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ABSTRACT

Students from Nashville, Tennessee's four black higher educational institutions organized and carried out sit-ins at lunch counters of downtown department stores beginning February 1, 1960. They wanted the lunch counters opened to customers of all races. The students used press coverage to convey the nonviolent character of their movement. Because their success depended on public support, it was necessary to use the media to convey both their message--human justice and equality--and their nonviolent tactics. Because civil rights demonstrations were perceived as being associated with violence, it was important for the public to see that the students were its victims rather than its perpetrators. The morality play of the sit-ins was made-to-order for the media. The sympathetic treatment received by the students was not due to an inherently sympathetic, white-dominated media. It followed a subtle, but predictable tendency in news media coverage to make events follow a predictable "storyline," complete with heroes, villains, starring and supporting actors, all resulting in a "good conquers evil" conclusion. Media coverage played a critical role for the Nashville students. Their commitment to nonviolence made their story that much more appealing to a white press. (Eighteen references are attached.) (RS)

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The Media's Role in a Nonviolent Movement: The Nashville Student Movement

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The Media's Role in a Nonviolent Movement:
The Nashville Student Movement

by David E. Sumner

"One of the things we did was we took time to talk to people in the media. We thought the media played a very important role; a necessary role," said Bernard Lafayette in recalling the success of the 1960 Nashville sit-ins in which he participated (Lafayette, telephone interview, March 20, 1989).

The Nashville sit-ins began on Feb. 1, 1960, and ended on May 10 when the city's downtown department stores quietly opened their lunch counters to customers of all races. Students from Nashville's four black educational institutions—Fisk University, Tennessee A & I University (now Tennessee State), the American Baptist Seminary, and Meharry Medical College—organized and carried them out. After the first sit-in on Feb. 13, several more were conducted before student negotiators reached an agreement with merchants to begin integrating the lunch counters on May 10. (Sumner, 1988)

Any discussion of the 1960 Southern student sit-in movement usually starts with the Greensboro sit-ins, which were the first to occur on Feb. 1. These began when four freshmen from North Carolina A & T College walked into a Woolworth's lunch counter and ordered a cup of coffee. After the waitress refused to serve them, they remained until the store closed half hour later.

Within two weeks after Greensboro, the sit-ins spread to Durham, Winston-Salem, Charlotte, Raleigh, Fayetteville and Elizabeth City, N.C.; Norfolk and Portsmouth, Virginia; Rock Hill, S.C.; Tallahassee, Fla.; and Nashville, Tenn. By summer's end, sit-ins had occurred in 104 communities in 15 states. By the year's end, students had successfully integrated the lunch counters in 40 of these communities. (Oppenheimer, 1963)

The issue was a simple one: department stores that welcomed blacks to purchase merchandise but refused to serve them food at their lunch counters. The lunch counter, one student said, was a symbol that "We aren't having it anymore. . . . We're trying to eradicate the whole stigma of being inferior. And another student said, "The sit-ins were a means of expressing something that had been in our hearts for a long time." (Doyle, 1985)

Because they were the first to begin, the Greensboro sit-ins have been documented in two books and other articles. While scholars haven't ignored Nashville or other sit-ins, they have failed to note their scope, connection, and organizational base, as Aldon Morris (1984) points out. While the Greensboro sit-ins were largely spontaneous in their origin, Nashville students had been participating in workshops on nonviolence for two years and had conducted test sit-ins in downtown Nashville in November 1959.

This article will demonstrate how the students used press coverage to convey the nonviolent character of their movement. Because their success depended upon public support, it was necessary to use the media to convey both their message—human justice and equality—and their nonviolent tactics. Because civil rights demonstrations were perceived as being associated with violence, they felt it was important for the public to see that the students were its victims rather than its perpetrators.

In so doing, this article will also point out that this morality play was made-to-order for the media. The sympathetic treatment received by the students was not due to an inherently sympathetic, white-dominated media. It followed a subtle, but predictable tendency in news media coverage to make events follow a predictable "storyline," complete with heroes, villains, starring and supporting actors, all resulting in a "good conquers evil" conclusion.

Literature Review

Scholarly inquiry into media coverage of the civil rights movement has been sporadic and inconclusive. In a 1986 review of the literature, Martindale (1986) summarized the findings of the past thirty years by saying that, "Only a few empirical studies of newspaper coverage of blacks in the years between 1950 and 1970 have been done, and each of them illustrates some inadequacy of coverage."

Breed (1958) compared coverage of the 1955 Emmett Till murder case in Mississippi by eleven newspapers, both northern and southern, black and white. Breed concluded that there were "some differences between North and South [newspapers], although the stereotyped expectations were not to be found." Only one newspaper, a small Mississippi daily, fit the stereotype of bias, he said. Carter (1957) analyzed news articles and editorials related to school desegregation from seven North Carolina dailies for two months in 1955. He concluded that

Negroes. . .and public school teachers rarely functioned as news sources, even though those two groups will be greatly affected by the outcome. . . . Stories from Negro sources appeared on the front page only half as frequently as items from white sources; . . . most of the pro-integration content comes from white sources.

Broom and Reece (1955) published a study of media coverage of the "Trenton Six" case, a trial of six blacks involved in a robbery-murder case in Trenton, New Jersey. The case received extensive national attention during its three year-appeal in the early 1950s. They studied coverage by eight newspapers, including the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Pittsburgh Courier, three black-owned Western newspapers, and two Communist newspapers. Evaluating the frequency of occurrence of "denial of civil rights," "racial discrimination," and "subversive contamination" themes,

they found some differences in coverage, but not always the expected ones. For example, two of the black newspapers failed to report the case at all.

Paletz and Dunn (1969) studied coverage of the race riots by the Winston-Salem Journal in that North Carolina city in November 1967. They concluded that the newspaper "attempted to reduce the racial issue" and went on to say

The fact that Negroes were rioting was never mentioned in the headline and only occasionally in all the news accounts. . . . The Journal presented the riot almost exclusively from the perspective of law enforcement and city officials. . . . Little or no attempt was made to cover the stories from the perspective of those engaged in violence.

A few books have been published about media coverage of the civil rights movement, and most of those came out in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some of those were proceedings of conferences and, consequently, lacked the depth and systemization of detailed historical study.

For example, Race and the News Media (Fisher and Lowenstein, 1967) contains talks and presentations from a conference titled "The Racial Crisis and the News Media" held at the University of Missouri. These essays, however, paint the civil rights movement in broad strokes. The contributors provide subjective impressions and experiences about how the press succeeded or failed in its coverage of racial issues. As a result, the book lacks detail, specific analyses, and historical perspective.

The Black American and the Press (Lyle, 1968) contains the proceedings of a 1967 symposium held at UCLA. Its participants included some of the stars of media coverage of the decade—Ralph McGill of the Atlanta Constitution and Hodding Carter III of the Greenville, Mississippi Delta Democrat-Times, for example. Theirs and others' comments offer valuable insights into the

tensions of the era, but also lack detail and historical perspective.

In one recent study, Becker, Kosicki, and Jones (1992) used public opinion surveys to determine racial differences in the evaluations of the mass media. Using data from a Gallup Survey and a Gordon Black Survey for USA Today, their findings suggest that African-Americans do not make distinctions between biases in the media and biases in other aspects of the dominant white society. Both the media and other segments of society are seen as biased by a large majority of the African-American population. However, they also found the African-Americans seem to know less about how the media operate and are less cynical about the media than their white counterparts. These differences cannot be accounted for by educational, economic, or age factors.

Split Image: African Americans in the Mass Media (Dates and Barlow, 1990) is the most recent book on the subject of media coverage of race relations. It contains an historical overview of African Americans in the music, film, radio, television, advertising, as well as newspaper industries. Its chapter on "Print News" is devoted almost entirely to a historical review of the black press, with little mention of the relationship between the dominant white press and the concerns of African Americans.

Martindale (1986) describes the crux of the continuing problem first articulated by the Kerner Commission in 1967:

The way the media portray black America and report on relations between the races strongly influences the way the public perceives these aspects of American life. Media reportage can promote attitudes of acceptance, or it can encourage repression; it can expose problems and present suggested solutions, or it can ignore uncomfortable situations until they explode into violence.

To summarize, the literature reveals various investigations into the role of media coverage in the civil rights movement. With the exception of the

1992 Becker study, most of these studies have been one of two types: a) a comparison of easily-accessible national newspapers; b) other reports containing "broad stroke" treatments (such as symposiums or panel discussions) of media and civil rights, which lack analysis with any degree of precision or detail.

What most have in common is that they provide an examination of African-Americans or civil rights issues from the perspective of white-dominated daily newspapers. What they lack is an examination of the media from the perspective of those who participated in the civil rights movement. That is what this investigation attempts to do.

Discussion and Analysis

The genius of the southern sit-in movement was its indigenous, grassroots character. While the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. may have inspired the sit-ins, their organization and development was entirely student-led. When the civil rights leader spoke in Nashville on April 20, 1960, he praised the Nashville initiative as "the best organized and the most disciplined in the Southland" and said the Nashville students had a "better understanding of the philosophy of the [nonviolence] movement than any other group." (King urges sit-ins continue, 1960).

In achieving their goal, the Nashville students demonstrated a high degree of nonviolence that served as a model for the Southern student movement. The word "nonviolent" in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's name came at the insistence of the Nashville students' who were involved in its formation that same year.

Clayborne Carson (1981, p. 23) wrote that the Nashville students "were prepared to lead one of the most disciplined and sustained of the early protests. . . . The Nashville students maintained firm control over the

protests ensuring that they remained nonviolent. Their rules of conduct became a model for protest movements elsewhere in the South."

Mary King (1987, p. 278), who wrote about her experiences in the student movement, said the Nashville students exemplified the spirit of nonviolence. "To the extent that there was an ideological nucleus or nerve center for SNCC in the early years, when a vision of an integrated society achieved through nonviolence still permeated our thinking, it was found in a group of student leaders from Nashville," she wrote.

The Nashville students saw the media as a friend and ally in winning support for their cause. Media coverage was especially important to a nonviolent movement. Students wanted to show the wider public that they were not the ones who caused violence or confrontations. If that occurred, they wanted the public to see that it was the onlookers and street-side critics who caused it. John Lewis, who is now a member of Congress from Atlanta, was one of the Nashville student leaders. He stressed this point:

So we would go downtown and sit in a very orderly, very peaceful fashion. We would put on our ties and coats. The young ladies would put on stockings and heels to project this image to the larger community that we were prepared and ready to bring about desegregation of the lunch counters and the restaurants in Nashville.

The media, Lewis said, helped the public see the contrast between the peaceful students and the "hoodlum element that came to beat us up or put lighted cigarettes out down our backs or in our hair." (Interview, Feb. 21, 1989).

One of the reasons the sit-ins received especially sympathetic coverage in the Nashville Tennessean was its 26-year-old reporter David Halberstam, who

went on to become the well-known author of many books. Halberstam wrote nineteen of the paper's seventy stories on the sit-ins, more than any other single reporter. The Harvard-educated, New York native described that experience of covering the Nashville sit-ins as one of the most exciting and meaningful of his career:

The one thing I understood immediately was that they [the students] had a right to do it. It was six years after Brown v. Board of Education, which was supposed to be "with all deliberate speed," and nothing had changed in their lives. //

I was really primed for that story. By then I had been in the South for five years. I think for five years I had been expecting it to happen and it finally happened. There's nothing in my life that I'm prouder of.

"You know when you were covering that and it was very tough for all of us, we would pick up the Tennessean the next day and it would always be there, fair and accurate, and just as it happened. That allowed us to go on" Lafayette told me. That's the most important thing anybody ever said to me as a journalist. (Interview, April 23, 1989)

Halberstam established good relationships with the student leaders. Wally Westfeldt, another reporter for the Tennessean, said "He [Halberstam] was like a piece of litmus paper. He's go out and just soak up everything; He had wonderful contacts with all the students." (Interview, Feb. 11, 1989)

John Lewis, one of the student leaders, acknowledged that students would call Halberstam and give him tips. "There were some reporters like David Halberstam that we tried to keep informed and try to let them know when we were going to stage a sit-in; what places we would be." (Lewis, 1987)

Bernard Lafayette stressed the nonviolent character of the sit-ins and how that was tied to public support through the media:

The media was important in conveying the nonviolent character of the movement. And I think that made a difference in the support we eventually got. We realized that the eyes of the world were on us and we wanted to put on our very best conduct. . . . We were aware that our support was based upon how people perceived us and what we were doing. To that extent, we relied on the press to do that; that influenced our behavior. (Lafayette, telephone interview, March 20, 1989).

And finally, the Reverend C.T. Vivian, a local pastor and civil rights leader, reiterated the same point. But he added that the nature of a demonstration is to make a public statement and any media coverage will help convey that

Coverage always helps a nonviolent movement because what we're trying to do is tell the truth about the culture, and we want that truth to be told to the whole community. That's why we demonstrate --to make a statement to the entire community. In the sense that the press covers it and it gets out there, it's tremendously important. (Interview, Jan. 22, 1989)

Nashville was more progressive than many southern cities. As the state capital, home of major universities and several religious headquarters or publishing houses, it saw itself as an intellectual center and the "Athens of the South." Consequently, media coverage was especially important in winning over moderate whites to the cause of lunch counter integration. Lewis described the city:

In Nashville, it was easier for them to line up for us than in many cities because you had more independent and intellectual people. It was an "advanced" community for the South at the time. It was still a southern city, but it wasn't Mississippi.

As a result, he said, "I think in Nashville you had hundreds and thousands of white citizens who identified with the students and supported us."

To a large extent, television was more important than newspapers in conveying the nonviolent character of the sit-in movement. Vivian said:

Television coverage of a movement was overpoweringly important to get the message across. We were trying to say to people: see the truth, see the confrontations, see what the two sides are like, see if these people have a right to justice, see if justice is really being done. So for us it was tremendously important, but it didn't create our message. (Interview, Jan. 22, 1989)

Bernard Lafayette said that television coverage probably had more of an effect on the outcome than the print media:

TV coverage was pretty strong and it really made a difference in exposing the problem to the public. And I think on that basis people began to take some action.

(Lafayette, telephone interview, March 20, 1989).

Television coverage also helped spread the movement to other parts of the country, Lewis said.

It was the media that made it possible for the sit-in movement to travel around the South like wildfire. And it was the media that helped to translate the message and interpret to some degree not only the message, but the method. Because people saw these young

black and white students sitting in a peaceful, orderly, nonviolent fashion, refusing to hit back or strike back.

The students saw sharp differences between coverage by the Nashville Banner and the Nashville Tennessean and saw the latter as a much more sympathetic ally. Bernard Lafayette recalled a particular story by David Halberstam in the Tennessean early in the course of the sit-ins:

I remember the closing sentence, "And they didn't hit back " and I think that helped to interpret to the Nashville community that this was not a riot. They probably couldn't imagine anyone getting attacked and not hitting back. There was a distinct difference between the Tennessean and the Banner. We didn't expect to get very positive coverage from the Banner. We just sort of took our lumps. (Interview, March 20, 1989).

C.T. Vivian said that blacks favored the Tennessean simply because it always gave them better coverage:

We knew that we were never going to get proper coverage from the Banner and we knew that the Banner never understood nonviolence and I don't think even cared to. I think most of us thought there was only one newspaper in the city that was important. But then that was our thinking only because of who we were—black people—and black people always got better coverage in the Tennessean.

(Interview, Jan. 22, 1989)

James Lawson, however, was critical of both Nashville newspapers. The Tennessean tended to be more moderate, he said, but neither was really accurate in its coverage of civil rights:

But both papers tended to miss facts and to write essentially from the white perspective and not really capture the movement.

perspective. Any history based on press accounts will be a sadly and badly distorted history. (Interview, April 8, 1989)

Except for one incident, there does not appear to have been any effort to manipulate the media or plan the sit-ins around media coverage. That occurred when CBS television crews were in Nashville to produce a documentary on the nonviolent character of the Nashville movement. The exclusive permission they gave to CBS to film the pre-demonstration meeting at First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill, enraged all of the other journalists who were trying to cover the sit-ins. This downtown church was a predominantly black church that served as an unofficial center for the sit-in movement.

"There was no doubt there was a deal cut to let CBS cover it exclusively," said John Seigenthaler, who was also a reporter for the Tennessean in 1960. (Interview, Feb. 4, 1989)

David Halberstam recalled that he tried to warn the students against allowing CBS to have exclusive privileges to cover the pre-demonstration meeting. And then when Governor Ellington became outraged and charged the network with "rigging" the sit-ins, some of the CBS people blamed Halberstam for telling the government officials. "I tried to warn them that what they were doing would cause problems, but they wouldn't listen," Halberstam recalled. "And then when Governor Ellington got mad, they came back and blamed me for fibbing on them." (Interview, April 23, 1989)

It is doubtful the civil rights movement would have occurred the way it did without the aid of the media in spreading its message. And, as the Nashville students explained, media coverage always helped the cause of a nonviolent movement.

"We felt that the media was necessary to help educate people, to convince people that our cause was right and our cause was just. The media became an ally," said John Lewis. He concluded:

I think we have witnessed what I'd like to have called a nonviolent revolution in the South, a revolution of values, a revolution of ideas. I think this region is much more caring, much more sharing, it's much more humane because of what did take place, what happened in the late fifties, happened in the sixties, because we had a group of brave people. . . who were prepared to get up there to write the words or shoot the pictures, capture the sound, and I think that's changed the face of the South and in changing the face of the South changed this nation once and for all. (Lewis, 1987)

Conclusion

While media coverage may or may not deserve the credit that Lewis gives it, it did play a critical role for the Nashville students. On the other hand, it was, as suggested earlier, not due to an inherently sympathetic media.

Tuchman (1978) argued that news is "first and foremost a social institution." As such, "news is the product of a social institution and it is embedded in relationships with other institutions. Therefore, the definition of "news" doesn't simply depend upon an individual gatekeeper (some lonely editor decided what to include in the paper), but is the product of social reality of which the newspaper organization itself is but one part. Out of these larger reality, the news "frame" is the newspaper's method of "framing" a picture of social reality.

The Nashville sit-ins, like many other civil rights events of the 1960s, provided an event that was easily "framed" for the press. In an article titled "Personalized Bias in the News," Rucinski (1992) argued that the typical definitions of "news," or "news values" lend themselves easily to confrontations provided by the civil rights movement. She cited (p. 93)

Bennett's definition of "personalized bias" as providing the framework for her analysis:

Personalized bias can be defined as the journalistic bias that gives preference to the individual actors and human interest angles in events while down-playing institutional and political considerations that establish the social contexts for those events.

Rucinski asserts that use of dramatic narrative structures rather than analytical accounts of events is one example of personalized bias.

The narrative structure of news may impose a personalized bias because stories require a cast of characters (especially heroes and villains) and a sequence of their actions. The news values of conflict and novelty further privilege dramatic stories over pallid, tedious analyses of sociopolitical problems and proposals for their solutions. It is assumed to be much more stimulating to witness the clash of political adversaries than to tease out the various implications of the policies each proposes.

It was, in fact, this good vs. evil, hero vs. villain storyline that made stories such as Nashville ideal for sympathetic press coverage. William J. Drummond (1990), a professor in the Graduate School of Journalism at California-Berkeley, even goes so far to argue that this is one of the primary reasons for the reversal of attitudes toward the press by African-Americans today. "Today, however, a deep suspicion of the news media appears to be endemic among black leaders. . . ," he wrote.

Media bashing is a growth industry that seems to be supported by black political leaders, black intellectuals, and even substantial numbers of black newsmen and newswomen themselves. This antagonism toward the news media represents a complete about-face from the

prevailing sentiment during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, when black leaders and the news media were de facto allies in the right against Jim Crow."

Henry Hampton, executive producer of the "Eyes on the Prize" documentary series that traced the civil rights movements from 1954 into the 1980s, wrote that the civil rights movement unfolded "in a series of morality plays in which good guys and bad could be instantly recognized. Perhaps not since the days of 'Everyman' in the fifteenth century had it been so easy for an English-speaking audience to distinguish good from evil."

The media and civil rights symbiosis continued only as long as "the movement's march was biblical and nonthreatening, as long as the leadership was Mosaic and conciliatory. But when it was over, it was over. Once these events ceased to be the setpiece in the fight against legalized segregation, the storyline ceased to be so enobling," Hampton wrote. (Cited in Drummond, 1990, p. 25)

The Nashville students' commitment to nonviolence made their story that much more appealing to a white press. They took advantage of the opportunity that history and journalistic values had provided them. It was a happy ending to but one chapter in an unfinished history book—one for which a conclusion remains problematic.

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