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Race and Community Revitalization: Communication Theory and Practice

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Abstract

The words *community* and *communications* are both derived from the Latin word for *common*. According to John Dewey, people "live in a community by virtue of the things they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (1915: 4). Dewey's point — that communities can not exist without communications — leads to a corollary: that the nature and health of a community depends upon the nature and health of its communications capacity. Thus, to *revitalize* a community necessarily means revitalizing communications.

Communications can take many forms, ranging from face-to-face conversations among family, friends, and neighbors to the broader flows of information that are provided through the mass media. All these forms are central to the way communities are constructed, maintain themselves, interact with other communities, and impact the political process. In this paper I will address how the communications environment, as currently structured, has contributed to many of the problems faced by inner city racial and ethnic communities in the United States.

In order to address this issue I will first discuss the importance of communications to community development. In the next four sections I will examine relevant research regarding four key elements of the mass media: structure; access and control; content; and impact. In the sixth section, I will explore the literature regarding less mediated, more interpersonal communications. Throughout sections two through five I will pay specific attention to what existing communications theories and research tell us (explicitly or implicitly) about issues of race and ethnicity, especially as they relate to poor urban communities. Finally, I will discuss issues regarding the intersection of race, class, and communications that require further study, and how changes in the communications environment might contribute to the revitalization of urban communities.

Comments

NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Michael X. Delli Carpini was affiliated with Columbia University. Currently January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

RACE AND COMMUNITY REVITALIZATION: COMMUNICATIONS THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Democratic Communications in a Diverse Polity

As Robert Dahl has noted, "[t]here is no democratic theory, there are only democratic theories" (1956: 1). However, *all* theories of democracy assume significant input (direct or indirect) from citizens in the "authoritative allocation of goods, services, and values" (Easton, 1965). In turn, this assumes that citizens have the capacity and opportunity to determine what is in their individual and collective interests, to express and refine these interests in the public debate over "who gets what, when, and how" (Lasswell, 1958), and to have a meaningful say in how these interests are translated into public policy.

Determining "interests" and aggregating these interests into functioning communities is no simple matter, however. At a minimum it requires finding a balance between self-interest, the interests of others who share similar economic, social, and cultural backgrounds, and the larger collective interests of the polity. This process is complicated by two factors. First, in a large, diverse, and federated system such as the United States, citizens are part of numerous, overlapping communities, each of which produces different, often competing identities, interests, and centers of political decision making. And second, interests are not objectively determined and permanently fixed, but are socially constructed and "essentially contestable" (Connolly, 1983).

The formation of communities is complicated in the United States by the great diversity of the population and by the federated nature of the political system. This results in membership in numerous real and potential communities. For example, the interests of a poor, African American woman living in

Harlem are shaped by a number of factors: her race, gender, economic status, place of residence, citizenship in New York City, New York State, and the United States, and so forth. Each of these characteristics potentially binds this woman to others who are similarly situated, while at the same time distinguishes her interests from those with different backgrounds and experiences.

However, these differences and similarities do not, in and of themselves, assure the formation of communities. Communities — the African American community, the Harlem community, the poor community, the community of women, the New York City community, the New York State community, the U.S. community, and so forth — are socially constructed through the intersection of objective conditions, a comparison of those conditions with the conditions of others, and an interpretation of the reasons for differences and similarities across individuals and groups. Distinct communities emerge when groups of individuals who share common conditions (e.g., geographic location, economic and political status, cultural heritage, historical experiences, etc.,) come to see both how these conditions bind them together, and how they differentiate them as a group from other individuals and groups. In short, community development requires both objective similarities that connect people to each other while distinguishing them from others, and a *conscious* awareness of those similarities and differences.

Communications is critical to the processes of interest formation and community development. Through the open exchange of information and opinions, citizens come to know not only their own interests, but the interests of others and how those interests tie them together into communities. This process does not assure consensus — there are real differences across individuals and groups. At a minimum, however, it provides the opportunity to understand these differences and negotiate ways to assure that different views are included in the authoritative allocation of goods, services, and values that is at the heart of the policy making process.

A democratic communications environment in a diverse but interconnected society must operate at three levels. First, there must be the opportunity for effective, ongoing *intra-group* communications. Communities of interests based on economics, culture, geography, race or ethnicity, and so forth, need ways of exchanging information and opinions in order to form, develop, and maintain themselves. Further, this exchange of information needs to be controlled by the community members themselves, rather than imposed from the outside. Second, there must be the opportunity for effective, ongoing *inter-group* communications. The exchange of information across groups serves to increase mutual understanding and respect, reveal areas of consensus, and highlight real differences of opinion that need to be addressed.

Both intra and inter group communications are *horizontal*, in that they assume some degree of equality in the exchange of opinions and information across individuals and groups. But a democratic information environment also requires effective *vertical* communication. Communities should have the ability to communicate effectively with policy makers, allowing for ongoing and open exchanges of information and ideas.

Horizontal and vertical communications can take place directly through face-to-face interactions and indirectly through the mass media. Interpersonal communications that involve *public* as opposed to *private* opinion (Barber, 1984) require both the motivation to join with others to deliberate about public issues and the opportunity to do so. Such public gatherings (in town halls, at schools and community centers, in living rooms, etc.) are critical to the identification of collective interests, the formation of a

2

sense of community, the exchange of opinions across communities, and the articulation of community interests to policy makers.

At the same time, much of the communications within communities, across communities, and with political elites is mediated. The mass media — newspapers, magazines, radio, television, the internet, etc. — are central to these exchanges in four ways. First, as *information sources* from which citizens can learn about the world in which they live, including parts of that world with which they have little or no direct contact. Second as *channels* through which citizens can express their views and present themselves to their fellow citizens and public officials. Third, as *forums* in which opinions are publically exchanged, debated, and constructed. And fourth, *as political actors* in their own right, serving as gatekeepers who determine the content and structure of public debate, as well as who participates in this debate.

In short, understanding inner city racial/ethnic community development and revitalization requires understanding: (1) the structure of the communications environment; (2) How this structure affects control of and access to the media; (3) how biases in control and access affect the content of the information environment; and (4) how content affects the formation of public opinion, the acquisition of political information, and the shaping of collective identities.

The Structure of The Mass Media

The structure of the mass media in the contemporary United States is characterized by three central characteristics: it is privately owned, highly centralized, and elite dominated. These characteristics affect all citizens, but have particular, usually insidious, implications for poor, local, and non-white communities. This is true because these communities lack the economic resources often necessary to effectively control or get access to the media.

Private Ownership: In the United States, the media is largely privately owned and run. This is especially true in the print media, but even in electronic media, where public ownership is more widely accepted, private media dominates: of the 1,449 television stations in the United States in 1990, 1,100 were commercial, as were 9,300 of the 10, 688 radio stations (Jamieson and Campbell, 1992: 19-27).

The dominance of private over public media is deeply imbedded in mainstream American political ideology. According to Theodore Peterson, the functions of the U.S. media are:

> (1) servicing the political system by providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs; (2) enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government; (3) safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government; (4) servicing the economic system, primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising; (5) providing entertainment; (6) maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests. (1956: 74)

According to the "libertarian theory" of the press, which dominated in the 18th century

(Peterson, 1956), private ownership would help insulate the media from the coercive power of government. At the same time, the economic free market would allow for the development of competing media voices, creating a parallel market place of ideas. This open exchange of ideas would create a "self-righting process" (Milton, 1644) in which "a livelier impression of the truth [would be] produced by its collision with error" (J. S. Mill, 1859: 18). In short, the civic goals represented by functions one through three above would be achieved as a by-product of functions four through six.

There are inherent tensions in both the logic and practice of the libertarian theory of the press. Regarding the former, the greatest tensions are between the civic goals (providing information, discussion, and debate; enlightening the public; and serving as a watchdog of government) on the one hand, and the goals of entertainment and economic self-sufficiency on the other. Put simply, being entertaining and economically successful often can come at the expense of being informative, enlightening, and vigilant. Further, the libertarian theory's emphasis on protecting citizens from the coercive power of the government under emphasizes the potentially coercive power of the market (Postman, 1985; Bagdikian, 1992).

Regarding the actual practice of the media, the notion that *all* citizens truly had the means to express their views through the press is a fiction. While it is true that, during the 18th century, most communities in the United States had several daily presses representing fairly diverse ideological perspectives, access to — let alone control of — this public conversation was always more difficult for poorer, non-white citizens (Dates, 1990; Emery and Emery, 1988).

Centralization of Ownership and Information: While the market place of ideas was never fully realized, ownership of the media has become increasingly centralized in the 20th century. According to Ben Bagdikian (1992), in 1983 50 national and international corporations already controlled a majority of "media voices" in the United States (measured by circulation, revenue, and/or audiences). By 1992, this number had shrunk to 20. For example, of the 3,000 book publishers in the United States, five produce most of the revenue. Eleven companies control a majority of the daily circulation of newspapers. Two companies produce over half the revenue for magazine sales. The three major networks, while less dominant than in the past, still consistently capture a majority share of television viewers and radio listeners. Four film studios control a majority of movie audiences. In addition, cross-ownership (for example, the same company owning both radio and television stations, or television stations and newspapers) has increased dramatically (Bagdikian, 1992: ix-45).

New media outlets such as cable, satellite broadcast, and the internet open the possibility of a richer and more diverse information environment (discussed in more detail below). But even in these mediums there is a trend toward centralization of ownership . Nearly half of the top 50 cable systems in the United States are owned by the broadcast networks, with another third owned by newspaper and magazine publishers (Graber, 1997: 396). And, as the ongoing "browser wars" suggest, corporate control of the internet and world wide web is a very real possibility.

The centralization of ownership has led to a parallel centralization of information. For example, of the 1,526 cities with a daily newspaper, only 44 have at least 2 separately owned newspapers, a sharp decline from 19th and early 20th centuries (Jamieson and Campbell, 1992: 27). And while most communities do have multiple sources of information (newspapers, radio, cable and broadcast

4

television, etc.), this information is likely to come from similar and non-local sources. For example, wire services now dominate the news in most local papers — especially chain-owned papers. Even local radio stations are dominated by non-local broadcasts such as nationally syndicated shows and pre-taped, fully automated programming (Jamieson and Campbell (1992: 26).

The result of this dual centralization of ownership and information has been the creation of mass audiences with little control over the form and content of the information that is presented. This works against intra-group communication, since the pressure to reach increasingly broad audiences provides few incentives to focus on the interests and views of select communities — especially poor communities. And while the broad reach of the media increases the possibility of both inter-group and elite-public communications, specific communities, especially poor, urban, ethnic communities, lack direct control or input in these mediated conversations.

The centralization of ownership and information in the latter half of this century created an environment in which one could no longer even assume a market place of ideas or a self-righting process. This centralization, coupled with the ability to reach large, diverse audiences, increased the already substantial power of the press. As a result, the libertarian theory gave way to a new "social responsibility" theory of the press (Peterson, 1956). This theory was an attempt to preserve the *ends* of the libertarian theory through different *means*. By separating fact from opinion, providing competing facts, opinions, and critiques, fairly representing different groups, presenting and clarifying societal values, and providing a full range of critical information *in the same publication or broadcast*, competition among numerous and separately owned media voices was assumed to be less vital.

The reality of contemporary mass media falls quite short of these goals for two reasons, however. First, a highly centralized media in a economically, culturally, and ethnically diverse society can never fairly represent the full range of opinions nor truly separate fact from opinion. Second, the economic incentives of the media necessarily mean that majority interests in general and the interests of economically powerful communities in particular, will dominate. This combination is particularly damaging to poor, ethnic communities that have neither the numbers nor the economic clout to attract the attention of, let alone to control, the media.

The recent increase in "channels " of communication provided by cable and the internet has led to the greater ability to target information to more narrowly defined communities, thus increasing the possibilities for intra-group communications. In addition, these additional outlets seem to allow for a greater variety of opinions and information. In reality, however, while audiences have become somewhat more segmented, the vast majority of the information received is still generally centrally produced and distributed. At the same time, greater segmentation of audiences can work against inter-group communications, as groups selectively choose information sources aimed exclusively at themselves, reducing the exchanges across diverse communities.

A privately owned, economically driven, and highly centralized mass media is poorly designed to serve the interests of poor, inner city racial and ethnic groups. At the level of intra-group communications, there are few mediums (print or electronic) designed to be exclusive sources of information, channels of exchange, or forums for deliberation for these segments of the population. While newspapers, magazines, radio stations, and television programs aimed at specific ethnic and racial groups exist, they represent a small proportion of the larger information environment. In addition, few of

5

these outlets are aimed at *poor* ethnic and racial communities, are controlled by these communities, or are designed primarily for providing meaningful civic information, exchanges, and forums.

The history of the black press is instructive both in terms of the importance of having media designed to address the interests of specific communities and the difficulty of maintaining such a press in the current economic and social environment. As Janette Dates (1990) notes, without black owned and operated newspapers, "there would have been no print medium of communications for African Americans that could instill a sense of community, a feeling of self-worth, or keep alive the often muted struggle to escape, first slavery, and then the clutches of segregation and discrimination" (p. 346). However, she also notes:

> In the early 1800s newspapers were the primary vehicle of the black press, and their publication dominated the focus of the black press for more than a hundred years. In the middle 1900s, however, other types of periodicals gained popularity with black audiences. By the late 1900s, black magazines had taken over many of the functions that black newspapers had previously claimed for themselves, particularly as the year 2000 approached. Part of the reason for the increased role of black magazines at this time lay in the declining quality of reporting and commentary in black newspapers. In fact, at this juncture, many black newspapers had become scandal sheets with sensational, screaming headlines and offensive pictures. Moreover, there was limited coverage of events, frequent misprints, outdated formats, smudgy ink, and a general perception that black newspapers were either too radical or too conservative and were thus failing to reflect true views of the black community. People were no longer proud to take black newspapers home to share articles with their families. Many hesitated to encourage their children to see or read the papers. By the 1980s black newspapers across the country had lost much of their credibility in African American communities as providers of reliable and enlightened black perspectives and as protectors of black interests. (P.345)

The result has been a steady erosion of economically viable, high quality, black newspapers in most urban areas:

> More than 3000 black newspapers — owned and edited by blacks for black readers — have appeared since *Freedom's Journal* made its 1827 bow.... Pride's [1951] figures showed that 1187 black papers were added during the years 1865 to 1900 to the forty founded before 1865. Another 1500 had been added by 1951, but the survivors numbered only 175. The average life span of a black newspaper, Pride found, was 9 years. (Emery and Emery, 1988: 266)

Tellingly, this problem was exacerbated by integration in the 1960s:

> For, with integration, many black newspapers also lost their "natural" advertisers, black businesses, to the general market press. In addition, many small black businesses had

gone under, as black consumers, like their white counterparts, flocked to the major chain stores for purchases. As their revenues decreased, black newspapers also lost much of their talent to the general market papers, which paid their staff higher salaries and offered them more career opportunities. (Dates, 1990: 345)

In addition, surviving black newspapers and black-oriented magazines tend to focus on middle class black audiences, further limiting the opportunity for poor blacks to have outlets for the formation and expression their views, and thus for the construction of a sense of community.

An Elite Dominated Press: While the availability of multiple, privately-owned presses was an important element of the libertarian theory of the press, equally important (though less often articulated) was the belief that citizens had the ability, opportunity, and motivation to actively participate in the civic and cultural market place. It is no coincidence that the first amendment to the U.S. Constitution gives equal attention to rights of a free press, free speech, and of the peaceable assembly of citizens, as the three rights are inextricably intertwined. The "truth" about the social and political world would not emerge from the pages of newspapers and pamphlets, but was constructed and constantly revisited through the interaction of the press and the citizenry.

Poor people and non-whites were *never* considered part of this public conversation by the framers. The same constitution that protected the rights of a free press, free speech and free assembly also upheld the right of slavery and reduced African Americans to two-thirds of a human being. And state constitutions prohibited poor people (and women) from voting. Not coincidentally, as the poor, African Americans, other ethnic minorities, and women asserted their rights as citizens, the social responsibility theory shifted much of the power once placed with citizens to political elites. This declining faith in citizens is most clearly seen in the 1920s debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey on the nature of "the public." For Lippmann (1925), the modern public was a "phantom," an artificially constructed collection of individuals who were generally uninformed about and disconnected from politics, who lacked the time, skills, and interest to take a direct role in their own governance, and who were easily swayed by seemingly persuasive arguments of the moment. The contemporary media, from this perspective, could easily become a propaganda tool used to manipulate and misrepresent the public in ways that could threaten the stability and order of society. To avoid this, the press must serve as a vigilant watchdog, guarding against demagogues. The goal of the press was not to provide information that would allow citizens to come to their own conclusions on the substantive issues of the day or to engage citizens in public discourse, but to create an environment in which they could choose among competing elites who would be responsible for the real work of democracy and policy making. Since the substance of politics and policy would be determined by experts, the substance of journalism should focus on this expert class. At best, the press could signal citizens when certain elites, experts, or ideas posed a threat to the democratic process.

Dewey, too, saw problems with the modern public, but drew different conclusions from these observations (1927). While he acknowledged the existence and importance of experts, Dewey believed that citizens were capable of engaging experts and their ideas and contributing to public deliberation. The nature and quality of public deliberation were not preordained, but depended upon the

opportunities presented to citizens by the public sphere. Given these opportunities, Dewey had faith that the public could play a more active, direct, and rational role in its own governance. These opportunities would come from many places, such as the education system and other public institutions. One key institution was the press. The press's responsibility was to provide the kind of information that could be used by citizens to understand not only the issues of the day, but that would also provide the context within which to use that information, and the skills necessary to do so. In addition, the public required a public sphere that would allow them to openly deliberate about civic issues. Here, again the press was critical, as it could serve as a public space for such deliberation.

In short, where Lippmann saw citizens necessarily as the passive consumers of the news, and saw the press as the place for an exchange of facts, opinions and ideas among elites and experts (including journalists and columnists), Dewey saw citizens as potentially active participants in this exchange, and saw the press as a fundamental part of the social fabric and the place where experts would inform, educate, and engage the public in issues of the day.

Elements of Lippmann and Dewey can be found in the tenets of both the libertarian theory of the press and its reincarnation in the social responsibility theory. However, the specific way in which these theories are put into practice vary significantly depending on whether Lippmann's or Dewey's views prevail. As has been noted by several students of the press (Carey, 1988; 1989; Rosen, 1998), Lippmann's view has come to dominate the journalistic profession.

This elitist view of politics and the media worked against poor, urban, ethnic/racial communities in two ways. First, by assuming public discourse was the purview of elites, these communities were effectively cut off from direct access to the media. Second, since "elite" was defined as white, male, middle class citizens, the media's notions of fairness, objectivity, and representation were unlikely to address concerns specific to these communities — in short, were unlikely to actually be fair, objective, or representative. The result has been a *hegemonic* press in which the media serves as central gatekeeper, determining the lines between consensus, legitimate controversy, and deviance (Hallin, 1986; Herman and Chomsky, 1988), and which groups and ideas fall into each of these spheres.

Control and Access

As noted earlier, effective, democratic intra-group communications requires control of the means of communication by the group in question. A privately owned, economically driven, highly centralized, and elite dominated media severely limits intra-group communications for local, poor, non-white citizens. Ownership of newspapers, magazines, television and radio stations, film studios, and the like by African Americans, Latinos, and Asians falls well below their percentages in the population (Dates and Barlow, 1990; Jamieson and Campbell, 1992; Emery and Emery, 1988). Needless to say, this is especially true of *poor* ethnic minorities, who by definition, lack the resources to own media. Even the minority owned and run print and electronic media that do exist tend to focus, for economic reasons, on the interests and concerns of middle class, upwardly mobile consumers.

The structure of the mass media also works against the use of the elite-owned mainstream press for meaningful intra-group, inter-group, and elite-public communications. Blacks, Latinos, and Asians are significantly under-represented in employment within the mainstream media: editors, producers,

directors, journalists and reporters, actors, and so forth are disproportionately white, male, and/or middle-to-upper class. Thus, the perspectives of these groups, especially regarding issues where significant class and ethnic/racial differences of opinion exist, are likely to be missed or misrepresented. In addition, the needs of the mainstream media to attract large, economically well-of audiences decreases the incentives to cover issues or provide cultural outlets that appeal to or represent poor minority groups. Finally, the "social responsibility" norms of the media, coupled with the bias towards elites, while intended to be balanced, fair, and representative, lead to an undervaluing of "non-authoritative" sources, and "non-mainstream" interests such as those of poor, urban racial minorities.

As a result, poor, urban, and/or non-white ethnic groups lack the means for communicating effectively among themselves, with other communities, or with political elites, and are thus effectively cut of from public conversations regarding politics, culture, and society.

Content

As a result of this systematic bias, urban, poor, ethnic/racial communities, and the issues of central importance to them are (1) generally under-represented in the mass media; and (2) presented from a white, middle class, elite perspective when they are represented. According to a recent review of the literature (Gilens, 1996), studies

> have consistently found that blacks are underrepresented in the American news media, whether it be television (Baran 1973), newspapers (Chaudhary 1980), or newsmagazines (Lester and Smith 1990; Stempel 1971). The underrepresentation of African Americans has decreased over time, however. Lester and Smith (1990), for example, found that only 1.3 percent of the pictures in *Time* and *Newsweek* during the 1950s were of blacks, compared with 3.1 percent in the 1960s and 7.5 percent in the 1980s. (P.518)

Studies of entertainment media and children's programming have found similar patterns of under but gradually increasing representation of minorities, though the proportion of minorities in both news and non-news media remains less than one would expect given their percentages in the population, and gains for Latinos and Asians have been less dramatic than for African Americans (Greenberg, 1986; Liebert and Sprafkin, 1988; Dates and Barlow, 1990). The increase in the number of non-whites is also largely driven by an increased visibility on a few shows — one study found that 75 percent of the total time African Americans were visible on television took place on only 18 percent of the shows (cited in Greenberg, 1986). Non-whites are also less likely to be seen in advertising (in print or electronic media), especially as the central figures (Greenberg, 1996), though again there is improvement in this area. Further, minorities are still grossly under represented as "experts" in the media — for example, one study found that over 90 percent of the expert guests on *MacNeil/Lehrer* and *Nightline* were white males (Croteau and Hoynes, 1996).

At least as troubling as under-representation is the *misrepresentation* of minority populations. Minorities in the mainstream media are consistently and disproportionately portrayed in a negative light.

For example, Entman (1990; 1994) found that nearly 60 percent of
network news stories showed blacks as either the victims or the perpetrators of social misfortunes. A
study of advertisements in *Time* magazine found that 10 percent of the blacks shown were poor,
compared to *none* of the whites (Humphrey and Schuman, 1984). And, while two out of three poor
Americans are non-black, two out of every three poor people pictured in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S.
News and World Report*, the three leading news magazines in the United States, were black (Gilens,
1996).

The most systematic work on the content of mainstream media and changes in that content over
time over the last three decades has been conducted by George Gerbner and various colleagues
associated with the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. This
research largely confirms the patterns described above: general under representation of non-whites
(especially for African Americans), especially in terms of major characters on entertainment television or
as authoritative sources in the news; under representation of non-whites in white collar and professional
roles; and the tendency for non-whites to be portrayed as "less serious" than whites. As with other
studies, this ongoing research has found evidence of improvement in these areas over time. In addition,
there is some evidence that non-whites are more likely to be portrayed as married, for family life to be
more important in their lives, and to be younger on average than whites.

A few studies have explicitly compared the behavior of whites and non-whites on prime time
television (Reid, 1979; Baptista-Fernandez and Greenberg, 1980; Weigel, et al., 1980). These studies
(most of which are dated) found that African American characters were portrayed as seeking more
recognition for their deeds, being younger, and being less frequently employed than their white
counterparts. Black women were portrayed as less achieving, less succorant, more boasting and more
dominant than White women. In addition, only 2 percent of air time was devoted to inter-racial
interactions, and these interactions were characterized by

> less shared decision-making, narrower, more formal relationships, less intimate personal
> relationships, and almost no romantic relationships. Friendships and nonwork
> relationships were more common in white-white interactions. Blacks and whites
> discussed problem alternatives in but 13% of the possible situations, compared to 56%
> of the white-white decisions. Black-white interactions occurred almost exclusively in
> job-related contexts, compared to half of the white-white relationships. Thus, cross-
> racial relationships are infrequent and relatively formal. Blacks and whites can work
> together but do not maintain the same degree of voluntary, individualized relationships
> that whites do. For the most part, blacks and whites appear on different shows; when
> they do appear together, they largely maintain that separateness. (Greenberg, 1986:
> 170).

Five caveats to this generally negative picture need to be considered, however. First, the trends
are clearly in positive directions, especially in very recent years. Second, many of the studies are dated,
thus potentially missing very recent improvements. Third, I know of no studies that have examined the
representation of non-whites in the expanded television environment of cable. Fourth, most of these

studies focus on the portrayal of non-whites in general, and do not explore the portrayal of *poor and/or urban* ethnic minorities in particular. And fifth, these studies are largely based on aggregate patterns — the assumption of these studies is that people are influenced by the *number* of positive or negative portrayals. We know little, however, about the impact of *specific* negative or positive portrayals that may be non-representative of the media in general, but that are particularly effective in challenging or reinforcing racial stereotypes.

The Impact of Structural and Representational Bias

Given evidence of structural biases in the media environment, and evidence that these biases lead to biases in media content, the question becomes what difference this makes. Research in political communications that focuses on individual-level impact reveal several ways in which media matters.

Agenda-Setting: Research strongly suggests that the media plays an important, even central, role in determining what issues citizens regard as most important. As Bernard Cohen put it, "The press... may not be successful in telling readers what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think *about"* (1963: 13). This finding has been supported in a number of studies and for both print and electronic media (Behr and Iyengar, 1985; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; McCombs, 1981; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Shaw and Martin, 1992). As Doris Graber (1997) notes, however, citizens do not slavishly follow the media in all circumstances: "past and current experiences, conversations with others, and independent reasoning provide alternatives to media guidance.... media guidance is most important for new issues that have not been widely discussed and for issues beyond the realm of personal experience" (p.201-202. Also see Ader, 1995; Behr and Iyengar, 1981). Agenda-setting is also most likely when various media simultaneously focus on the same issue or set of issues.

While the agenda-setting literature does not specifically focus on questions of race or on issues of special importance to inner city revitalization (with the exception of crime), it is of obvious relevance to these concerns. In particular, it suggests that, absent direct experience or contact, the media's coverage (or lack thereof) of issues of special relevance to inner cities and/or non-white ethnic/racial groups will play an important role in whether these issues are on white, non-urban America's political agenda. The often great disparity of views between whites and non-whites and between people of lower and higher economic status regarding issues of social welfare, race relations, and affirmative action (Erikson and Tedin, 1995: 179-193) supports this conclusion (discussed in more detail below).

The agenda-setting literature also suggests that, given personal experience and direct contact with the problems of inner cities, residents of these areas may find little of direct relevance in mainstream mass media's coverage of social and political issues, and thus turn away from such media. Research on media use provides some support for this proposition. Upper income Americans are much more likely to use multiple forms of mass media than are lower income Americans, and African Americans are less likely than whites to depend on the mainstream media for political Information (Graber, 1997: 195-196). One study found that whites in a low-income Los Angeles neighborhood were almost twice as likely to use mainstream mass media for political information as were African Americans, with Latinos

even less likely to do so (Williams, Dordick, and Horstmann, 1977). At the same time, African Americans and lower income Americans are significantly *more* likely to watch television than are whites and upper income Americans (Graber, 1997: 195-196), though *less* likely to watch television news.

     Framing and Priming: In addition to drawing attention to certain issues (and, in doing so, drawing attention away from other issues) the media have also been shown to shape the *way* issues are presented (framing) and thus to influence public reaction to them (priming). Research has shown that television — the most common source of political and non-political information in the United states — tends to frame most social issues *episodically* rather than *thematically*:

> Episodic framing depicts issues in terms of concrete instances or specific events — a homeless person, an unemployed worker, a victim of racial discrimination, the bombing of an air-liner, an attempted murder, and so on. The thematic news frame, on the other hand, places public issues in some general or abstract context. The thematic news frame typically takes the form of an in-depth, "backgrounder" report dealing with general outcomes or conditions. While episodic reports are often visually appealing, thematic reports consist primarily of "talking heads." (Ansolabahere, Behr, and Iyengar, 1993: 145).

For example, Iyengar (1991) found that 89 percent of network news reports on crime were episodic rather than thematic. The importance of how news is framed lies in its ability to "prime" the way viewers assign responsibility for social problems:

> Viewers who are exposed to news coverage that is thematically framed tend to assign responsibility for national issues to societal factors — cultural values; economic circumstances; or the motives, actions and inactions of government officials.... However, when television news coverage is heavily episodic (as is usually the case for issues such as poverty, crime, and terrorism), viewers attribute responsibility not to societal forces, but to the private motives and actions of poor people, criminals, and terrorists, respectively.

While these studies have focused on national television news, content analyses of local news strongly suggest that its coverage of issues is also dominated by episodic coverage (Entman, 1990; 1994). In addition, while newspaper coverage is traditionally more thematic than television, it, too, is becoming more episodic over time.

     I know of few studies which look specifically at the effects of framing and priming on inner city racial/ethnic communities. Nonetheless, the significance of framing and priming for revitalizing urban communities is clear. At a minimum, the largely episodic coverage of social and economic problems of relevance to inner cities means that the public is primed to view these problems as resulting from the behavior of inner city residents themselves, rather than due to larger social, economic, and political factors. This would work against developing coalitions outside poor urban communities to solve these

problems in ways that would address larger structural issues. And to the extent that such media portrayals also lead inner city residents to blame themselves or their neighbors for the problems they face, it would also work against the formation of a strong, politically active, community identity.

Research by Gandy et al. (1996), finds evidence that when newspapers aimed largely at white, middle class, audiences address issues of social risk (for example, job loss, cancer rates, police brutality, etc.) in racial terms, they tend to emphasize black loss while downplaying white gains or losses. Further, they find that structural causes (such as racism) for the disparities between blacks and whites are more likely to be mentioned in stories involving economics and government services than health care or the criminal justice system. While they do not look specifically at the effects of this type of framing, they provide a suggestive argument that the impact of such coverage on white readers would be to both discount systematic racism as the cause of black risk in health and criminal justice matters, and to discount the risk to white populations. Both effects, if true, would work against the formation of cross-community coalitions aimed at remedying such problems.

Attitudes and Opinions: Public opinion research finds strong evidence of significant differences of opinions across different economic and racial groups. Many of these differences, perhaps unsurprisingly, are strongest in the areas of direct relevance to inner city racial/ethnic communities — government assistance in jobs and welfare, affirmative action, and race relations.

Lower income Americans are significantly more likely than middle and upper income Americans to support increased government spending on the homeless, the poor, social security, unemployment assistance, childcare, and student loans. They are also more supportive of programs guaranteeing jobs and minimum standards of living. Differences across economic groups can also be found in areas other than social welfare, though much of these differences are accounted for by educational, rather than purely economic, differences. Lower income Americans are less likely to support government spending on science and technology or foreign aid. They are generally more conservative on social issues (showing less support for equal roles for women, abortion rights, gays in the military, rights of the accused), and more isolationist on foreign affairs (showing less support for U.S. involvement abroad and in the United Nations, and greater opposition to communism). Lower income Americans are also more likely to identify with the Democratic party and vote for Democratic candidates (Erikson and Tedin, 1994: 177-188).

African Americans are generally more Democratic and more liberal than whites, showing greater support for government social welfare spending and services, for government efforts to guarantee jobs and a minimum standard of living, and for anti-discrimination laws to protect homosexuals. African Americans are also more likely to oppose the death penalty and to have opposed U.S. military intervention in the Persian Gulf (Erikson and Tedin, 1994: 191; Dawson, 1994: 189-191).

African Americans are much more likely than whites to believe that the civil rights movement helped blacks, but to also believe that significant social and economic inequities still exist, and that the pace of change has been too slow (Sigelman and Welch, 1991). Given these differences, it is not surprising that African Americans are also much more likely than whites to believe that government should work towards improving the economic and social conditions of blacks and other minorities, including through educational quotas and employment and promotion preferences (Sigelman and Welch,

1991: 119-145; Erikson and Tedin, 1994: 190).

The greatest controversy regarding racial attitudes involves the issue of racism. Surveys find that whites are much less likely to subscribe to the most overt forms of racism (those based on arguments of genetic differences), and a good deal less likely to hold negative stereotypes of blacks, than in the past. Nonetheless, significant percentages of whites still say that blacks are unintelligent (24%), lazy (31%), not determined to succeed (22%), not hard working (17%), not dependable (13%), lack discipline (60%), and are violent or aggressive (50%) (Peffley and Shields, 1996: 184-85).

In addition to this evidence of considerable and continuing *overt* racism among whites, there is also considerable evidence regarding the existence of *symbolic* racism. Symbolic racism refers to attitudes regarding blacks (and other ethnic minorities), that, while avoiding direct statements of racial/ethnic inferiority, discount the existence of discrimination, blames minorities for their economic and social status, and, thus, opposes policies designed to implicitly or explicitly benefit minorities. For example, Sears, et al., (1996) measures symbolic racism as the denial of continuing racial discrimination, the absence of positive emotions towards blacks, the belief that blacks should work harder, the belief that civil rights leaders make excessive demands, and the belief that blacks have an undeserved advantage (pp. 25-26).

The concept of symbolic racism is controversial. Sniderman and Piazza (1993) argue that general political ideology and notions of fairness and equality, rather than racial prejudice, underlie whites' opposition to policies designed to benefit blacks. While this debate remains unresolved, the research documenting both overt and symbolic racism, and its impact on the policy stands and voting behavior of whites, is, to my mind, compelling (Sears, et al, 1996; Meertens and Pettigrew, 1996; Kinder and Sanders, 1996).

Research on attitudes about race in general and the views of African Americans in particular have been hampered by four factors. First, most surveys, especially national surveys, have relatively small percentages of African Americans, making fine-grained analyses of black opinion difficult. Second, most studies have focused exclusively or predominantly on white opinions about race. Third, issues of race are highly charged, making it difficult to accurately capture "true" opinions through surveys. And fourth, closed-ended surveys often miss subtle differences in meaning that can be imbedded in similar responses across the races.

Recent research, aided by new surveys of African Americans and innovative research designs have begun to remedy these problems. This research finds greater variation in African American opinion than often reported, with financially better off blacks less liberal on social welfare and race-specific policies than less well-off blacks (Dawson, 1994). Trend data also suggests that both blacks and whites have become more conservative on social welfare policies and that whites have become more liberal on civil rights (with the exception of busing), shrinking the differences across the races (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985; Page and Shapiro, 1992). However, both in general and within specific economic classes, African Americans continue to hold significantly more liberal opinions on social welfare, government programs aimed specifically at blacks and minorities, and civil rights than do whites (Dawson, 1994; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985).

One of the most telling findings regarding black opinion is the extent and persistence of beliefs among African Americans that white Americans hold negative stereotypes of them. Research by

Sigelman and Tuch (1996) shows that large percentages of African Americans believe whites endorse a number of racial stereotypes: for example, that blacks prefer to live off welfare (75%), are violent (82%), are lazy (69%), are unintelligent (76%), and are unpatriotic (44%). Significantly, while these percentages are higher than those actually *reported* by whites, they generally correspond with white attitudes, leading Sigelman and Tuch to conclude that black's views on white's racial stereotypes are generally accurate. In addition, these views are strongest among black women, younger blacks, and higher income blacks. The findings for age and income "confirm growing evidence of a deepening alienation from white society among that segment of the black population that, ostensibly, is the most successful and integrated" (Bobo, 1996: 7; Also see Bobo, et al., 1994; Cose, 1994; Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Hochschild, 1995).

While research on racial attitudes and opinions shows significant and often troubling patterns, there is remarkably little research on the role of communications in the formation and maintenance of these views, especially regarding the views of African Americans. Dawson (1994), found that use of the mainstream mass media was significantly and negatively related to African American survey respondents' sense of community among blacks (linked fate) and a belief that they had personally benefitted from the civil rights movement:

> Being an urban resident and being exposed to mainstream media served to weaken the link between individual African Americans and the group as a whole. Commentators as disparate as Marable and Wilson suggested that the increasing social disorganization of the inner cities has led to a breakdown of community (Wilson, 1987) and a lessening of group consciousness (Marable, 1983). The urban residence finding was consistent with their hypotheses. The finding that exposure to mainstream media served to weaken perceptions of linked fate is consistent with findings by Allen and Kuo (1990) that mainstream media can act as a conservative force.... As with linked fate, the more exposure one had to mainstream media, the less likely one was to believe that the black movement had affected oneself. (Pp. 82-83)

In one of the few studies regarding the impact of the media on children's attitudes towards race, Graves (1975) found that negative portrayals of blacks increased white children's racial stereotyping, while positive portrayals led to more positive opinions. However, for black children, the mere presence of blacks in the media — whether positively or negatively portrayed — led to more positive opinions.

Research by Armstrong, Neuendorf, and Brentar (1992) found different impacts for viewing entertainment television versus the news. For white viewers, exposure to entertainment television was correlated with more positive views regarding the socioeconomic status of blacks, while viewing the news was correlated with more negative views. The authors postulate that these differences were due to the tendency for entertainment television to portray blacks in professional, middle class roles, while blacks in the news are more often from poorer backgrounds (Gandy and Mantabane, 1989). Significantly, black viewers of both news and entertainment media were less affected, presumably due to their ability to draw on personal experience.

In an innovative experimental design, Peffley, Shields, and Williams showed white viewers a

local news story in which the race of a crime suspect was the *only* difference between two edited versions. They found that in the "black suspect" version, viewers were significantly more likely believe the suspect was guilty, to believe the suspect was likely to commit further crimes, to feel anger towards the suspect, and to recommend a harsher penalty. Similarly, research on the impact of the infamous "Willy Horton" 1988 presidential campaign ad suggests that viewing the ad activated whites' latent prejudices, priming not only reactionary attitudes towards crime (the ostensible subject of the ad), but also towards a much broader set of race-related policies (Mendelberg, 1996).

George Gerbner and his associates have taken an approach to the impact of television called *cultivation analysis*. This approach is similar to *priming* (discussed above), but focuses on the impact of the broader media environment (prime time entertainment and news) rather than on the impact of particular broadcasts or genres. Their research suggests that heavy viewers of television tend to see the real world in ways that are more similar to how it is portrayed on television than do light viewers. Thus, when television (directly or indirectly) provides positive racial images, heavy viewers are more likely to reflect these views in their own opinions about race, but when (as is more often the case) these images are negative or stereotypical, heavy viewers express arguably more prejudiced views.

Factual Information: Much of my own research has been in the area of citizens' factual knowledge about politics and the impact of this knowledge on attitudes and behaviors (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996). This research has several implications for issues of race and community revitalization. First, we found that aggregate levels of political knowledge were generally low. Second, however, we found significant and sizable variation in levels of knowledge, with lower income and African American citizens less politically informed than upper income and white Americans. Indeed, high income whites scored more than twice as high on our tests of general political knowledge than did low income blacks. Third, these differences were largely attributable to structural inequities — low income blacks are disproportionately less educated, less likely to be in high status occupations, and (by definition) less well-off financially, and all of these factors increase the motivations, opportunities, and skills necessary for obtaining and retaining political information.

The significance of these findings for issues of race and community revitalization are twofold. First, we found that more informed citizens were more likely than less informed citizens to participate in politics, to hold stable, consistent opinions, and to effectively tie their opinions to their political behaviors (e.g., to vote for or more generally support candidates and parties whose views on policy matters most closely resembled their own on). Thus, to the extent that blacks in general and poor blacks in particular are relatively uninformed about politics, these citizens are less likely to participate and less likely to do so effectively. Second, while as discussed above, blacks are generally more supportive of government programs designed to assist lower income and minority citizens, we found that greater political knowledge increased support for such programs among *both* blacks and whites. Thus, increasing and equalizing levels of political knowledge would increase aggregate support for racial equality and for programs designed to achieve such equality.

Also relevant to the concerns of this paper, we found that following politics in the media — especially print media — increased levels of political knowledge. In addition, while blacks were generally less informed about politics than whites, when the issue was of specific relevance to blacks

and/or when they involved local issues in communities where blacks made up a significant portion of both the general population and of government, racial differences in knowledge were diminished or disappeared.

Interpersonal Communications: Providing Opportunities for
Intra-Group, Inter-Group, and Elite-Public Deliberations

While the mass media is crucial to the exchange of information within and across communities, inter-personal communications are also vital to this process, and thus to the creation and maintenance of communities. While research in this area is under developed and of mixed quality, there is evidence that bringing people together in settings where they have the opportunity to meet with fellow citizens and political elites, exchange their views on important issues, learn more about these issues, and so forth, is beneficial in many ways: increasing political knowledge, political efficacy, political interest, political trust, and a sense of political community; finding areas of consensus; and developing an understanding of difference (Delli Carpini, 1996; Fishkin, 1995; Fishkin and Luskin, 1998; Putnam, 1995; Brehm and Rahn, 1995). There is also evidence that such face-to-face exchanges can also change aggregate opinions on substantive issues from those held prior to such deliberation (Fishkin and Luskin, 1998; Delli Carpini, 1996; Yankelovich, 1991).

The extent to which Americans engage in activities that afford them the opportunity to interact with fellow citizens is a matter of some dispute. Putnam (1995) sees a dangerous decline in community engagement, and, as a result, low levels of trust among citizens. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), however, argue that the vast majority of Americans engage in some level of political, secular, and/or religious activities, and about one third of Americans attend meetings or have worked with others to address community problems (see also Verba and Nie, 1972: 31).

There is also mixed evidence regarding differences in community engagement between whites and non-whites. According to Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) there is little difference between African Americans (19%), Latinos (14%), and Anglo Americans (17%) in the amount of informal community activity they engage in, and once active, there is also little difference in the amount of time these groups devote to community involvement. In addition, church membership (an important institution for community interaction) is greater for African Americans (74%) than for Latinos (62%) and Anglos (66%).

On the other hand, Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) also find that African Americans and Latinos are significantly less likely than white Americans to belong to either political or non-political organizations. African American and Latinos citizens are also significantly less likely to be asked to participate in non-religious community activities — a deceptively simple yet important predictor of such participation. And African Americans and Latinos are significantly less likely to have contacted a public official or member of the media to express their views on issues of the day.

The evidence is less mixed regarding class. Poorer Americans are significantly less likely to engage in informal community activity, less likely to be members of a political or non-political organization, less likely to a member of a church, less likely to be asked to participate in community activities, and less likely to have contacted an elected official or member of the media.

The internet provides a new venue for community and elite-public interaction. However, African Americans, Latinos, and low income citizens are less likely to have access to this technology at home, in schools, or at the workplace (Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press, 1994; 1995).

Finally, while open to dispute, at least some research and theory suggests that the increased use of television is contributing to a general decline in civic engagement (Fallows, 1996; Postman, 1985; Hart, 1994; Putnam, 1995. But see Norris, 1996).

Communities or Colonies? Areas For Future Research

Several conclusions can be drawn from extant research on communications. First, while ostensibly designed to create a diverse information environment that is open to a wide range of opinion, the mass media in the United States was always more limited to resource-poor, culturally and racially "marginal" groups. Second, this bias was exacerbated by the growing centralization of the media, and by changing views of the proper role of the media. Greater centralization increased the already sizable hurdles faced by lower income, racial/ethnic minorities for control or access. The economics of this more centralized mass media put pressure on both mainstream and minority media to focus on more upscale populations and concerns, as well as on more sensationalized, entertainment-oriented fare. The assumption that political elites in general and the media professionals in particular were responsible for determining the form and content of public information increased their gate keeping power, further decreasing the possibility of intra-group and elite-public communications, while at the same time distorting inter-group communications.

These structural biases, and their resulting effects on the portrayal of poor and/or racial communities have clear implications for how different economic and racial/ethnic groups view both each other and themselves. The media plays a critical role in setting the public agenda, framing issues, priming how citizens think about these issues, shaping deep-seated attitudes and opinions, and providing citizens with usable information about the political and social world. Interpersonal communications can insulate communities from some of the more divisive aspects of mass media, allowing for more nuanced, experiential, and deliberative exchanges. But these exchanges require opportunities and resources that are often unavailable to inner city residents. And the likelihood and nature of these exchanges is still strongly affected by the larger mass media environment in which they occur.

Given the lack of control over intra-group, inter-group, and elite-public communications, poor, urban, racial/ethnic populations come closer to colonies than communities. As indicated by the sizable differences in opinions across class and race, this hegemonic information environment has not prevented poor, racial/ethnic citizens from maintaining a distinctive, rational world view. It has, however, worked against the formation of informed, interconnected inner-city communities who are able to translate their collective interests into political power. It has led to a greater likelihood that middle class, white America will either ignore, misunderstand, and/or undervalue the views and opinions of non-middle class, non-white America. It has worked against the possibility of finding areas of consensus across diverse communities. And it has worked against the possibility of addressing differences in a way that respects and encourages cultural diversity while remedying economic and social inequities.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to only emphasize the negative aspects of the current

information environment. The power of the media as an information provider, agenda-setter, and issue framer, if properly harnessed, provides tremendous opportunities for revitalizing poor, inner city, ethnic communities. When made aware of its biases, the mainstream media *has* demonstrated some sensitivity to its portrayal of minorities and the poor, and very recent trends show at least some evidence of improvement. Mediated events like the Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas hearings, the Rodney King videotape and the O.J. Simpson trial drew public attention to issues of race and class that put these issues on the national agenda and created real opportunities for discourse (Fiske, 1996). New technologies the internet offer important new channels for inter, intra, and elite-citizen exchanges. Even ostensibly negative portrayals of race like the "Willy Horton" campaign ad created subsequent debates that worked to highlight the inherent racism still present in the United States and the way in which the media can be used to exploit this racism. For all its hegemonic centralization, the media environment remains essentially porous and open to multiple uses and interpretations.

This being said, there is a great deal that is poorly understood regarding the nature and impact of communications on inner city, poor, racial/ethnic communities. In particular, further research is needed in the following areas:

(1) Specific Research on the Impact of Communications in and on Inner City Poor Ethnic/Racial Communities: While the research described in this paper is instructive, few studies focus exclusively on inner city, poor, racial/ethnic communities. More work needs to be done on both how portrayals of such communities affect the knowledge, opinions, and behaviors of non-residents, and, especially, how residents of these communities are affected by their patterns of intra, inter, and public-elite exchanges. This research should take advantage of prior research, and of the methodology of surveys and statistical analyses, but should not be limited to such assumptions or techniques. Detailed, qualitative, anthropological approaches such as depth interviews and participant observation would provide useful and much needed theory development and fine-grained understandings of how inner city, poor, ethnic/racial communities negotiate within an information environment over which they have little control. Comparative studies across different classes and ethnicities within these communities, as well as across different urban communities (with presumably different resources and networks of communication) would also be invaluable.

(2) The Impact of Cultural Exchanges: In examining the political consequences of communications, "news" is often privileged over other forms of information. And yet as discussed in this paper, "entertainment" media — music, film, television dramas and comedies, sports, and so forth — are clearly important for how communities are bound together and see each other. While research in this area exists, it needs to be further developed, especially as it applies to urban, racial/ethnic groups, whose culture is at the same time often expropriated by white society and vilified. This research should also focus more on the social, political, and policy implications of what is often viewed as purely cultural issues.

(3) The Impact of New Media Technologies: One of the factors that makes studying the impact of the media difficult is the pace at which the media itself changes. New media — from

expanding cable stations, to satellites transmissions, to high definition television, to interactive television, to the internet — create new potential problems and opportunities. More research is needed on the dangers and benefits of these newer forms of communication, focusing on their ownership, content, impact, and accessability, especially as regards inner city ethnic communities. For example, while access to the internet is growing among all groups, significant disparities based on race and especially class and education exist. For example, in a recent survey by The Pew Research Center For The People and the Press, fewer Blacks (17 percent) than Whites (24 percent) reported having gone "on-line" in the last day. More dramatically, only 13 percent of those earning less than $20,000 did (as compared to 48 percent of those earning over $75,000 a year), as did only 16 percent of those with less than a high school degree (compared to 44 percent of those with a college degree). These disparities can also be seen across communities: as recently as 1994, half the population of Palo Alto, California had home computers, modems, and access to the internet, while fewer than 10 percent of Chicago residents could make this claim. Access to other communications technologies such as telephones, cable, and vcrs also show differences by race, education, and income. And despite its very real potential for greater diversity of programming and greater interactivity, new media like cable and to a lesser extent the internet ares increasingly owned and/or effectively controlled by a shrinking number of corporations. These issues are especially important in that policies regulating the development and spread of these technologies are currently being developed.

(4) Research on Local Media: Most studies of the mass media tend to focus on the national media. While obviously important, more needs to be known about the role of more local media in inter, intra, and local elite-citizen exchanges. It is at this level that the greatest potential for meaningful reform to occur in ownership, content, and thus impact. One particularly promising avenue in this regard is the "public journalism" movement. This movement, spearheaded by the Center for Public Life and the Press at NYU, the Poytner Institute, and by foundations like Kettering and the Pew Charitable Trusts, aims on making local media a more integral part of the community and for it to play a more central role in not only identifying local problems, but in providing information and opportunities that help in *solving* those problems.

These four areas of inquiry are all aimed at providing better, more detailed information regarding the impact of various forms of communication on poor, inner city ethnic communities. But to revitalize communities requires a better understanding of the possibilities for and limits on change. Given the complicated mix of types of communication available in inner cities, and the diversity of ethnic/class backgrounds of inner city residents, predicting the impact of changes in the communications environment is difficult at best. Carefully designed studies that include multi-method approaches to assessing existing community resources and information networks are crucial:

(1) Mapping Community Resources: While research suggests poor, urban, racial/ethnic communities lack resources for effective intra, inter, and elite-public communications, most of the evidence for this is highly aggregated and somewhat circumstantial. Detailed studies at the local level are needed which carefully "map" real and potential resources for inter-personal and mass mediated

communications, as well as who owns/controls these resources. Such a project would involve an inventory of existing voluntary associations, neighborhood publications, local cable and broadcast television stations (including public access), local radio stations, computer/internet availability, book stores, movie and live theaters, and so forth. It would also include availability of "public spaces" for interpersonal exchanges such as community centers, libraries, coffee houses, parks, taverns, and so forth. Understanding the existing infrastructure for communications is the first, key step for revitalizing communities.

(2) Mapping Community Information Networks: In addition to better understanding existing resources, it is important to understand existing patterns of how these resources are actually used, and by whom. There is still remarkably poor information on the day-to-day inter-personal and mediated information environment of inner city, poor, racial/ethnic residents. Who speaks to whom? How often? About what? Where do these exchanges occur? What, specifically, is read, listened to, or watched? How much of this daily personal and mediated exchange is intra-group oriented, inter-group oriented and/or elite-public oriented? Knowing more about the information environment of inner city poor ethnic/racial residents would serve to better identify the *actual* contours these communities (given the assumption that it is through communications that communities develop). For example, in what sense, based on the actual flows of information that exist in inner cities, can we talk about African American, Asian, and various Latino residents as part of a single community? It would also help identify how existing communications resources may be under-utilized, and what new resources need to be introduced.

Information regarding extant resources and information networks would serve two main purposes. First, they would provide crucial information for public officials, activists and the media on how best to both find out community concerns and for disseminating important information. Second, they would identify underutilized resources as well as "gaps" in communications chains that need to be remedied. Both of these would be crucial in our own decisions as to how best to devote resources so as to have a meaningful impact on community revitalization. For example, particular communities may already have well-developed community information networks that are underutilized in terms of social and political issues. Others may have networks that work well within certain, constrained subgroups within the community, but require ways of connecting these networks across larger inter or intra community groupings. Still others may need to find ways to connect to political elites or to the larger political community. In addition to pointing to ways of efficiently improving the information environment in specific communities, these mapping projects could identify already existing networks that could serve as models for other communities. Many communities are already experimenting with various ways of increasing civic discourse through partnerships among government, media, civic associations, and business interests (Rosen, 1998, forthcoming; Delli Carpini, forthcoming). These experiments could serve as useful lessons.

Armed with the information drawn from the approaches discussed above, I would recommend that we consider investing in our own community-based "experiments." Once we have mapped existing

community resources and information networks, and have identified successful experiments from other communities, we could apply these approaches (or other approaches more carefully tailored to particular community needs). It is my hope that these experiments would allow us to find the best ways to invigorate the information environments within communities.

For example, what would be the short and long term impact of creating forums that allowed inner city residents to regularly discuss issues of relevance with each other, absent changes in the larger media environment? How should such forums be structured? How homogeneous or heterogeneous should the participants be? What would happen if an existing community-based newspaper, radio station, or television station changed its reporting style from a mainstream to a "public" or "civic" journalism approach (Rosen, 1998), devoting more of its coverage to uncovering the interests of inner city residents, giving these residents greater voice in — even control of — the media, and working towards encouraging community forums and problem-solving rather than problem identification? What effect would such a public journalism approach have in mediums whose readership or audiences cut across diverse communities? What impact would providing inner city residents with computers, modems, and internet access, along with guidance and instruction on using this technology, have on the quality and quantity of intra, inter, and elite-public exchanges? While efforts in *all* of these areas are occurring, they are happening unsystematically, without real input from inner city residents themselves, and without much attention to ways of evaluating their impact.

(3) Shaping The National Media Environment: While my emphasis has been on local community, ultimately we need to consider how these local communities interact with the larger, national media environment, and how changes in that environment might help in both improving communications within local communities and in bringing these communities into the national political debate. This agenda, while more ambitious, would require three-pronged strategy. First, there needs to be greater efforts to work with the national media (news and entertainment) to help shape media content in ways that would be more sensitive to needs and interests of urban, poor, and ethnic communities. Environmental groups have been effective at lobbying writers, producers, and so forth in shaping media content and might serve as a useful model (Gay rights groups have also had some success in this regard).

Second, there needs to be a greater effort to lobby the federal government as it develops policies regarding media ownership, content, and access. The general direction of these policies in recent years has been towards a disturbing combination of free-market competition coupled with special advantages for the already well-established media conglomerates. The result has been the kind of industry centralization described above, as well as a decreasing ability of less-powerful communities to influence patterns of hiring and content. While some efforts to consider the impact of federal media policy exist (Bowie, 1990), more can be done in this area. Coalitions of citizen groups have been effective at putting issues of violence and sexually-explicit content on the national agenda — these efforts could serve as models.

If community and communications evokes notions of commonness, race, ethnicity and class evoke notions of difference. The current communications environment clearly works against creating a

sense of community based on commonness, celebrating the differences that add to the vibrancy of a polity, and identifying and remedying differences that are based on economic and social inequities. In the end, this requires giving inner city, poor, racial/ethnic residents the means through which they can communicate effectively and equitably with each other, with citizens of different economic and ethnic backgrounds with whom they are bound into larger communities, and with political elites who are responsible for translating community interests into public policy.

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