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## Transmitting Race: The Los Angeles Riot in Television News

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## TRANSMITTING RACE: The Los Angeles Riot in Television News

### Summary

The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, popularly known as the Kerner Commission, was appointed by the late President Lyndon Baines Johnson to find out what caused a series of urban riots in the summer of 1967 and what could be done to prevent them from recurring in the future. As part of its report, the Commission studied news coverage of the unrest and concluded that the so-called "white press" had not done a very good job. Of greater concern, though, was news coverage of the story of race relations in America when there wasn't a crisis and the news media's failure to bring more African Americans (and other racial minorities) into the profession, a concern echoed by news media professionals who gave testimony to the Commission.

The Kerner Commission found that television news coverage was characterized by two main frames, or themes; the riots were portrayed as a confrontation between blacks and whites, and the coverage emphasized law enforcement and thus downplayed the underlying causes such as poverty, racism and unemployment. Twenty-five years later, had television's coverage changed, or were there similar news frames evident in coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riot? This is a study of how "frames" shape the way journalists organize the facts in news reports to give them meaning. Research is based on a content analysis of television broadcasts before, during and after the riot on ten television stations. To assess news framing effects, the results of a content analysis are compared to official reports on the ethnic background of the neighborhoods hit hardest by the violence and of the people who were arrested and victimized during the Los Angeles riot. The main conclusions of this analysis are threefold.

First, the study suggests that television news coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riot emphasized the involvement and impact of the violence on blacks and Koreans, but significantly downplayed the involvement of and impact on Latinos. While Latinos comprised more than half the rioters arrested in Los Angeles and perhaps one-third of the storeowners who lost property in the violence, they were only the main focus of just more than one-tenth of the television news reports.

Second, the study found substantial differences in the nature of the coverage on the three major networks and on local news stations in Los Angeles. The network coverage contained substantial commentary on social issues while the Los Angeles stations focused almost exclusively on discrete episodes of violence and the restoration of law and order.

Third, this pattern is consistent with the findings on local and national television news portrayals of racial minorities in general. On local news, people of color were most often depicted as criminals or victims of crime, and on national news, they were most often depicted as victims of society. The study concludes by considering possible reasons for these findings, and the implications of this study for our understanding of race relations on television news.

Jurors in the state trial of four Los Angeles police officers accused of unlawfully beating Rodney King reached their not guilty verdicts at about 1:00 p.m. on April 29, 1992 in Simi Valley, California, but prosecutors requested a two-hour delay so television news crews could prepare to broadcast the verdicts live in Los Angeles.<sup>1</sup> The delay, not unusual in widely publicized cases, illustrates the enormous role television news played in the King case, and the four-day riot the Simi Valley acquittals sparked in late April and early May of 1992. The focus of this analysis of national and local television news in the Los Angeles riot is what the coverage told us about what happened and what it meant.

This is a study of the news framing of the 1992 riot in Los Angeles, asking whether or not the themes that journalists used in 1992 were the same ones they used to cover the civil disorders of 1967, or whether journalists had learned the lessons of the Kerner Commission.

### Introduction

Twenty-five years before the violence in Los Angeles, urban unrest rocked America as dozens of cities experienced minor and major riots, many of them triggered by altercations involving the police and young African American men. The cities of Newark, New Jersey and Detroit, Michigan erupted within two weeks of each

other in July of 1967, eclipsing in scope and violence the 1965 riots in Watts, a neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles. As Detroit burned, President Johnson appointed the Kerner Commission to investigate the nature, scope and causes of the unrest. Among the issues the commission studied was newspaper, radio and television news coverage of the disturbances. The Kerner Commission identified two news frames, or themes, in television news coverage of civil disturbances in 15 U.S. cities during the summer of 1967:

(1) the riots were portrayed as a confrontation between blacks and whites although almost all the deaths, injuries and property damage occurred in black neighborhoods, and;

(2) the coverage emphasized law enforcement, and, thus, downplayed underlying causes such as poverty, racism, poor education and job opportunities, antagonistic police-community relations and unequal consumer services.

Twenty-five years later, did the same frames emerge in television news coverage of the riot in Los Angeles in 1992? This study tests three key hypotheses:

(1) television news mainly portrayed the 1992 Los Angeles riot as a social confrontation between blacks and whites;

(2) the coverage emphasized law enforcement and downplayed underlying causes, and;

(3) framing of the events differed on local and national television news.

Why might we expect to find similar frames in coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riot as the Kerner Commission found in 1967? Obviously, the events were similar and television news reporters and producers still need to use frames to make sense of the facts in their reports. Race relations in America continue to focus most intensely on the relationship between blacks and whites despite the country's increasingly diverse populations. Consequently, the event that triggered the 1992 violence in Los Angeles—the not guilty verdicts in the beating of a black man by four white police officers—tuned the ears of the nation, and therefore also journalists, to the event as a symbol of black-white race relations.

Yet there also are reasons why news framing of the 1992 Los Angeles riot might be different from coverage of Newark and Detroit. The bulk of the violence in Los Angeles occurred in neighborhoods far more racially diverse than the urban areas that erupted in 1967. Almost half the residents in the areas hit hardest by the violence were Latino, and perhaps as many as one half of

the stores were owned by Korean-Americans. More than half the people arrested in Los Angeles during the violence were Latino, and, perhaps one-third of the stores destroyed were Latino-owned.<sup>2</sup> The ethnic diversity of participants and victims reflected long-term changes in the racial makeup of inner-cities across America. Like many urban areas, Los Angeles has been transformed since the late 1960s by the exodus of industries and mostly white (but also middle-class black) residents from the cities to outlying neighborhoods and suburbs, and the growth and/or arrival of other racial or ethnic minorities in the 1970s and 1980s. The result are populations that are more racially but less economically diverse than they were in the late 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, we might expect the coverage of the conflict in Los Angeles to reflect these changing demographics.

### The Theory of "Framing" Television News

To understand how television interpreted the events in Los Angeles, this study works within the theory of "framing." A news "frame" is a theme or story line that organizes the facts in a news report and gives them meaning. A journalist might refer to a frame as the story angle, news peg or hook which is determined by the facts deemed most important. For news events, such as an ongoing crisis like the one that occurred in Los Angeles, many themes will unfold as more facts are known. Framing is particularly crucial in television news where mountains of facts and visuals are condensed into narratives to tell a story in two minutes or less. As William Gamson explains, "Television news is replete with metaphors, catchphrases, and other symbolic devices that provide a shorthand way of suggesting the underlying story line..."<sup>4</sup> Frames are conveyed by the reporter in his/her script as well as by the anchor in story lead-ins and closings. Frames also are conveyed by the people interviewed for the story, or soundbites, and the visuals used to illustrate the story. For example, although poverty is rarely an explicit topic of television news, it is quite often conveyed visually in scenes showing run-down and/or abandoned buildings with boarded-up windows.<sup>5</sup> The 1992 violence in Los Angeles was ripe with the dramatic, action visuals that drive television news and has made it the dominant medium of information for the majority of Americans. Television news framing is illustrated in the following riot news report aired on the "CBS Evening News." (The italics and

material within parentheses were added for clarification and emphasis.)

**Dan Rather:** While the violence has centered on the minority communities of Los Angeles, *the fear is haunting other communities and people.* Cindy Kennard has our report about that.

**Jason Weterring (Attorney, Santa Monica):** I know it's against the law to carry a loaded weapon, so I'm not going to tell you whether or not this (is) loaded or not...

**Kennard:** Santa Monica attorney Jason Weterring is *armed and feeling the danger.* He says several of his firm's lawyers are carrying guns to work.

**Weterring:** No, I am not a vigilante or something like that. I am not going looking for trouble. I'm just trying to protect myself.

**Kennard:** *Fear and loathing* among whites is intensifying here. Many have locked themselves in or abandoned their neighborhoods, even pristine Beverly Hills.

**Unidentified (white) man #1:** *Why not loot Beverly Hills?*

**Kennard:** What *scares the daylight*s out of whites is the image of bands of *marauding black youths*, and this: Wednesday's savage beating of white trucker, Reginald Denny. (A portion of tape of African American youths attacking Denny is shown). . . .

An inevitable consequence of frames is the selective emphasis of facts, and this is especially true on television news because of the limits and constraints of the medium. Frames, by nature, elevate some facts and downplay others. Surely, people of all races in Los Angeles, as the "CBS Evening News" report clearly states in the opening, had reason to fear the violence, but the focus on white fear supported by television images of young black men brutalizing a white man creates the impression, despite the disclaimers, of black-on-white race war. This does not mean that the report did not represent legitimate news, but it illustrates the degree to which the news frames selectively reflect and legitimize social perceptions whether they are rooted in reality or not. News frames are routinized by journalistic norms and practices. Because much news emanates from public institutions, many newsmakers tend to be elected or appointed officials, skilled in "spinning" stories in

their favor. Furthermore, since journalists rely on such officials to speak for their constituencies, the news format tends to bypass people who do not vote or are not well-represented in government until they do something dramatic, such as riot, and can no longer be ignored. The mission of a news media outlet also affects coverage, and, therefore, news framing. The news media define and deliver audiences for advertisers with the news they provide. A car-jacking in Winston-Salem, N.C. might be top of the news on local newscasts but, if reported at all on national news, would more likely be presented as an example of a nationwide trend. In other words, the national news lens is wider than the local news lens. Lastly news frames are influenced by the prevailing values, assumptions and attitudes in society at large.

The frames for a given story are frequently drawn from shared cultural narratives and myths. Some stories resonate with larger cultural themes; this tunes the ears of the journalists to their symbolism.<sup>6</sup>

Because of these factors, news coverage of the same event can communicate different underlying meanings by elevating some facts and downplaying others. Thus, news frames are as important a component of news as the facts themselves. The effects of news framing were identified in a study of news coverage of the March 16, 1991 shooting of a black teenager by a Korean storeowner in two weekly newspapers in Los Angeles—one serving the black community, the other the Korean community. The storeowner, Soon Ja Du, was found guilty of manslaughter in the death of 15-year-old La Tasha Harlins and was sentenced to five years probation for the apparently accidental shooting. The coverage in the black weekly focused on long-standing black grievances with Korean storeowners, the police, and the criminal justice system, while coverage in the Korean weekly focused on Korean storeowners' long-standing problems with gangs, crime and anti-Asian bias. As a result, the researcher concluded that the incident was framed in the black weekly as a symbol of "disrespect" and "injustice" and was framed in the Korean weekly as a symbol of "crime" and "scapegoating."<sup>7</sup>

News frames, as indicated above, are a product of values and assumptions about news. An enduring value in news (as well as for most people) is, as Herbert Gans explains, "the desirability of social order."<sup>8</sup> Through selecting and reporting events, the news media help establish

and reaffirm the prevailing assumptions and values in society. This is why so much of the news emanates from institutions—Congress, city hall, the courts, police departments, schools—and so much of it focuses on conflict—the antithesis of order. The order-conflict orientation of news coupled with reliance on officials for information affects the presentation of all people in the news. Middle-age white men, for example, appear far more frequently in the news than any other group of people because they dominate the ranks of leadership in the institutions considered most newsworthy. However, the traditional definition of news has a particularly skewing effect on the presentation of racial minorities in news because of social barriers to their acceptance in the mainstream of American life. Hence, racial minorities historically have become most newsworthy when they challenge, threaten or make inroads into the status quo.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, the national television news featured African Americans overcoming racial, economic and political obstacles, marching or protesting against racism, rioting, committing crimes and being victimized by crime and other forms of social misfortune.<sup>10</sup> Although the frequency of black protesters in the news in the 1960s was clearly influenced by the extensive coverage of the civil rights movement, research on more recent news coverage found evidence of similar portrayals.<sup>11</sup> There has been less research on contemporary news portrayals of Asians, Latinos and other racial minorities in print or broadcast media. Briefly summarized, Latinos and Asians are featured in the news far less frequently than blacks but are portrayed in similarly stereotypical ways.<sup>12</sup> Therefore the key question to be investigated is how the dominant frames within local and national television news shaped our understanding of the Los Angeles riots, and whether the frames provided an accurate picture of those who rioted and were victimized by the riot.

### Methods and Data

Content analysis of television coverage was utilized to investigate these issues. Most of the television news reports analyzed by this study were about the Los Angeles riot, but general news coverage was also included to provide the broader context. The content analysis included television broadcasts every night beginning April 29, 1992, the day of the state court verdicts in the Rodney King case, and ending two weeks later on May 12. The study analyzed news

broadcasts for the period before and after the riot—specifically, March 3 to April 29, and May 12 to July 9, 1992. One news program from each week during these periods was examined, but only stories that centrally involved Asians, blacks, or Latinos were coded.<sup>13</sup> Since television news frames are evoked in narratives, soundbites and visuals, all three components of the coverage were analyzed.

Ten television stations were sampled: the three major networks (the “NBC Nightly News,” the “CBS Evening News,” and “ABC World News Tonight”); Univision, the top-rated Spanish-language news network; three stations in Los Angeles, including KABC-TV and KNBC-TV, the top-rated network affiliates and a Korean-language news program, Korean Television Enterprises or KTE-TV; and three top-rated local news programs in geographically diverse parts of the country—WCVB-TV in Boston, WXII-TV in Winston-Salem, N.C. and WDAY-TV in Fargo, N.D.-Moorhead, Minn. The Spanish and Korean news programs were included because of the pivotal roles these groups played in the event and they were only analyzed during the riot and post-riot periods.

The Los Angeles sample was limited to the 5:00 p.m. evening news programs. These stations, like five others in Los Angeles, covered the riot live, broadcasting nearly round-the-clock for the first two days of the unrest. The live coverage in Los Angeles is worthy of a study itself but such an analysis was not feasible given the resources available. Moreover, since the study is of news coverage from across the nation, the evening news programs, which combined live coverage with updates of the day’s events, provided a better basis for comparison. In all, 903 stories and 2,228 soundbites were coded. The coverage analyzed includes 621 riot news and 282 general news stories, totaling 28.5 hours. Thirty-eight of a possible 248 news programs were missing due to programming changes or unintentional mistakes while recording. However, it is statistically unlikely that these missing stories would affect the findings. To test for news framing effects, the result of the content analysis was compared with evidence of the racial background of participants from three reports on the violence: (1) “The City in Crisis: A Report by the Special Advisor to the Board of Police Commissioners on the Civil Disorders in Los Angeles”; (popularly known as the Webster Report) (2) “Latinos & The L.A. Uprising,” a Tomas Rivera Center Study conducted at Occidental College in Los Angeles, and (3) “To

Rebuild Is Not Enough: Final Report and Recommendations of the Assembly Special Committee on the Los Angeles Crisis." Evidence of "framing effects" in television news is measured as the difference between the racial background of participants, according to these reports, and the racial background of those covered by television, according to the content analysis. If, for example, 51 percent of those arrested were Latino, but 81 percent of the people shown on television rioting were black, then one could argue that by emphasizing the involvement of blacks the framing of the riot downplayed the role of Latinos in the unrest and unfairly depicted blacks.

Reporters quite often identified the racial and ethnic minorities in their stories, so in addition to visual identification, the race or ethnicity of anyone who was not white was verified in the reporters' narratives. However, Latinos, who comprise people of many races, were not identified as often in the Los Angeles riot coverage except on Spanish language television. In those cases, either the ethnicity of the persons shown was not coded or a judgment was made based on visual identification and our knowledge of the racial demographics of the areas hit hardest by the violence.

Riot actors were classified into four major categories depending on their activities. Participant rioters included those depicted beating, burning, looting, shooting and being arrested. Victim categories included those depicted as being assaulted, losing property or having their daily lives disrupted. The law enforcer category included those patrolling streets, making arrests and fighting fires. Lastly the good samaritan category includes those seen aiding in riot control, rescuing assault victims, participating in the clean-up and making appeals for calm.

### **The General Context of the Coverage: A City in Flames**

An evaluation of the television coverage can be made in light of arrest records and official reports on the riot. State court acquittals of the police officers in the videotaped beating of Rodney King triggered what a special committee of the California Legislature called the "worst multiethnic urban conflict in United States history." The riot left 53 people dead, 2,400 injured and more than \$800 million in property damages, according to the California Office of Emergency Services. Neighborhoods throughout the Los Angeles area experienced rioting, but hardest hit were Koreatown, the Pico Union

district and South Central Los Angeles.<sup>14</sup> The Webster Report stated that the first signs of trouble came within an hour of the verdicts reached by the jury in Simi Valley, a suburb of Los Angeles, culminating almost three hours later in live Los Angeles television coverage of the beating of truck driver Reginald Denny at the intersection of Florence and Normandie streets in South Central Los Angeles. The Los Angeles police department, under the direction of then-Chief Darryl Gates, had no specific plans to deal with adverse public reaction to the verdicts, and was slow to respond to the outbreak of violence. The delay proved crucial, for as dusk fell, fires began to light up the night and the violence intensified moving north and west.

The Los Angeles riot occurred against a backdrop of heightened community tensions exacerbated by rapidly changing demographics, an economic downturn, growing poverty and crime rates, and a history of police abuses in minority communities documented by the Christopher Commission, which was appointed to investigate the LAPD after King's beating. Poverty and unemployment rates in the areas hit hardest by the rioting are twice that of the city of Los Angeles as a whole and the rate of per capita income and home ownership are 50 percent lower.<sup>15</sup> The most profound shifts occurred in South and South Central Los Angeles. For example, the Latino population in historically black South Central Los Angeles more than doubled to 45 percent while the black population declined 20 percent. Koreatown is home to the largest single concentration of Koreans in Los Angeles, but 70 percent of its residents are Latino. In Pico Union, heart of the Central American immigrant community, Latinos comprise 80 percent of the residents.<sup>16</sup> The "Latinization" of the inner-cities of Los Angeles coincided with the economic success of Korean immigrant entrepreneurs, who began arriving in the late 1960s and by 1990 owned 50 percent of the small businesses in South and South Central Los Angeles. The shooting of a black teenager by a Korean storeowner two weeks after the King beating put additional pressure on storeowner-customer relations.<sup>17</sup>

The first person to die in the Los Angeles riot was an 18-year-old black man who was shot as he stood outside a business that was being looted because he had refused to join a gang. He was typical of the majority of people who lost their lives in Los Angeles. Of the 42 who died in the city of Los Angeles, most were male and under 30 years old. Half (21) were black, and almost a

third (12), Latino. Of the remaining eight, seven were white, including a 68-year-old man strangled by a supermarket produce manager in a dispute over corn husks, and one was an 18-year-old Korean-American college student shot by storeowners who mistook him for a looter when he arrived to help them protect their property. Police killed five people but more people died of random gunfire as they stood or walked down the street.<sup>18</sup>

The profile of those arrested during the riot indicates that the majority (51 percent) of the arrestees in the city of Los Angeles were Latinos, and 38 percent were African Americans. The remainder were white (9 percent) and Asian (2 percent). When the Rand Corporation released an initial analysis of the arrests on June 17, 1992, principal researcher Joan Petersilia concluded, "This wasn't a black riot so much as it was a minority riot."<sup>19</sup> Questions were raised about whether the figures reflected actual participation in the riot, the delay in the initial police response, reluctance of Latinos to flee or fear on the part of police to confront young black men in the racially charged atmosphere following the verdicts. But subsequent analyses of the police response and Latino involvement in the unrest concluded that the arrest figures, though low given the scope and duration of the riot, are consistent with the dynamics of a riot, the pattern of the violence and the racial composition of the neighborhoods most affected by the rioting.

Although the initial violent incidents immediately following the verdicts appear for the most part to have involved African American males, members of all racial groups were involved in the spreading physical assaults and looting.<sup>20</sup>

According to a *Los Angeles Times* analysis of 700 people mostly convicted of looting, more than half (60 percent) had prior felony convictions; only one-third were employed; two-thirds were high school drop-outs; two in five had lived at their addresses for a year or less, and 11 percent were homeless; and only one in 10 were affiliated with gangs. Eight out of every 10 Latino looters were foreign-born and were more likely than black or white looters to have jobs. Lastly, the majority looted within a few blocks of their homes.<sup>21</sup>

## Results and Findings

The role of television news has changed substantially in the quarter of the century

between the urban upheavals of 1967 and the violence that erupted in Los Angeles in 1992. In particular there were significant differences between Detroit and Los Angeles in the amount of coverage of the riots, and the reliance on official sources. In giving evidence to the Kerner Commission, Bill Monroe, then news director of NBC News, noted the self-imposed restrictions on what was transmitted; in 99 cases out of 100, TV stations decided against live coverage of the urban unrest of the late 1960s because they thought it might only serve to further inflame the violence. By 1992 in Los Angeles, although some stations initially delayed broadcasting live coverage of motorists being attacked until the Reginald Denny beating, the city's seven major stations broadcast nearly continuous live coverage for the first two days of the violence. This was widely watched, helping to increase household television viewing levels to a 40.3 rating average (including cable), a 9 percent increase over May 1991.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, unlike 1967, when the Kerner Commission blamed public officials for providing journalists with information that led to the reporting of stories that exaggerated the scope and character of the violence, journalists did not focus as exclusively on public officials in their news reports on Los Angeles. Indeed, most of the people interviewed in the Los Angeles coverage were either residents of the neighborhoods hit hardest by rioting, or ordinary citizens from Los Angeles or from around the country. In this sense, television news coverage of the Los Angeles riot served as a kind of nationwide vox populi on race relations illustrated by searing, horrific images that were as unprecedented as they were numerous. In Los Angeles, the journalists not only did not wait for the police but in many instances got there first. Advance planning and technology coupled with daytime rioting made it easier for television news to obtain almost instantaneous images of the violence in Los Angeles. Thus, it could be argued that these factors coupled with the absence of a Kerner Commission-like response on the part of the federal government to the Los Angeles riot, made the role of television news in shaping public opinion of the events in Los Angeles far greater than it was a quarter of a century before when urban upheavals erupted throughout the country.

## Racial Representation

How were members of different ethnic groups depicted as riot participants and victims and as

community leaders and vox populi? The first significant finding is that a "black-white" frame continued to dominate the main coverage. Blacks and whites were centrally involved in over three quarters of the stories about the Los Angeles riot. In contrast, Latinos and Koreans were the focus of about a quarter of the stories, and much of this coverage was aired on the foreign-language stations. To see how riot actors varied, people seen on camera were classified into victim and participant categories, broadly defined to encompass both the most extreme and most benign depictions of violence and victimization, ranging from motorists being assaulted in South Central Los Angeles to roller skaters being turned away from the boardwalk on Venice Beach because it had been closed by police. (See Table 1.)

*Victims:* Whites and Koreans comprised just more than half the victims in the television coverage, that is, the property owners who suffered damage, assault victims, and people whose lives were otherwise disrupted by the violence. A quarter of the victims were black, and just under a quarter were Latinos. Koreans comprised almost half the storeowners depicted in the coverage of the violence. The remainder were black (29 per cent), white, (11 per cent), and Latino (10 per cent).

*Community Leaders and Vox Populi:* More than half the local, state and national leaders (54 percent) interviewed were white; one-third (33 percent) were black; 7 percent were Asian, and 7 percent were Latino. More than three-fourths (77

percent) of the law enforcement officials who were interviewed were white; 18 percent were black; 3 percent were Latino, and 2 percent were Asian. In terms of vox populi interviews with the public, African Americans comprised 47 percent of the people interviewed in Los Angeles (excluding those who lived in the areas hit hardest by the rioting) and throughout the country. People were mainly asked about their opinions of the not-guilty verdicts in the King beating and their reaction to the violence in Los Angeles. Among interviewees, whites were 41 percent; Latinos, 8 percent and Asians, 4 percent. However, more than three-quarters (77 percent) of the riot-area residents interviewed were black; 17 percent were Latino, and the remainder were Asians (4 percent) and whites (2 percent).

*Rioters:* Most significantly, almost half (48 percent) the people shown rioting were black; 31 percent were Latino; 12 percent were Asian, and 9 percent were white. Almost all of the most violent rioters on television news, such as those shown assaulting people and burning property, were African Americans, and blacks comprised the majority of people shown looting.

### The Content of News Stories

Beyond the basic statistics, we need to see how the riots were understood and interpreted. The power of television lies in its ability to literally bring the news to life. This coupled with the event-oriented nature of news means a premium is placed on visuals that convey action

Table 1: Primary Riot Actors

	Whites	Blacks	Latinos	Asians	Total%	N.
Resident Population	7	36	49	7	100	
LAPD Arrests	9	38	51	2	100	
<b>On-Camera Appearances</b>						
Participants	9	48	31	12	100	153
Victims	31	24	21	24	100	91
Good samaritans	20	44	20	15	100	117
Law enforcers	54	32	8	6	100	135
<b>Soundbites</b>						
Leaders	54	33	7	7	100	344
Citizens	41	47	8	4	100	243
Residents	2	77	17	4	100	167
Store owners	11	29	10	49	100	106
Law enforcement	77	18	3	2	100	182

Notes: Resident Population—1992 US Census Bureau Figures for Areas Hit Hardest by the Riot; LAPD arrests April 29 - May 4, 1992. See text for definitions of other categories.



and drama. In Los Angeles, human drama and modern technology met in a tragic, action-packed event that was tailor-made for television. But the differences in circumstances, technology and professional sensibilities that guided some television news managers in 1967 to err on the side of caution yielded coverage of the Los Angeles riot that contained far more graphic images than were possible 25 years before. In 1967 much of the local news media in Detroit delayed reporting the unrest at the request of local authorities. In 1992, the intense interest in the four police officers' trial in the videotaped beating of Rodney King meant the lenses of the television news cameras from around the nation and the world were not only already trained on Los Angeles but, in some instances, better positioned to react to the violence than the police. Indeed in Los Angeles, a reporter for a private company that provided "helicopter reporting" for several stations had plotted the city for possible trouble spots, before the Simi Valley verdicts, including the intersection of Florence and Normandie streets where trucker Reginald Denny was beaten. Consequently, after the verdicts were read, he said, "We were airborne with minutes, looking for possible insurrection," and thus captured the first live images of the Denny beating while the police gathered several blocks away waiting for orders to act.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, unlike the late 1960s, the unrest in Los Angeles did not subside during daylight hours, which made it easier for television crews to obtain footage of people engaged in looting and other riot activities without having to signal their presence by turning on their camera lights.

Taking all of the news programs in our sample together, we find that slightly more scenes of actual rioting were shown than scenes of law enforcement officials trying to contain it, especially on network news programs. Strikingly, the opposite was true in 1967. One-third of the dramatic visuals (33 percent) featured in the Los Angeles coverage showed scenes of rioting; 30 percent showed riot containment activities, such as police making arrests, National Guard or other military personnel patrolling the streets or firefighters battling blazes (this category also includes scenes of citizens engaged in such activities or aiding authorities); 12 percent showed the beating of trucker Reginald Denny; 11 percent showed protests and rallies in Los Angeles and around the country, mostly directed at the not-guilty verdicts in the Rodney King beating trial; 9 percent consisted of the videotaped beating of King. The remainder featured the

King press conference, where he made his famous plea, "Can't we all get along?" (2.5 percent) or Korean storeowners firing semi-automatic weapons at would-be intruders not shown on camera (2.5 percent).

### **The Explanatory Framework: Causes and Consequences**

Most of the stories in the combined network and local sample (61 percent) focused on the riot or reaction to the violence and the not-guilty verdicts in the King beating. Most of the reaction stories (43 percent), as noted above, featured ordinary citizens, but 20 percent focused on political leaders, especially the presidential candidates who were still active in the campaign at the time—Bill Clinton, Ross Perot, Jerry Brown, Patrick Buchanan and former President George Bush. The remaining stories focused on the King case (9 percent), or feature and human interest stories (10 percent) on issues such as poverty, racism and discrimination.

The relative paucity of feature stories did not mean that television news did not report why the violence occurred. Indeed, causal themes could be identified in more than half (56 percent) the stories. Many causes, conveyed and/or implied by anchors, reporters and the people they interviewed, were expressed in catchwords and phrases uttered in a single sentence, and many stories contained more than one cause. For example, "ABC World News Tonight" anchor Peter Jennings introduced the network's lead story about the riot as follows:

Good evening. This has been a day on which people all over the country have been using words and phrases such as outrage, powerlessness, wanton violence and hopelessness, anger, frustration, betrayal and racism.<sup>24</sup>

Through the repetition of words and phrases, such as those spoken by Jennings, several causal frames, or themes, emerged in television news coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riot. Of the causal themes identified, character issues such as lawlessness and immorality were mentioned the most (36 percent). Issues of individual responsibility were followed by anger over the acquittals in the King beating (18 percent); the slowness of the police response (16 percent); public policy issues (16 percent), defined as the inadequacy and/or failure of current and past social programs; leadership failure (12 percent),

and the animosity of blacks toward Korean storeowners (4 percent).

Another way to look at causes is to ask who or what was seen as primarily responsible for the Los Angeles riot? The rioters, society, police, jurors in the King case, political leaders? The findings here suggest that although blame was spread around, the dominant message of the combined network and local television news sample was that most of the responsibility lay with the rioters because they were lawless, immoral, and greedy people. When the causal theme was leadership failure, the leader mentioned most often was former President George Bush, followed by former Los Angeles police chief Darryl Gates and former Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley. One might argue that because these leaders represent the public, then their failure might be viewed as a failure of society as well, but with the exception of Bush, most of the criticism focused on their individual behavior or performance. Typical are the following two excerpts taken from a report by CBS News correspondent Bill Lagattuta:

And for much of the night, LA's police force seemed unable to catch up. Whether they deliberately stood back or were caught off guard was the question dogging Chief Darryl Gates wherever he went today. Not everyone bought his explanation...LA's mayor, Tom Bradley helped stoke the anger over the verdicts with this fiery speech at a local church...<sup>25</sup>

As the Jennings introduction illustrated, network and local television news mentioned a plethora of social issues in framing responsibility for the unrest. The issues mentioned most frequently was racism, crime (18 percent each) and loss of faith in the courts (17 percent). Police brutality and inner-city problems comprised 18 percent of the issues mentioned in the coverage, followed by unemployment (8 percent) and poverty (5 percent). Other issues included education and housing (6 percent); health care, welfare and gangs (6 percent); and family dissolution and immigration (2 percent).

### Consequences of Violence

The consequences of the riot were expressed most frequently in terms of injuries, deaths and property damage (46 percent), but because of the presidential campaign there also was coverage speculating on its impact on the campaign and on politics and public policy. The consensus was

the riot would hurt Bush, but help Clinton, who as the leading presidential challenger and the candidate with the greatest support in the black community, received far more coverage than the other presidential candidates. The impact on race relations also was discussed as a consequence of the violence (22 percent), and there was a consensus that the Los Angeles riot would hurt race relations, and demonstrated how divided blacks and whites remained in America.

### Network News and Local News: Different Stations, Different Frames

Most importantly, there were significant differences in the coverage aired on the networks and on the Los Angeles news programs included in this study. Networks were more likely to use the black/white frame than local TV, which presented a more diverse population. Network television news was also more likely to concentrate on underlying causes of the riots than local TV which concentrated on the lawlessness theme. Blacks and whites were portrayed more frequently in national news programs than in the coverage aired on the Los Angeles stations, and, not surprisingly, on the Spanish-language and Korean-language stations. Blacks and whites were the central focus of almost 96 percent of the network coverage compared with 80 percent of the coverage on the Los Angeles stations. Conversely, Latinos and Koreans were the central focus of 4 percent of the stories aired on the networks and 18 percent of the stories aired on the Los Angeles stations.

The Spanish- and Korean-language news programs aired the greatest percentage of stories focused on the involvement and impact of the violence on the Latino and Korean communities in Los Angeles. The differences in the representation of ethnic groups also was reflected in rioter portrayals. Almost 60 percent of the rioters shown in the network coverage were black compared with just under 50 percent in the Los Angeles coverage. Latinos comprised 24 percent of the rioters shown on the networks but 33 percent on the stations in Los Angeles.

The framing of responsibility for the riot also differed. Character issues—e.g. lawlessness, immorality—were mentioned far more frequently in the Los Angeles coverage than in the network coverage. Conversely, the national news mentioned public policy issues far more frequently than the Los Angeles stations did. The coverage in Los Angeles also contained more footage of the violence and efforts to quell it

than the network coverage did. Scenes of rioting and the restoration of order comprised 72 percent of the dramatic visuals shown on the Los Angeles stations compared with 50 percent on the networks. The Los Angeles coverage featured more footage of order being restored (42 percent) than the networks did (30 percent).

The other significant difference in the visual coverage involved George Holliday's infamous videotape of the King beating. The videotape comprised 14 percent of the dramatic visuals in the network coverage compared with two percent of the dramatic visuals in the Los Angeles coverage. This was because the Los Angeles stations, at the request of the police, stopped airing the King beating tape as the violence worsened.<sup>26</sup>

### General News Findings

There was a sharp increase in coverage of minorities on television news after the riot. Half the general news stories about Asians, blacks or Latinos in the sample from March 3 to July 9 aired in the two-week period following the end of the violence in Los Angeles. Blacks were portrayed in 63 percent of the general news coverage of people of color in the combined sample; Latinos, 25 percent; Asians, 9 percent, and Native Americans and other minorities, 4 percent. Minorities were depicted most frequently as criminals, or victims of crime and other social and natural misfortunes, such as discrimination, bad social programs, fires and diseases. More than half (60 percent) of the general news coverage of Asians, blacks, Latinos and other racial minorities depicted them in crime or victimization coverage. Conversely, only 12 percent of coverage depicted people of color in feature stories about everyday life.

The pattern of coverage of minority groups on network and local Los Angeles news was very similar, with differences ranging from 3 to 10 percent. Coverage of minorities by the other local stations in our sample (Boston, Winston-Salem, and Fargo) reflected the ethnic composition of the local population (e.g. 97 percent of the minorities were black in Winston-Salem, but no blacks were shown in Fargo). Racial minorities were most frequently depicted in network news as victims of social misfortunes and natural disasters and in local news as criminals or victims of crime. Not surprisingly, given the prevalence of crime coverage, the social problem mentioned most frequently in the combined sample coverage was crime. Unemployment and

economy was second, followed by racism and discrimination and police brutality, partly a result of the federal investigation of the King case but also the result of cases in other parts of the country that were underway prior to the unrest in Los Angeles. The social issues mentioned in the general news coverage paralleled many of the issues mentioned in riot coverage, especially poverty, police brutality, joblessness and inner-city problems as central newsworthy issues. Network and local coverage differed significantly on crime and victim stories, however. Networks focused mostly on members of minority groups as victims rather than criminals (53 percent of coverage compared to 18 percent) while the Los Angeles stations reversed the emphasis with 29 percent crime stories and 19 percent victim stories. Clearly in this aspect of general news, the network and local stations present very different pictures of minority groups.

### Conclusions

On the first question we asked, the overall conclusion from this study is that both local and network television news portrayed the 1992 Los Angeles riot similarly to the way they portrayed the riots of 1967 — as a black-white conflict triggered by the state court acquittals in the Rodney King beating and fueled by lawlessness. Although the coverage also depicted the tensions between Korean storeowners and the black community, black-Korean conflict was a secondary story line in the coverage and the involvement and impact of the violence on Latinos was largely overlooked. The "black riot" frame is supported by the visual depictions of participants and victims and the ethnic breakdown of riot-area residents and storeowners interviewed. Perhaps most significant was the ethnic composition of the ordinary people interviewed in Los Angeles and elsewhere who represented a Greek chorus, of sorts, reflecting on the larger meaning of the violence for society as a whole. Because most of them (88 percent) were black or white, by their presence and their words, they invariably placed the events within the context of black-white race relations. The network coverage, in particular, focused on African Americans. Local coverage presented equal numbers of whites and blacks centrally involved in the riot news, while the networks showed more blacks than whites. The networks depicted twice as many blacks as Latinos participating in the riots, while the gap was much narrower on the local

stations in Los Angeles (half black, one-third Latinos). The diversity of the population was much more apparent on local news in Los Angeles than on the national news.

On the second question deriving from the Kerner Commission findings, did television news portray the riot primarily as lawlessness and police action, the answer differs on network and local news. The local Los Angeles stations portrayed the causes of the riot in terms of the character of the participants. More than eighty percent of the coverage attributed blame centered on lawlessness. Network television news, however, was more varied, although somewhat more weight was given to lawlessness than to underlying public policy issues (60 percent compared to 40 percent). The local and network coverage of the riots paralleled their general news coverage. Where crime was the dominant theme in local news coverage, network news was far more likely to present members of minority groups as victims of natural and social disasters. While the network coverage of minorities may not be uplifting, it appears more sympathetic to the social and economic concerns of people of color than local news. Possibly, the overwhelming dominance of the crime/action news on local television drives out the consideration of social and policy issues. Therefore, it appears that on the second point of the Kerner Commission Report, the explanations for the riots, there is considerable improvement, but it lies primarily with the network coverage. It is curious that the networks did not show a corresponding change in the racial confrontation framing of the riot.

### **The Persistence of the Black/White Frame**

What is the significance of the persistence of the black/white frame in riot coverage? After all, blacks and whites were major players in the riot and many of those arrested had criminal records so clearly lawlessness was a factor. Are we then justified in saying that television told it like it was? We are not. It may be somewhat comforting to know the television news frames did not come out of thin air, but we need a finer measure than the fact the riot included two qualities which most characterized their coverage.

Two yardsticks by which we can assess the effects of framing on news coverage are objectivity and fairness. In 1947, the Hutchins Commission, popularly known as the Commission on Freedom of the Press, stressed the importance of a fair, impartial press to enlighten the public and make it capable of self-government.<sup>27</sup> Curtis

MacDougall's *Interpretive Reporting*, a classic textbook taught at many journalism schools, stresses the importance of journalists guarding against their "prejudices and stereotyped attitudes which would bias perceptions of human affairs."<sup>28</sup> And in 1987, the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, clearly spelled out this standard:

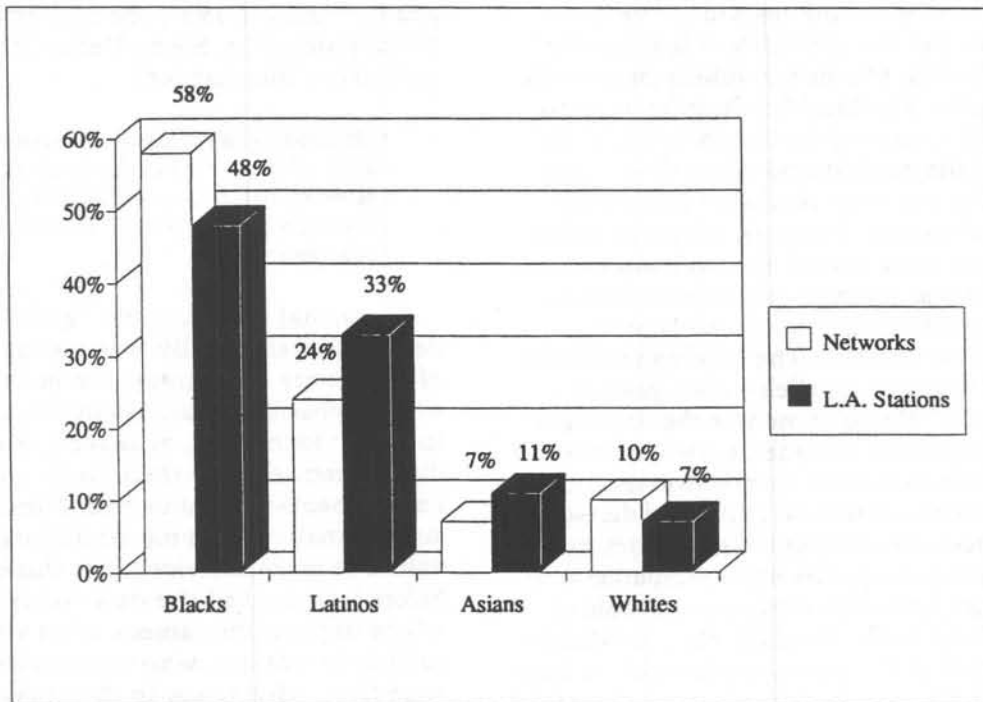
Objectivity in reporting the news is another goal, which serves as the mark of an experienced professional. It is a standard of performance toward which we strive. We honor those who achieve it.<sup>29</sup>

We should note the term "goal" in this declaration, since fully conforming to standards of objectivity and fairness can be difficult and even impossible. Truth is elusive, and it is futile to expect journalists, or anyone, to entirely divest themselves of their biases and somehow render themselves value free. Moreover, television journalists use professional and personal values to make decisions that shape the news before it is aired all the time—they must decide where to point the camera, what visuals to include or edit out, who to interview for a soundbite, what to say in their narrations. Nonetheless, approximations to objectivity and fairness can be made and this study operationalizes such a standard by asking, "How well did the coverage reflect social reality?" We apply this to the two central frames of the television coverage of the Los Angeles riot: who was shown rioting and why they were rioting.

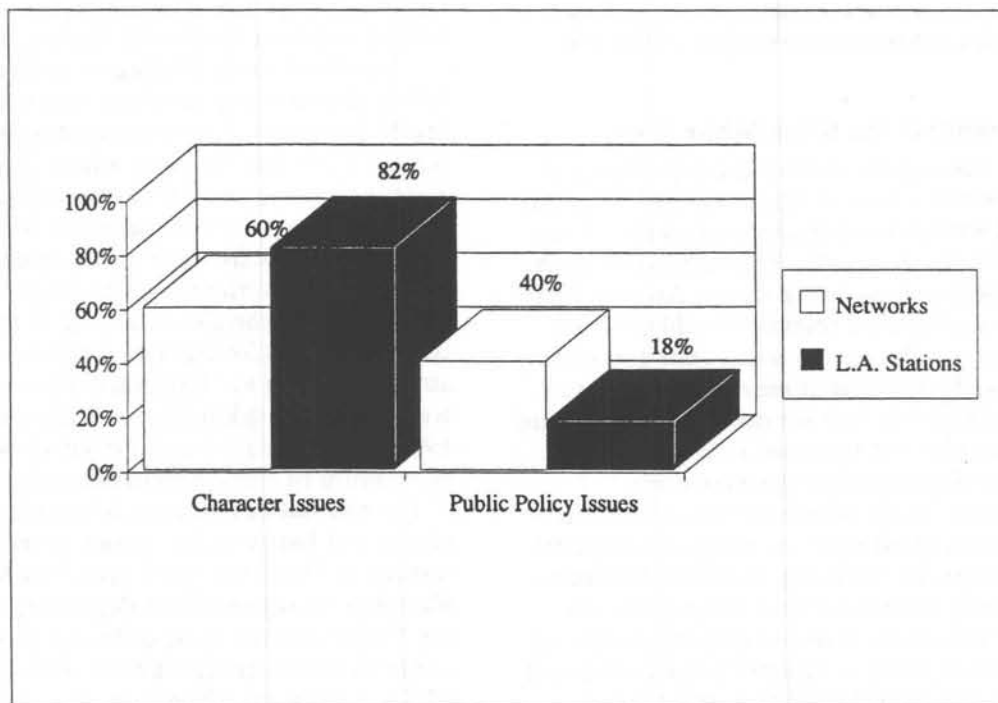
One of our main findings was the dominance of the theme of black/white race relations. As we recall, for every 10 television stories, blacks and whites were seen in eight while Latinos and Koreans were in two. Did this reflect social reality? To answer this question we must define reality, and as a first cut at the question, we initially viewed the racial makeup of the areas hardest hit by the riot. Looking at the populations of South Central Los Angeles, Pico Union and Koreatown in "Latinos & the L.A. Uprising," we see, among other things, that according to the 1990 census Latinos comprised 49 percent of the population in these neighborhoods.

But television coverage is not like a census report. For better or for worse, journalists are trained to "look for the drama," as Melvin Mencher writes in *News Reporting and Writing*,<sup>30</sup> and because most ordinary people are rarely in such situations they tend to get little media coverage.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, the news media's

**Graph A**  
**Participants - Total**  
**Networks and L.A. Stations Only**



**Graph B**  
**Selected Causal Themes**



"reality" should be expected to include people involved in the riot far more than the vast, vast majority of people who did not riot. Because the news media focus on unusual and extremist acts,<sup>32</sup> we should properly judge them by how they reflected these acts during the 1992 Los Angeles riot—or, in other words, who was shown engaged in protests or illegal activities such as looting and physical assaults.

One way to measure the presentation of such acts are arrest figures. According to the Webster report, Latinos comprised 51 percent of those arrested by Los Angeles police during the riot; blacks, 38 percent; whites, nine percent and Asians, two percent. Conversely, our content analysis shows 48 percent of the Los Angeles rioters shown on television were black; 31 percent were Latino; 12 percent were Asian, and nine percent were white. Since most local stations outside of Los Angeles did not devote much coverage to the riots, most people across the country formed their impressions of the event from national news programs. On the networks, blacks comprised 58 percent of the rioters shown; Latinos, 24 percent; whites, 10 percent, and Asians, seven percent. (See Graph A, page 12.)

The search for "drama" clearly affected the findings. Because of the premium placed on action visuals and the advance planning and technological abilities of television news crews to react quickly to the initial outbreaks of violence, dramatic images of the assaults by young black men on white, Latino and Asian motorists at the intersection of Florence and Normandie streets and of the confrontation between police and demonstrators, including many young whites and Asians, in downtown Los Angeles on the first night of rioting were shown repeatedly throughout the coverage. Although these images are consistent with the norms and practices of television news, they also clearly illustrate that on television seeing should not always be believing.

So, in summary, we can conclude that the portrayals of the rioters in television news combined with the dominant theme of black/white race relations in the coverage failed to fully reflect reality.

### **Framing the Blame**

Our findings suggest the most prominent cause presented in television news was lawlessness. Social issues such as unemployment, education, poverty, discrimination and immigra-

tion were far less frequently presented; in the cases in which they were, it was more on national news than local news in Los Angeles. According to *Los Angeles Times* analysis of 700 looting cases, more than half those arrested had been previously convicted of crimes, which suggests criminality was a factor in the riot. However, the same analysis also found that most of those arrested also were high school dropouts, unemployed and rootless, and of the Latinos, most were foreign-born and one-fourth had been in the country for two years or less. Of course, many, many people with similar backgrounds did not loot during the riot, but, at the very least, it is possible that a correlation between the two motivations exist (that is, underlying social issues as well as individual behavior contribute to criminality). Secondly, motivations are likely to change from context to context (Reginald Denny's attackers, who, as *U.S. News & World Report* wrote, were neither "especially notorious gang members or violent criminals," may have been differently motivated than those who, say, stole groceries and Pampers.<sup>33</sup>)

We might expect then that journalistic standards of objectivity and fairness would dictate coverage of both the character and social issues that may have contributed to the violence in Los Angeles. Briefly summarized, these standards stress the importance of a fair, impartial press to enlighten the public and make it capable of self-governance and the importance of journalists guarding against their prejudices and stereotyped attitudes which would bias perceptions of human affairs. However, for every eight stories on the local Los Angeles stations that mentioned lawlessness, two mentioned social issues. In contrast, the ratio on the networks was 6 to 4. These findings suggest the presentation of causal themes in network news coverage was far more consistent with the goal of fair, objective journalism as defined by the profession than was local news coverage in Los Angeles. Having criticized the Los Angeles stations for their predominance of lawless causal themes, it is important to remember that their acts were ones of omission, not commission. The difference in local and network framing is illustrated by the following examples, which though extreme, exemplify the range in explanations offered by anchors and reporters.

KNBC-TV anchor John Beard, caught up in the emotion of the moment, yelled on the air as a telecopter crew filmed the beating of truck driver, Reginald Denny: "We can tape this thug and get him thrown behind bars, where he

belongs."<sup>34</sup> In another context, "CBS Evening News" anchor Dan Rather pointed to underlying social issues as the cause of the rioting. "In almost every situation, the spark that ignited the violence was conflict between mostly white police and black men. But that was the surface cause. The roots of the problem were poverty and exploitation and unemployment and lack of opportunity and racism."<sup>35</sup> In both examples, the anchor explicitly mentions the riot's cause, whether it be the rioters or a matter of public policy. The visuals support his words. But the vast majority of the images of the riot were not accompanied by narratives about causal themes, but by narratives that described a series of discrete episodes of violence. The crucial point is that these images are value-laden. Although factual and truthful, visuals of people being assaulted and stores being looted and burned are anything but neutral—they send clear messages of lawlessness. Indeed, visuals that elicit negative emotions carry potent messages that research shows viewers more readily remember any information in the narrations accompanying them.<sup>36</sup>

This means the frames identified in this study are rooted in the construction of the stories, or, in other words, where the camera was pointed and who was interviewed. The point is a subtle one because images may not seem to have values attached to them, but they do and an absence of narrative context renders them neither neutral nor fair. Such an absence contributed to the dominance of individual responsibility—the lawless immorality of the rioters—for the violence that followed the acquittals in the Rodney King beating in television news coverage of the Los Angeles riot. To repeat, lawlessness contributed to the violence in Los Angeles, but in presenting this issue as the dominant cause of the riot, television news, particularly local coverage, gave short shrift to the plethora of social issues underscored by the violence.

### Explaining the Frames

Perhaps the most striking finding in our study regards the reporting on the involvement and impact of the violence on Latinos, who were seen in the coverage but rarely noted except in passing references. As we recall, Latinos comprised the majority of people arrested for rioting, almost half the residents in the areas hit hardest by the violence, and perhaps as many as one-third of the storeowners whose property was damaged. Given these facts, the finding seems especially curious.

Obviously, one cannot understate the challenge and peril journalists faced covering a violent, multi-ethnic conflict that occurred over a large geographic area. On the other hand, journalists did have unlimited access to the riot areas, unlike the late 1960s, and were, in some cases, on the scene before the police. So why was there so little reporting on Latinos?

We can only speculate because we did not interview the journalists whose work is examined in this study, but based on what we know about news framing, the norms and practices of journalism and the event itself, some possible explanations spring to mind.

As we recall, news frames are influenced by journalism norms and practices and the prevailing values, assumptions and attitudes in society at large. The latter influence is particularly salient when discussion turns to the role race plays in American life. Political scientist Andrew Hacker, in his book, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile and Unequal*, contends that Americans of Asian and Latino descent, who comprise the fastest growing racial groups, "prefer to emphasize their cultural and national identities rather than traits associated with race" but that "the same cannot be said for the rest of the nation, which remains either black or white."<sup>37</sup> Whether or not one agrees with Hacker, an inevitable consequence of the legacy of slavery has been that the story of race in America remains largely told in terms of blacks and whites. Moreover, contemporary public opinion surveys suggest that African Americans, who continue to comprise the nation's largest racial minority group, continue to be perceived as among the least desirable and/or most discriminated against racial/ethnic group in American society.<sup>38</sup> This larger cultural narrative on race, fueled by history, tunes the ears of journalists to its significance. Thus, it is echoed in coverage of people of color.

For example, our findings on "non-riot" coverage showed that even in Los Angeles, where Latinos comprise the largest racial minority group, most news reports involving people of color depicted blacks. Similarly, a 1990 ethnic content analysis of news coverage in San Francisco media found that for every five stories depicting blacks, the smallest racial minority group in the city, there was one depicting Asian-Americans, who comprise the largest minority group.<sup>39</sup> These findings are inevitable when we recall sociologist Gans' definition of news, its impact on the representation of *all kinds of*

people and on people of color, in particular. To summarize, through selecting and reporting on events while ignoring others, the news media either reinforce or challenge the social order. Middle-aged white men, who dominate the ranks of institutional leadership, are far more likely to appear in the news than any other group because so much news emanates from institutions empowered to establish and preserve social order. News focuses on challenges to that order (that is conflict). Conversely, groups who are not as well-represented in the halls of power, such as racial minorities, tend to become most newsworthy when challenging, threatening or making inroads to the status quo. Therefore, mainstream news media might be expected to view the plight of black people, who comprise the largest, most visible racial minority and possess a long, comparatively well-documented legacy of organized, mass civil rights movements, as more newsworthy than those of other racial minorities.

The event that triggered the violence in Los Angeles—the beating of black motorist Rodney King by four white police officers—was viewed, not only in this country but around the world, as a symbol of the persistence of white-on-black racism in America. It only made sense that television news would train its cameras on African Americans in South Central Los Angeles, where there had been news reports on a possible adverse reaction to the King case verdicts prior to the violence. The decision proved prophetic for, as the Webster report concluded, the first acts of violence, including the Denny beating, involved African Americans. Moreover, these acts, specifically the Denny beating, were captured by professional and amateur video operators as they unfolded, providing dramatic visuals essential to storytelling in television news that were aired repeatedly in the coverage even as the violence spread and the players shifted to encompass diverse segments of the population.

Inherent in the sound news judgment that led to widespread attention on the King case was the salience of black-white race relations in America. The amateur videotape of King's beating made visible a recurring topic of controversy in minority communities as well as, perhaps, a recurring topic of racial news—police brutality. We found, for example, in our sample of stories not related to the riot or the King case that police brutality was mentioned in one in every 10 reports portraying people of color. This is a significant finding because in 1967 the

Kerner study found virtually no reporting on police conduct in black communities although many of those upheavals occurred after incidents involving police and young black men.

Also inherent in the presentation of the King case is the construction of conflict in the news. News, as we discussed earlier, thrives on conflict—the antithesis of order. The norms and practices of journalism coupled with the need to simplify means conflict is largely presented as a two-sided affair. Like any court case, the antagonists in the King case were clearly defined. On one side was King, who is black, and, on the other were the police officers, who are white. He became a symbol of the black community and the officers symbolized white authority.

The problem with the “black-and-white” framing of the King case was not that it was wrong, but that the story line was too narrow for reporting on the multi-ethnic nature of the violence that followed the verdicts, and perhaps even the King case itself. For example, the Christopher report on the Los Angeles Police Department, conducted and completed before the state court verdicts in the King case, made clear that instances of police misconduct were as pervasive in L.A.'s Latino communities as in its black communities. So it could be argued that television news also might have trained its cameras on Latinos for their reaction to the verdicts. Indeed, we found that some television news stations in Los Angeles did report on reaction to the verdicts in East Los Angeles, the historic heart of Los Angeles' Mexican American community and home base of the city's most well-known and prominent Latino elected leaders. Obviously, the Christopher report was bigger news in Los Angeles than around the country so perhaps we should not chastise the national media (which in addition to being, perhaps, less well-informed of local affairs did not have the personnel that local stations had to fan across the city) for their apparent failure to recognize the possible significance of the King case in Latino communities. In either case, neither coverage strategy was effective for comparatively little violence occurred in East Los Angeles. Rather it occurred in heavily Latino neighborhoods in South and South Central Los Angeles, including Pico Union, the heart of the city's Central American community.

That television news did briefly turn its cameras on East Los Angeles is an illustration of the traditional strategy used to report on traditional, racially segregated minority communities, which rarely are subjects of continuing, or



beat, coverage in television news. The strategy involves going into these areas when news arises and interviewing, depending on the story, ordinary citizens, officials (elected or appointed), community leaders, well-known public figures, or, if necessary, outside experts. Elected officials and community leaders play a key role in defining news because it is to them that journalists turn most often for news but it might be particularly problematic when covering a community as diverse in nationality and language skills, geographically dispersed, and underrepresented in the halls of established power as Latinos are in Los Angeles. For example, although Latinos, including many from Central America, comprise 49 percent of the population in the areas hit hardest by the Los Angeles riot, they represent less than 5 percent of the registered voters in those areas largely because they are too young to vote, according to the report, "Latinos & the L.A. Uprising."<sup>40</sup> Of the three city council representatives in these areas at the time of the riot, two were black and one was Latino.

The media strategy council member Mike Hernandez, whose district includes Pico Union, used to appeal for calm after the violence began is illuminating. His first reaction was to talk to Spanish-language media "because I know there are 500,000 Latinos whose *hermana lingua* is Spanish in the L.A. area and I knew that we had no other vehicle by which to communicate with

that population base." As the violence intensified, he decided to approach English-language stations, and he said at one station the reporter assigned to interview him did not know he was a member of the Los Angeles City Council.<sup>41</sup>

None of these possible explanations excuse the relative absence of Latino perspectives in television news coverage of the 1992 Los Angeles riot. But they do suggest that the framing of the event was influenced by the norms and practices of journalism as well as the King case, which was viewed as a symbol of black-white race relations. It seems possible, then, that the "Latino angle" was not more fully explored in the coverage either because (1) it did not fit into the dominant, racial story line in the coverage, and, therefore, journalists did not recognize its significance, and/or (2) the journalists lacked sufficient reporting strategies and news sources to find ways to report on it except in passing references.

Lastly, it should be said that news reports on Latinos did emerge in the weeks after the riot ended and a year later when the federal court verdicts in the King case were rendered. Still, given that the nation's attention was most riveted on Los Angeles during the violence, perhaps the most lasting impression was the one made before the looting, burning, beating and shooting stopped.

## Endnotes

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Pacific Americans published annually by the Asian American Journalists Association, San Francisco, CA, p. 107.

13. Central involvement means a member (or members) of a certain racial and/or ethnic group was seen on camera in at least three medium to close-up shots and spoke on camera at least twice. This code category was devised by Northwestern University Professor Robert Entman for use in his study, "Blacks in the News: Television, Modern Racism and Cultural Change," *Journalism Quarterly*, Vol. 69, No. 2, Summer, 1992, pp. 1-21.

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36. Newhagen, John, "Images of Fear," *Washington Journalism Review*, Vol. 14, No. 6, July-August 1992, p. 27.

37. Hacker, Andrew, *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1992), p. 6.

38. For a discussion of shifting attitudes toward dozens of U.S. ethnic/racial groups over a 25-year period, see "What Do Americans Think about Jews?" (New York: The American Jewish Committee, Institute of Human Relations, 1991).

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40. See "Latinos & the L.A. Uprising" for a profile of the Latino electorate in areas hit hardest by the violence as well as in Los Angeles County as a whole.

41. Hernandez's comments are taken from a transcript of the National Association of Latino Elected Officials Conference Session on "Urban Violence in Latino Communities: The Case of Los Angeles" that was held in Santa Fe, New Mexico on June 19, 1992.