents.

Similarly, propositional framing assigns roles to actors. (Linguistic propositions are elements of a clause or sentence whose meaning is derived from the association of a predicate [in the sentence above, ‘robbed’] with referents [‘black teens’] [Fleming, 1988].) Thus, framing every African American teen as a potential thief, as opposed to a potential voter or a potential physician, perpetuates the negative depiction of an already stigmatized group (Fowler, 1991). It also universalizes the interests of the person doing the framing, such that the speaker’s concerns are assumed to be everyone’s concerns. Thus, a white reporter might use propositional framing of the deviant behavior of black teens on the assumption that everyone shares his or her concern about being robbed by them. Finally, framing also concerns agency and responsibility. In ideologically charged discourse, positive actions by Us (the in-group) are associated with the role of responsible agent, while any negative actions by Us are actively imposed on Us, when we are passive, by Others (the out-group) (van Dijk, 1995). Thus, a white reporter may claim that a clerk deserves credit for peacefully averting a robbery attempt by black teens, but might report that the clerk had no choice if he shot black teens during a robbery attempt. This ultimate attribution error (Pettigrew, 1979) explains why Others are portrayed as agents when they engage in negative actions, but are said to be not responsible for their positive actions (van Dijk, 1995). Thus, a reporter might imply that black thieves are
responsible for their criminal behavior, but that black honors students are successful because of dedicated tutors or devoted mentors.

Finally, propositions can be in or out of focus, depending on whether information they contain lies in the foreground or the background of cognition. If a white reporter were to say, ‘Black teens robbed the store,’ the mention of the blackness of the teens overshadows an equally important but unspoken semantic element – the whiteness of the speaker. Such a sentence that links African Americans with crime plays on stereotypical associations of blacks with deviance, thus foregrounding white people’s concerns and perspectives while backgrounding those of persons of color. To the contrary, a black reporter might describe the same scene by saying, ‘Some teens robbed the store’ (which makes the utterance non-racial, thus less likely to impugn all African American teens), or even, ‘Some black teens robbed the store after the clerk made a racist comment about them’ (thus making the clerk, not the teens, the instigator). Both utterances foreground African Americans’ perspectives, thus giving the statements a different ideological underpinning than the utterance from the white reporter.

All racial statements do not necessarily reflect racial ideology. The lexicalization in the sentence, ‘Black teens robbed the store’ can be merely descriptive; it is only ideological to the extent that it is agenda-driven and reflects attitudes and opinions, either by the speaker or the hearer, that assume that African American youth are inherently prone to thievery (van Dijk, 1995). Similarly, a white reporter whose propositional framing implies that Others are not responsible for their negative actions (‘Joblessness is driving many black teens to crime’) or who foregrounds African Americans’ concerns (‘Many black residents are concerned that teens are turning to crime’) does not propagate racial ideology.

**Results**

We begin this section by presenting information on the race of the reporters who engaged in interjournalistic discourse during the study period. We follow with evidence that reporters found covering the Katrina crisis to be stressful, and we note indications that journalists were unfamiliar with African American residents and their surroundings. We conclude with descriptions of lexicalization, propositional framing, and focus, in both formal interviews and casual conversation, that reveal racial ideology.

Of 22 journalists whose conversations appeared in our four news programs, 17 (77%) were white, four (18%) were black, and one (5%) was Hispanic non-white. The fact that this cohort of reporters was predominantly white and worked for white-owned news organizations allows for the likelihood that the discursive elements explored later in this section reflect the perspectives of the dominant culture.

Several of the 22 reporters referred to the personal challenges of covering an extraordinary stressful story. They spoke of the enormity of human suffering and of their dismay at disingenuous government reassurances. ‘[T]his is a horrible story,’ said CNN correspondent Gary Tuchman, who on CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer (11 September 2005), called discrepancies between official reports and events on the ground ‘very frustrating’. In the same broadcast, CNN’s Wolf Blitzer noted, ‘I would say [to reporters in the field], “Well, what’s going on?” And they would say, “It’s awful. It’s nothing like we just heard in this briefing.”’ Washington Post columnist Eugene Robinson added:
It was infuriating. The angriest I think I got in a week down there was at the command headquarters in Baton Rouge, where officials would come out and spend more time arguing about who was in charge and giving, you know, numbers that really didn’t mean anything, that often contradicted each other. And kind of not out really doing anything for these many, many thousands of people who are in desperate, dire situations. It was an appalling performance, and I think any reporter couldn’t help but be moved, and moved to a certain level of outrage.

While no journalist in our sample said that working among unfamiliar people in unfamiliar surroundings made them anxious and fearful, as AUM predicts, only one reporter – Eugene Robinson, an African American – spoke with any familiarity about the city’s flood-ravaged African American neighborhoods. Robinson’s comment came during an 11 September 2005, conversation with Wolf Blitzer about government censorship of the media:

. . . First of all, logistically it is impossible to keep the news media out of the neighborhoods. I mean, they won’t – even if they don’t take reporters out on boats, if you’ve got a boat, you can, and you know the back ways into the city, you can launch it yourself and go all over flooded New Orleans.

We suspect that most reporters were as unfamiliar with the city’s African American neighborhoods and their residents as was CNN’s Gary Tuchman, who reported to Wolf Blitzer:

. . . We’ve been driving around New Orleans. Even today, before we went around with you, we took a drive around, and it really is something – and you don’t even realize it even as a reporter who has traveled all over this country – the percentage of poverty is very high in this city. And it is just so pitiful.

Such a profound lack of awareness no doubt means that reporters such as Tuchman were thoroughly unfamiliar with the poor black residents whose plight was central to the humanitarian crisis at the center of the Katrina story. For these reporters, the stressful nature of covering the crisis and the unfamiliar cultural terrain likely gave rise to ethnocentric, dichotomous, and stereotypical thinking as expressed in interviews and casual conversation.

**Interview discourse**

Interjournalistic interviews in the four news stories contain propositions, focus, and lexicalization that reflect racial ideology. For example, a Fox News interview segment offers propositions by host Bill O’Reilly and African American syndicated columnist Deroy Murdock (*The O’Reilly Factor*, 7 September 2005), that dispute the claim that delays in the federal rescue effort reflect racial animosity:

. . . And the idea that President Bush doesn’t care about black people and therefore he, I guess, called FEMA [the Federal Emergency Management Administration] and said, ‘OK, take your time rescuing these people’ is a really bizarre idea . . .
O’REILLY: No politician – no politician would ever say, ‘Yes, let the black people die.’ I mean, that’s death for the politician.

These propositions represent a *reductio ad absurdum*, in which a speaker claims that an assertion is true by showing that a contradictory assertion is absurd (Rescher, 2005). Murdock is claiming: 1) if President Bush did not care about African Americans, he would have ordered federal authorities to delay their rescue effort; 2) it is inconceivable that Bush would have issued such a directive; thus 3) Bush must care about African Americans. This argument is flawed, of course: there are many ways that a leader might display disregard for a population, including acting slowly to help them; making policy decisions that harm them, failing to acknowledge responsibility for such actions; and so forth. O’Reilly’s response is flawed for the same reason; one can disregard African Americans in many ways short of announcing, ‘Let the black people die.’ But both statements convey a clear ideological message: only the most blatant racial animosity – what social scientists term traditional or old-fashioned racism (Dovidio and Gaertner, 1986) – qualifies as genuine racism, and in the absence of such unmistakable evidence, anyone who alleges racial motives for individual or institutional actions is merely ‘playing the race card’ – manipulating people to arouse sympathy for claims of racial victimization.

O’Reilly takes a similar pro-government position later in the program when he discusses a controversial ‘shoot to kill’ order issued on 1 September 2005, by Louisiana governor Kathleen Blanco to deter looting among Katrina survivors, who are overwhelmingly black. He initially rejects the accusation that the order targets African Americans. Then he appears to change his stance after an exchange with Eleanor Tatum, African American publisher of *The Amsterdam News*:

O’REILLY: You know, I don’t care that [entertainer Kanye] West said that President Bush doesn’t care about black people. I mean, so what? He says that – Bush gets hit all the time with that stuff. But I did care that he said authorities were ordered to shoot black people. That was grossly irresponsible to say . . . You don’t think people were ordered to shoot black people, do you?

TATUM: I believe that people were ordered to shoot to kill.

O’REILLY: Well, looters, that’s what happens.

Here O’Reilly advances the proposition that looters – not the governor nor law enforcement officials – are responsible if they are shot or killed by the state. Such propositional framing of a group (low-income African Americans) that is typically portrayed as involved in crime serves an ideological function by (re-)establishing the Other (African Americans, looters) as guilty and Us (white people, the state) as blameless. By emphasizing looters’ negative actions as the result of decisions by purposive actors, propositional framing simultaneously deemphasizes the potentially lethal consequences of Governor Blanco’s order as the result of decisions imposed on the more passive state – ‘as something that happens to us, or as something we are forced to do by others or the circumstances’ (van Dijk, 1995: 261). Thus, after initially denying that the shoot-to-kill order has anything to do with race, O’Reilly seems to concede that it does, up to a point, because many looters are African Americans.
But because any shootings are imposed on law-enforcement officers by looters themselves, they do not represent state-sanctioned racism, which by O’Reilly’s calculus makes the shoot-to-kill order reasonable.

An interview segment on CNN’s Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer (11 September 2005) reveals propositional framing and focus that reflect racial ideology. The conversation includes an exchange between Blitzer and CNN’s Howard Kurtz, host of Reliable Sources; former Des Moines Register editor Geneva Overholser; Washington Post associate editor Eugene Robinson, and CNN national correspondent Gary Tuchman. (Lines are numbered for easy reference.)

1 BLITZER: Howie, what about the whole issue that has come up of race and class, hovering over all of this coverage?
2 KURTZ: Well, Wolf, while we’re patting journalists on the back for the yeoman work they’ve done, and deservedly so during this two-week crisis, what about the last 20 years? How come it was a shock to a lot of people to find out that New Orleans was two-thirds black, most of these people poor? Urban poverty, minority people who need help. These have been off the media radar screen for a long time . . . They couldn’t afford the bus fare. They had no place to go. Journalism fell down on this job. Politicians don’t talk about it. And we didn’t make them talk about it.
3 BLITZER: Do you agree?
4 OVERHOLSER: I do agree. And I hope that the legacy of this will be that we won’t let officials drive our national news as much. It’s expensive to go out there and report from city after city. But we have got to do it. We owe it to democracy.
5 BLITZER: I think a lot of Americans, Eugene, were shocked at how poor so much of New Orleans really is. They think of New Orleans as a party town, Mardi Gras, the Big Easy, let’s go have a good time. And now to see what happened at that Convention Center, at the Superdome, and to see the enormous poverty in that city, which was basically hidden.
6 ROBINSON: Tourists didn’t see it. You didn’t get to those parts of town. No tourist went to the Lower Ninth Ward, which is a neighborhood that was almost completely drowned . . .

This passage reveals two semantic elements of interest. The first is propositional framing that attempts to establish a dichotomous Us–Them relationship between reporters and public officials. Thus, positive actions by Us (reporters) are associated with responsibility and agency (‘. . . we’re patting journalists on the back for the yeoman work they’ve done . . .’, line 3) while Our failure to report on urban poverty has resulted from Them (officials who ‘drive our national news’ (line 12) and who ‘don’t talk about it [urban poverty]’, lines 8–9). Though the journalists acknowledge their failure to ‘make them [public officials] talk about it’ (line 9), their readiness to blame other causes – even the location of the Lower Ninth Ward as a place ‘no tourist went to’ (line 19) – suggests an attempt to avoid responsibility for establishing urban neighborhoods such as the Lower Ninth Ward as neglected and vulnerable.

Second, the focus in the passage foregrounds white Americans’ experiences while backgrounding those of persons of color. Most African Americans appreciate the problematic interconnections between race, poverty, and urban spaces, often through direct
personal or familial experiences. So it is unlikely that black television audiences were shocked that New Orleans is home to thousands of low-income African Americans. Thus when Kurtz notes that ‘a lot of people’ (line 5) were surprised that such a sizable part of the city’s population was black and poor, he refers implicitly to white people. Similarly, his assertion that the urban poor ‘have been off the media radar screen’ (lines 6–7) is a clear reference to white-owned media organizations rather than the black press, which focuses exclusively on African Americans’ concerns (Dolan et al., 2009). The fact that Kurtz need not mention ‘white’ nor ‘white-owned’ for his statements to convey meaning is a reminder of the power of whiteness to serve as the standard against which all else is measured. As Dyer (2005: 1) notes, ‘Other people are raced, we [whites] are just people.’ But these statements also bring to the foreground the perspectives of white audiences, while causing other perspectives to recede. As such, these semantic structures serve an ideological function by perpetuating a white-over-black mentality, thereby confirming that ‘information importance and relevance are ideologically sensitive’ (van Dijk, 1995: 263).

One of the clearest examples of ideological lexicalization appears on MSNBC (The Situation, 5 September 2005), when host Tucker Carlson interviews correspondent Rita Cosby, who has just reached New Orleans:

1 CARLSON: Well, for all the latest news coming from the Gulf Coast, let’s turn now to
2 MSNBC’s Rita Cosby, who’s on the scene in New Orleans, and also Joe Scarborough,
3 who is live in Biloxi, Mississippi. Rita, we were in New Orleans Saturday night… What’s
4 the situation there tonight? Is it better?
5 COSBY: Tucker, I just arrived here in New Orleans just a few hours ago, and it truly looks like
6 a ghost town. …Trees are down everywhere. …Many homes and businesses are
7 boarded up. It is truly an ominous sight, and it’s also a dangerous place. Some deviants
8 are clearly walking around in certain pockets of the city, looking for trouble, looking to
9 wreak havoc. But separate from that, there are also lots of glimmers of hope, particularly
10 the military men and women that I’ve run into… They are incredible. They are
11 determined to keep this city safe, to keep it clean, to get the looters out, to get these—
12 everyone out…
13 CARLSON: Thanks, Rita. Rita Cosby right on Canal Street, New Orleans, Louisiana.
14 Well, Joe Scarborough in Mississippi. What’s going on right now in Biloxi?

Cosby’s use of the word ‘deviants’ (line 7) is significant. She could have chosen any number of words (teens, youths, young men) to describe the persons who ‘are clearly walking around’ New Orleans (line 8). Because young black men on urban streets represent a menacing presence (Majors and Billson, 1992), especially to white women (Anderson, 1990), Cosby’s ideologically charged use of ‘deviants’ (line 7) almost certainly refers to black teens, especially since she sets the stage by describing the city as ‘a dangerous place’ (line 7). She even seems to catch herself before uttering a slur as she praises the troops who are determined ‘to get the looters out, to get these—everyone out’ (lines 11–12). But Carlson is complicit in reinforcing this stereotypical representation of young black men. He never asks Cosby how she knows that the young men ‘are looking for trouble’ and ‘looking to wreak havoc’ (lines 8–9). And at the end of her report he
passes the baton uncritically to the next reporter, thus implicitly sanctioning Cosby’s racialized assessment.

**Casual banter**

Our analysis of casual conversation found two examples of focus by white reporters that foregrounds the concerns of white people. On 5 September 2005, CBS reporters Harry Smith and Hannah Storm discussed on *The Early Show* Storm’s interview of an African American couple who were caring for 84 family members displaced by the hurricane. As they chat about the story on-camera, Smith and Storm broach whether race may have precipitated Katrina’s catastrophic aftermath. Then, just as quickly as they raise the issue, they downplay it:

1. **STORM:** A lot of talk about race and the fact that so many of the people that were left there
2. **SMITH:** are black and poor, and these are people who had no means to get out.
3. **STORM:** Right. I think one of the things—you know, that became sort of the s...
4. **STORM:** Did you hear a lot about that?
5. **SMITH:** We actually talked to a lot of people about that on Friday. And that became sort of
6. **STORM:** the screaming face of the storm that we saw day after day after day. And I would just
7. **SMITH:** suggest it’s even more complicated than that, because there are huge, predominantly
8. **STORM:** white parishes that we’ve even heard from this morning...
9. **STORM:** Jefferson Parish, right.
10. **SMITH:** ...Plaquemines Parish...
11. **STORM:** Right.
12. **SMITH:** ...where they have not received one single iota of federal help, even still this
13. **SMITH:** morning.
14. **STORM:** Right.
15. **STORM:** So while that may have—you know, that horrible thing happened, which is
16. **SMITH:** absolutely inexcusable, but the fact is that federal aid, that federal help that so many
17. **SMITH:** people look for, it didn’t go there. It also didn’t go over here and over there and over
18. **SMITH:** there and over there.

This conversation appears to reflect considerable unease. The words ‘you know’ appear twice: once by Smith (line 3) and again by Storm (line 15). This discourse marker asks the recipient to orient his or her knowledge and attention toward what the speaker is articulating. Thus, ‘you know’ ‘forces the hearer into a . . . relationship of exchange and reciprocity’ (Schiffrin, 1988: 311). We suspect that, like other verbal tics, ‘you know’ signals a nervous struggle for words (Erard, 2004) – an understandable circumstance for a white reporter who might feel self-conscious while speaking about racial atrocity – and that Smith and Storm are trying to direct each other to a shared reference point: a horrific event that for these reporters is more comfortably implied than articulated. Storm seems to be so uneasy talking about race that she uses a euphemism (‘that horrible thing’, line 15) for African American victimization.

That the conversation reverses dramatically once the reporters broach race suggest reluctance to engage the full racial dimensions of the Katrina story, a story that should
have elicited any number of race-related questions. For example, how did New Orleans neighborhoods come to be stratified by race and class, such that the most vulnerable population lived on the most vulnerable flood-prone acreage? Why was having an African American political infrastructure, including a black mayor, a black police chief, and a majority black city council (Chappell, 2007), insufficient to protect the city’s most vulnerable black residents from harm? How did the federal response to Katrina hearken officials’ behavior during the Mississippi River flood of 1927, when African Americans in neighboring Mississippi were prevented from evacuating and were denied Red Cross food unless they worked as unpaid laborers to prevent flood losses (Nowell, 2009)? Two weeks into the Katrina story, reporters had sufficient time to summon local historians, political and social scientists, and public officials for a sophisticated inquiry into the role of race in the Katrina story, and in urban public affairs generally. But Storm and Smith avoided the issue (as did other reporters in our larger sample of programs \(n = 65\) from the second week of Katrina coverage). We did not find eagerness to discuss an issue that could have enlightened viewers and perhaps even prevented future Katrinas from becoming racialized disasters.

Discussion

We sought to understand what interjournalistic discourse about African Americans during television coverage of Hurricane Katrina suggests about how US cable and network news broadcasts can reflect racial ideology. While we assumed that racialized interjournalistic discourse would emerge from a politically conservative news organization, we found ideologically charged semantic elements from news organizations across the political spectrum, suggesting that problematic racial discourse may be widespread. In formal interviews and informal banter, we found lexicalization, propositional framing, and focus that divides populations into in-groups and out-groups (dichotomous thinking), that values the perspectives of whites over persons of color (ethnocentrism), and that attributes criminal tendencies to African Americans (stereotypical thinking), as AUM theory predicts. Despite journalists’ undoubtedly benign, even noble intentions, these word choices, links between actors and roles, and foregrounding of in-group members’ concerns could maintain or perpetuate ethnic division and racial inequality. If so, some television news reports may have represented a polarizing influence at a time when the speed of the rescue effort may have relied at least in part on unanimity of political will. Thus while most (85%) of the 65 second-week news programs that contained racial interjournalistic discourse was not ideological, the presence of any racial ideological semantic elements is cause for concern.

The role of stressors

Our findings suggest that stressors may prompt the on-air articulation of racial ideology, particularly for white reporters who feel uneasy among persons of color. To be sure, most of the news programs we studied did not contain problematic discursive elements, despite the likelihood that all Katrina reporters experienced stressful working conditions in unfamiliar settings. Nor was every articulator of racial ideology a white reporter, as seen by
African American journalist Deroy Murdock’s defense of President Bush’s racialized response to the hurricane. Further, because we did not compare our findings to a sample of racial news from before the hurricane, we cannot determine whether our findings might be typical of everyday news production, or indeed whether Katrina reporters’ realization of their vast audiences made them even more vigilant self-monitors of interjournalistic discourse than is routinely the case. In other words, while we find support for the AUM-theorized link between crisis journalism, unfamiliar settings, and articulated racial ideology, other interpretations are possible. This is a topic for future research.

However, experimental exposure to stressors does tend to make people less sensitive to others (Cohen, 1980). For example, Sherrod and Downs (1974) found that subjects who had listened for 20 minutes to a dissonant recording of jazz music superimposed over non-relevant spoken prose were less likely to agree to help a researcher pretest experimental materials compared to subjects who had listened to soothing seashore sounds. This self-centered, non-altruistic behavior is consistent with white Katrina reporters’ foregrounding of in-group members’ perspectives, whether those perspectives are professional (e.g. blaming public officials for journalists’ failure to publicize urban poverty) or racial (e.g. avoiding talk about race, or universalizing white Americans’ surprise over inner-city African American poverty). In addition, Donnerstein and Wilson (1975) found that subjects who were angered after being exposed to high-intensity noise showed heightened aggression compared to non-angered subjects, who showed no increase in aggression. Perhaps the anger and frustration that Katrina reporters experienced during the delayed rescue effort contributed to a generalized aggression or hostility that ‘spilled over’ onto African American victims, leading to reporters to use lexical items (e.g. ‘deviants’) that assign stereotypically negative roles to out-group members, and to blame African Americans rather than the state for placing looters’ lives at risk. The antisocial effects of stress seem to be especially pronounced when stressors are unpredictable and uncontrollable (Cohen, 1980) – precisely the scenario that confronted reporters in the shocking and traumatic aftermath of the worst natural disaster in US history.

In the face of such stressors, the functional utility of racially ideological reporting seems clear. When confronted by unpredictable events in unfamiliar terrain, journalists feel uneasy and uncomfortable. They may even experience conflicting feelings (cognitive dissonance) associated with obvious racial inequities, or with their own prejudices that are incongruent with their view of themselves or of society as being fair and non-racist. Strategies such as stereotyping, dichotomization, and ethnocentric thinking can provide a (false) sense of control by replacing unknowns or ambiguities with readily available categorizations. In so doing, journalists temporarily manage their personal unease and discomfort by seeking comfort in the familiar, retreating to beliefs and behaviors that help to solidify their affiliation with the in-group, distance themselves from and devalue the Other, or deny or justify racism.

Given the potential of journalists to influence societal beliefs and attitudes, our work highlights the study of interjournalistic discourse as a legitimate research enterprise. Journalists’ spoken words have been analyzed to illuminate cultural influences (Bell, 1985; Leitner, 1980), identity politics (Leitner, 1984), and institutional dominance (Lerman, 1980), as well as conversational structure (Jucker, 1986) and interactional resistance (Clayman, 1990) in interviews. Our study suggests that interjournalistic discourse
can reveal racial ideology as well. This is important because ideology informs which stories journalists select and how they convey them. In turn, audience research may add to the limited literature on the effects of race-related news on audiences’ racial attitudes—an effect that may be significant (Domke and McCoy, 1999), especially for white viewers who have limited personal contact with African Americans (Armstrong et al., 1992). For example, white audiences may become less sympathetic to African Americans when journalists seem to avoid talking about race (as did CBS’s Harry Smith and Hannah Storm) or when they openly question the legitimacy of African American grievances (as did Fox News’ Bill O’Reilly and Deroy Murdock). Empirical research could illuminate how audiences receive and interpret such race-related interjournalistic discourse.

**Implications for cultural competence in journalism**

Although psychological and intercultural communication theories suggest that journalists may perpetuate ethnocentric ideologies, the theories also suggest how to prevent or ameliorate harm. The management component of AUM, for example, includes the notion that while anxiety and uncertainty are normal responses to the unfamiliar, they can also be managed by increasing cultural competence and intercultural communication skills (Gudykunst, 1995). Cultural competence, a product of awareness (of self and other), knowledge, and skills that enhance one’s effectiveness in a multicultural society, belongs in all academic curricula and training programs for journalists. Such education and training should encourage journalists to examine their worldview and the inevitable biases that accompany it. White journalists, in particular, should understand the impact of white privilege and institutionalized racism on language, communication, and news production. They should learn about the complexities of ethnicity, race, culture, and how social constructions of the Other systematically privilege some groups while denying and even dehumanizing others, as with the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which was fueled by radio messages that compared Tutsis to cockroaches (Rothbart and Bartlett, 2008). Journalists should be mindful of their own anxieties and work to develop comfort and ease talking about race. This can be accomplished by increasing interactions with diverse groups, both in their personal lives and through interviews and news stories with diverse cultural groups.

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