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African-American Photo Coverage in *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Time*, 1937-1988

By Paul Lester and Ron Smith

This content analysis of the pictures in three major magazines for an entire year for each of 11 sampled years in the 1937 through 1988 period shows that African Americans increased visibility from a low of 1.1% to a high of 8.8% of all photographs. This included the presence of African Americans on covers, in advertisements, sports, everyday life, and in other areas. The authors found the African-American photos could be grouped into periods of stereotyping (1937-1952), civil rights (1957-1972), and working within the system (1978-1988).

► There has been a general move toward a more fair and objective picture of African-Americans in newspaper and magazine photographs.¹ Gone are the stereotypes published in the late 1930s when *Life* magazine “overwhelmingly presented Negroes as either musical, primitive, amusing, or religious, or as violent and criminal; occupationally, they were pictured as either servants, athletes, or entertainers, or as unemployed.”²

Yet, as one national columnist has written, “racial justice remains for blacks, a distant dream.” Affirmative action programs have recently been limited by the Supreme Court. The Urban League in its study, “The State of Black America 1989,” reported the high poverty rate of African-Americans under the Reagan Administration. A recent survey found that blacks are less likely to seek medical care than whites. Another government study found that black babies are still almost twice as likely to die as whites. A media watchdog group reported that guests of a nationally televised news-interview program are generally white, conservative males.³ Despite advances in the media’s coverage of African-Americans, social and economic unity still lag.

What progress there is in the media’s coverage of African-Americans can be traced from the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s and the Kerner Commission’s report on civil disorders released in 1968. The report, an outgrowth of African-American protests and riots, criticized the media for ignoring the everyday life situations of African-Americans. “By failing to portray the Negro as a matter of routine and in the context of the total society,” the report stated, “the news media have, we believe, contributed to the black-white schism in this country.”⁴

A survey of magazine executives reported in *Columbia Journalism Review* found that criticisms leveled against newspapers and television by the Kerner Commission could be said about magazines. One

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magazine editor characterized the media's coverage as a "search for villains and heroes, and an incorrect emphasis on those Negro leaders who behave most theatrically. Violence and violent words are disproportionately highlighted, while real feelings are rarely portrayed."⁵

In 1970, *Ebony* magazine published an advertisement with the headline, "Why Johnny Can't Read Your Ads." The *Ebony* ad criticized the media's use of blond, all-American models in pictures selling everything from cigarettes to automobiles and in the "stories that surround those ads." "Johnny, you see, has trouble identifying with . . . all-American types," the ad stated. "They may be all-American in your neighborhood, but not in Johnny's. So Johnny doesn't get past the pictures to the words. He knows they're not meant for him."⁶

The Kerner Commission's report and its subsequent coverage sparked great interest among academic scholars to study the media's coverage of the races. Short and long-term studies related to advertising and news-editorial pictures and stories within newspapers, magazines and on television were published. A common theme that developed among the studies was: Although fair and unbiased African-American coverage was on the rise, the number of African-Americans in advertisements or in news photographs was low compared with the number of white Americans.

Some researchers recognized the need to study African-American media coverage before the Kerner Commission's report. In 1963, Berkman looked at advertisements in four issues in *Ebony* and *Life* magazines in 1960. He found that *Ebony* was more likely than *Life* to print advertisements selling "alcoholic beverages (including beer), patent medicines, men's apparel and accessories, 'money-making opportunities,' and Negro cosmetics and hair products." The difference in appeals, Berkman wrote, reflects "the dichotomy which exists between Negro middle-class aspirations and status reality."⁷

Lambert in 1964 analyzed pictures and text in 52 issues from 1959-60 and 1963-64 of *Look* magazine "dealing with the American Negro." Lambert found an increase in non-racial references to African-Americans and concluded that "*Look* is more likely to treat the Negro not as a Negro but as a member of society."⁸

Advertising photographs in selected issues of newspapers and magazines were studied in 1964 by Boynton. Of the 7,400 total pages on four metropolitan newspapers, 12 advertisements were found to contain pictures of African-American models. The 2,500 pages in

¹ Throughout this study, the term "African-American" will be used as a replacement for the word "black." As noted recently by a group of African-Americans, including Jesse Jackson, the term is preferred because it denotes the origin of a people rather than their color. Columnists as diverse as Clarence Page and Ann Landers have advocated the use of the term.

² Thomas Pettigrew, "Complexity and Change in American Racial Patterns: A Social Psychological View," *Daedalus*, 94:998 (Fall 1965).

³ William Raspberry, "Blacks dare to hope that Bush will make racial justice a reality," *The Orlando Sentinel*, Jan. 31, 1989, p. A-12; "Research finds inequities for blacks in medical care and drug tests," *The Orlando Sentinel*, Jan. 13, 1989, p. A-5; "U.S. blacks miss out on increased life span," *The Orlando Sentinel*, Mar. 16, 1989, A-1; "Nightline Criticized," *The Orlando Sentinel*, Feb. 6, 1989, p. A-2.

⁴ *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (New York: Bantam, 1968), p. 383.

⁵ Woody Klein, "News media and race relations: a self-portrait," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 7:43 (Fall 1968).

⁶ "Why Johnny Can't Read Your Ads," *New York Times*, Mar. 26, 1970.

⁷ Dave Berkman, "Advertising in *Ebony* and *Life*: Negro Aspirations vs. Reality," *Journalism Quarterly*, 40:53-64 (Winter 1963).

⁸ Verdelle Lambert, "Negro Exposure in *Look*'s Editorial Content," *Journalism Quarterly*, 42:657-659 (Autumn 1964).

three magazines yielded four ads with African-Americans. Boyenton concluded that the lack of progress "need not be construed as segregationist or anti-Negro. It would be nearer to the point to attribute the slow pace to the well-worn habit of seeking business where it is known to be."⁹

In the following year, Kassirjian, critical of the "limited time span and the informal or unsystematic content analysis" of past studies, looked at African-Americans in advertisements for the years, 1946, 1956 and 1965. The purpose of the study was to look at the frequency, roles and changes in the roles of African-Americans in ads. Twelve magazines with circulations each of over 250,000 were selected. In total, 546 ads were isolated from 150,000 magazine pages. Kassirjian found that the frequency of using African-Americans in ads remained low and about the same for the three years. "The Negro's occupational status, however, has risen significantly, but he is still seldom found in conventional middle-class settings."¹⁰

In 1970, the *Journal of Advertising Research* published, "Special Issue: Research on Negroes." Writers reported their findings in articles titled, "The Negro Market," "Integrated Advertising-White Backlash?," "Three Seasons of Black's on Television," "How Negro Models Affect Company Image," "White Responses to Integrated Advertising," and "Social Effects of Integrated Advertising." Among the conclusions in the studies were that "ads with all-Negro or all-white principals may be more effective than integrated ads" and the occupational roles of African-Americans have shifted "from cooks, maids, and butlers, etc., to businessmen, students, and consumers."¹¹

In 1971, Geizer looked at the advertising content in *Ebony* magazine in 1960 and 1969. Geizer found that although "the proportion of black advertisements has not changed drastically from 1960 to 1969" there has been an increased number of racially mixed ads. Such a finding, it was concluded, reflected the perceived philosophy of *Ebony* as an advocate for integration and middle class values.¹²

Stempel looked at the first 10 issues of five U.S. magazines in 1960 and 1970. News and advertising pictures were analyzed for white and African-American content. Stempel found that the percentages of African-Americans in news pictures increased from 1960 to 1970, that whites are used more often in advertisements than for news pictures, and the differences are insignificant between the five magazines studied.¹³

In 1982, Sentman completed one of the most thorough content analyses to date. She looked at African-American coverage in *Life* magazine from 1937 to 1972 using five-year increments. Sentman found that although there was a sharp increase in the total percentage of African-Americans in the last two years of her study, "coverage of black Americans constituted a minute portion of *Life's* content." Everyday life activities of African-Americans, one of the editor's

⁹ William Boyenton, "The Negro Turns to Advertising," *Journalism Quarterly*, 42:227-235 (Spring 1965).

¹⁰ Harold Kassirjian, "The Negro and American Advertising, 1946-1965," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 6:29-39 (February 1969).

¹¹ Various Authors, "Special Issue: Research on Negroes," *Journal of Advertising Research*, 10 (April 1970).

¹² Ronald Geizer, "Advertising in *Ebony*: 1960 and 1969," *Journalism Quarterly*, 48:131-134 (Spring 1971).

¹³ Guido Stempel, "Visibility of Blacks in News and News-Picture Magazines," *Journalism Quarterly*, 48:337-339 (Summer 1971).

goals, were markedly absent from the pages of the magazine. Such a finding contradicted *Life's* mission stated by Henry Luce in 1936, "to see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud . . . to see and be instructed." Sentman concluded that "*Life* failed to provide its mass audience with an opportunity for exposure to the everyday life of black America."¹⁴

Based on the premise that "the way the media portray black Americans and report on relations between the races strongly influences the way the public perceives these aspects of American life" and the assumption that "it can be argued that for many — perhaps most — American blacks not much has changed since 1968, when the Kerner report sketched a stark picture of the American black's position at the bottom of society's socioeconomic ladder," Martindale, in her 1986 book *The White Press and Black America*, reported the results of a content analysis of newspaper story, column, letter and picture coverage of African-Americans. A total of 245 issues were analyzed for three time periods, 1950-53, 1963-68 and 1972-80 in four newspapers. A slight increase in coverage for African-Americans for the years studied was found. Martindale concluded that the increase may be a result of "an increased awareness of blacks, and, perhaps, a desire to cover them more extensively and realistically than . . . in the past." The increase "may also have resulted partly from an increased visibility and participation of black citizens in the everyday life of American society."¹⁵

If a trend toward covering the everyday life events of African-Americans is in effect, a long-term content analysis of media coverage should reveal an upward trend in depiction of African-Americans on the cover and for the content categories of everyday life, prominent persons, social commentary, and advertisements. The content categories of entertainment, sports and crime should decline as stereotypical coverage is reduced.

Furthermore, a readership study revealed that the percentage of African-Americans who read *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Time* is 14.9, 10.7 and 9.3 respectively.¹⁶ The 1980 census reported that African-Americans compose 11% of the U.S. population.¹⁷ Since readership figures approximately coincide with the population figure, it is reasonable to assume that the percentage of African-Americans pictured within each magazine should be at least 11%. As Wheatley wrote in his criticism of Kassarian's study, "if race were not a criterion for the selection of a model one would expect random selection to result in approximately 11% of all advertisements containing people having blacks in them."¹⁸ The same logic should hold true for news editorial pictures.

Kassarian and Sentman reported low total percentages for pictures of African-Americans because they based their figures on the total number of pages published, not on the number of pictures with

¹⁴ Alice Sentman, "Black and White: Disparity in Coverage by *Life* Magazine from 1937 to 1972," *Journalism Quarterly*, 60:501-508 (Autumn 1983).

¹⁵ Carolyn Martindale, *The White Press and Black America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp. 1-4, 82.

¹⁶ 1984 *Study of Media and Markets* (New York: Simmons Market Research Bureau, Inc., 1984), pp. 28-29.

¹⁷ *Newsweek*, Jan. 17, 1983, p. 22.

¹⁸ John Wheatley, "The Use of Black Models in Advertising," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 8:391 (August 1971).

human figures. Pages without photographs and pictures without human figures should not be included in the analysis.

Based on the results from previous research, five hypotheses can be postulated about the African-American pictorial coverage within the pages of three nationally published magazines, *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Time*:

1. African-American coverage has increased over time,
2. The content categories of everyday life, prominent persons, social commentary, and advertisements will increase over time,
3. The content categories of entertainment, sports and crime will decrease over time,
4. The African-American pictorial coverage will be similar for all three magazines, and
5. The African-American picture percentage will approach the 11% circulation and population figure for each magazine over time.

Methodology

A content analysis of the pictorial treatment of African-Americans for all issues for the years, 1937, 1942, 1947, 1952, 1957, 1962, 1967, 1972, 1978, 1983 and 1988 for *Life*, *Newsweek* and *Time* magazines was performed. The three magazines were selected because of their national prominence, large circulations, and blend of news and feature subject stories.

It was concluded from a preliminary study that a sample of any fewer issues would not result in a fair representation of each magazine's coverage. Pictures of African-Americans are scattered among many issues of each magazine throughout the year. Clustering within an issue occurs because of significant news events or special issues devoted to African-Americans. If a random or purposeful sample of issues within a year was taken, the risk of missing important instances of African-American coverage would be high. A fair representation of the magazine's coverage, therefore, could not be stated.

Picture content was studied because of the photograph's power to immediately impact a reader's perceptions. Woodburn has reported that surveys show "that readership of pictures is high in comparison to other elements of a newspaper."¹⁹ Miller wrote that "photos are among the first news items to catch the reader's eye, and they often help to establish the context or frame of reference in which the reader interprets an accompanying story."²⁰ Blackwood made the point that "sometimes the photos are the only representations of world events to which some people are exposed. These factors make the photos in newspapers potentially important conveyors of information and shapers of attitudes."²¹ If African-Americans have been slighted, pictures will clearly show that fact. As Stempel noted, pictures show "the most clearcut evidence of visibility or lack of it."²²

The years studied reflect the pre- and post-civil rights era, the Kerner Commission's influence on media coverage, and the present situation. Because *Life* quit publishing in 1972, but resumed in 1978 as a monthly, *Newsweek* and *Time*, coincided with *Life*'s year of publica-

¹⁹ Bert Woodburn, "Reader Interest in Newspaper Pictures," *Journalism Quarterly*, 24:197 (Autumn 1947).

²⁰ Susan Miller, "The Content of News Photos: Women's and Men's Roles," *Journalism Quarterly*, 52:72 (Spring 1975).

²¹ Roy Blackwood, "The Content of News Photos: Roles Portrayed by Men and Women," *Journalism Quarterly*, 60:711 (Winter 1983).

²² Stempel, *op. cit.*, pp. 338-339.

tion for this analysis.

The unit of analysis for the study was the page. If African-American picture coverage composed one-half page, the coverage was tabulated as .5. If two pages were devoted to pictures of African-Americans, the coverage was tabulated at 2.

With Sentman's study as a model, the subject categories were covers, everyday life, prominent persons, social commentary, advertisements, entertainment, sports and crime.

- 1) *Covers*. Coverage of any African-American on the cover.
- 2) *Everyday Life*. Coverage of any African-American engaged in an everyday life activity.
- 3) *Prominent Person*. Any coverage of widely known African-Americans either pictured alone or within groups.
- 4) *Social Commentary*. Coverage of issues specifically related to the place of African-Americans in American society.
- 5) *Advertisements*. Any picture within an advertising context of African-Americans.
- 6) *Entertainment*. Coverage of entertainers, fashion models and the arts.
- 7) *Sports*. Coverage of any athlete or sporting event.
- 8) *Crime*. Coverage of the accused and victims within a crime-related picture.

To avoid any coder reliability problems, all of the data were collected by one of the researchers.

The total number of pictures with human figures was calculated from 99 issues — the first issue of January, the last issue of June, and the last issue of December — of each year studied for each magazine. Some of Sentman's data was used for *Life* magazine's analysis.

Coverage of foreign persons of African descent was not included.

Since *Life* magazine published three issues in 1978, the 12 issues for 1979 were included in the 1978 analysis.

Results

Out of the 160,802 total pages studied for all three magazines, 34,237.9 pages were devoted to pictures of human figures. Out of the human figure total, 1,149.1 pages were pictures of African-Americans, or 3.36 percent for all three magazines for the years studied.

Table 1
Total, Human Figure and African-American Pages
With African-American Total Percentages in *Life*, 1937-1988

Year	Total Pages	Human Figure Pages	African-American Pages	African-American Total Percentages
1937	4,968	1,932.7	29.8	1.5
1942	5,914	1,904.9	23.7	1.2
1947	7,072	2,185.7	21.2	1.0
1952	7,746	1,390.1	31.0	2.2
1957	7,578	3,172.0	83.4	2.6
1962	5,844	2,132.0	52.6	2.5
1967	5,466	1,662.6	92.9	5.6
1972	4,136	1,800.9	111.7	6.2
1978	2,034	1,023.0	32.5	3.2
1983	1,606	828.0	46.6	5.6
1988	1,624	728.4	48.7	6.7

Table 2
Total, Human Figure and African-American Pages
With African-American Total Percentages in *Newsweek*, 1937-1988

Year	Total Pages	Human Figure Pages	African-American Pages	African-American Total Percentages
1937	2,178	530.4	3.2	.6
1942	3,922	582.4	2.7	.5
1947	5,188	457.6	13.3	3.0
1952	5,230	650.0	13.2	2.0
1957	5,320	540.8	5.7	1.1
1962	4,950	707.2	6.0	.9
1967	5,292	577.2	39.0	6.8
1972	5,346	582.4	37.7	6.5
1978	5,308	1,050.4	33.5	3.2
1983	4,916	889.2	46.3	5.2
1988	4,062	738.4	96.0	13.0

Table 3
Total, Human Figure and African-American Pages
With African-American Total Percentages in *Time*, 1937-1988

Year	Total Pages	Human Figure Pages	African-American Pages	African-American Total Percentages
1937	4,008	348.4	6.9	2.0
1942	4,892	546.0	10.0	1.8
1947	5,786	613.6	15.0	2.4
1952	5,666	587.6	6.1	1.0
1957	5,648	800.8	9.0	1.1
1962	4,656	639.6	8.4	1.3
1967	5,258	894.4	31.2	3.5
1972	4,718	868.4	27.8	3.2
1978	5,072	941.2	48.1	5.1
1983	4,698	962.0	49.4	5.1
1988	4,700	977.6	64.7	6.6

Using the human figure page count, overall African-American picture percentages are higher than reported in previous studies that used the total page count method. This study has been able to address the hypotheses posed in the first section.

- 1) African-American coverage increased over time. *Hypothesis supported.* Over the years studied, the African-American percentage has increased from an average low for all three magazines of 1.1 percent in 1942 to an average high of 8.8 percent in 1988.
- 2) The content categories of everyday life, prominent persons, social commentary, and advertisements will increase over time. *Mixed results.*
- 3) The content categories of entertainment, sports and crime will decrease over time. *Mixed results.*

During periods of social unrest or political awareness of African-Americans (the years 1957, 1967, 1972 and 1988), the social commentary, crime and prominent person (in 1988) subject categories and the number of cover photographs increased. During those same years, however, everyday life and advertisement pictures decreased. Entertainment and sports subjects generally remained about the same.

- 4) The African-American pictorial coverage will be similar for all three magazines. *Hypothesis supported.*

When analyzing the 11 years studied in each category for each magazine, there is remarkable similarity in the percentages obtained for all three magazines. Despite individual differences during particular years, the differences between the three magazines remain slight over the 1937-1988 time frame. Sentman criticized *Life* for its low African-American picture use. This study has shown that *Life's* totals were not unusual when compared to the other two magazines.

5) The African-American picture percentage will approach the 11% circulation and population figure for each magazine over time. *Mixed results.*

When the percentage is computed from the number of human figure pages, the African-American percentage is much higher, and probably more accurate, than reported in previous studies. Although there has been a steady rise in African-American coverage for all three magazines, *Newsweek* is the only magazine that approached the 11% figure in 1972 and surpassed the number in 1988.

Discussion

After reviewing the results of this study with an eye on the historical events within the 51-year time-frame, three eras emerge. The years 1937 to 1952 reflected the early racial stereotyping common to all publications. However, increased awareness of African-American problems during World War II was also within this period. The turbulent years between 1957 and 1972 showed the rise in the civil rights movement and the urban riots throughout the United States. The era was also marked by an increased awareness among the media to report the underlying causes for African-American unrest. The modern era, the years 1978 to 1988, reflected the attempt by African-American leaders to effect change by working within various political systems. Table 4 shows the combined percentages for all three magazines during the three eras for each subject category.

Table 4
Combined Percentages for *Life*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*
for Three Time Periods

	1937-1952	1957-1972	1978-1988
Everyday	7.0	4.0	9.4
Prominent Person	2.1	3.7	10.6
Advertisements*	44.4	18.9	25.2
Social Commentary	21.4	36.8	14.0
Entertainment	15.0	13.7	12.6
Sports	11.6	19.6	18.3
Crime	5.5	6.8	10.1
Covers	0.5	2.6	2.1
Total	1.6	3.4	6.0

* From 1937-1972, only *Newsweek* and *Time* are represented in this category.

In a 1968 *Time* article on African-American participation in commercials, Urban League Director Whitney Young said, "It's important that blacks are used more frequently in ads because they serve to educate the masses of viewers that black people, like themselves, have

an important role in American life. The situation was awful, is better, and has to get better."²³

The increase in African-American coverage is largely due to dramatic increases in everyday life, prominent person and advertisement subject categories. An emphasis on those subjects is an indication that African-Americans received recent attention not due to protests, entertainment or sports figures, but because of a sensitivity on the part of editors to show African-Americans as equal members of society. Such a trend reflects the way the American media have evolved from the stereotypical coverage of 50 years ago. Publishers, editors, reporters and photographers should be encouraged to continue that positive trend.

²³ "Commercials Crossing the Color Line," *Time*, Oct. 25, 1968, p. 83.