



Thomas J. Hrach. *The Riot Report and the News: How the Kerner Commission Changed Media Coverage of Black America.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016. 240 pp. \$25.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-62534-211-9.

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Published on H-FedHist (August, 2017)

Commissioned by Caryn E. Neumann (Miami University of Ohio Regionals)

During the past several years, the racial climate in our nation has been volatile: from Michael Brown being shot multiple times by officer Darren Wilson as his large body bled profusely in the sweltering heat in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, to the troubling death of Sandra Bland almost a year later at the hands of Texas state trooper Brian Encina in July 2015, to the horrendous mass shooting of nine black church members by a mentally deranged man, Dylann Roof, in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. Each of these horrific incidents (and several others) jilted many people, across racial lines, and caused many people to ponder what was happening in our nation with regard to race relations. Despite such horrendous atrocities, none of the specific incidents resulted in riots. This is in stark contrast to earlier decades, when reactions toward blatant racial injustice frequently led to racial unrest or were more commonly referred to as riots by the mainstream news media.

In his passionate, detailed, meticulous, and well-researched book, *The Riot Report and the News*, Thomas J. Hrach, a professor of journalism at the University of Memphis, has crafted a compelling and engaging narrative that examines how the Kerner Commission established in 1968, previously referred to as the Report of the Nation-

al Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders appointed by President Lyndon Johnson the previous year, began to examine the sudden rash of big city riots and other forms of urban unrest. While American cities have certainly experienced racial unrest, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, for most of the mid-twentieth century (late 1940s to early 1960s), such racial unrest was often minimal or sporadic at best. This changed by August 1965 as the predominately black (then termed Negro) Watts section of Los Angeles went up in flames after decades of hostile and fractious relations between the black community and the police. For the next two years, Newark, Detroit, Chicago, Baltimore, and St. Louis experienced racial unrest as well. It was the culmination of such ongoing unrest that prompted Johnson and several of his senior advisors to launch an investigation.

Hrach describes how then Illinois governor Otto Kerner (who was convicted several years later in a bribery scandal and sentenced to prison) reached out to President Johnson and agreed to head the commission that was responsible for addressing fourteen points related to the riots. While there were a number of issues that were of concern to Johnson and the commission, the primary question that everyone wanted answered

was “What effect do the mass media have on the riots?” (p. 41). As it turned out, this was indeed a most legitimate concern.

Throughout the book, Hrach provides examples of the many members of the press who harbored their own racial biases. Moreover, they were frequently condescending and arrogantly manipulative when covering young black children and teenagers. One incident of such media manipulation was when a white male television reporter encouraged two ten-year-old black boys to stick their heads through a broken window for the sake of capturing visual footage (p. 11). Two other particularly disturbing examples of such irresponsible media behavior was when a Los Angeles lieutenant described overhearing a white television cameraman encouraging a black kid to throw rocks while a third baited several young black men to take off their shirts and don bandanas in an effort to make them appear more menacing to viewers (p. 12). Hrach also provides interesting information, although for many people of color not all that surprising, on how many black reporters eagerly covered the riots and other related stories that affected their own (black) communities but were often the recipients and victims of hostile law enforcement, condescending bosses, and other racial factors. A number of southern newspapers (and some northern ones) were hostile to both black Americans and the civil rights movement in general.

Hrach eloquently notes that several members of the commission spent more than half a year conducting interviews with black and white citizens, hired a research company to do varied forms of analytical research, and assembled weekly roundtables with members of both the print and electronic media. In these meetings, those in attendance discussed race relations in an environment often free of tension. As Hrach sees it, there was no doubt that the findings of the Kerner Commission prompted journalists and other people outside the profession to begin having

serious discussions on the issue of race that extended to reporters’ treatment and coverage of such stories as well as the racial composition of newsrooms.

The author draws much of his research from the Johnson Presidential Library and the papers of the late governor Otto Kerner’s archives. At 139 pages, the book is shorter than expected given the subject matter and significance of the topic. The book could have benefited from more information on the relationships between white and other non-white reporters and more detail and content on the historically complex nature of the mainstream media’s often complex and awkward treatment of racial issues. Also, notable is the fact that Hrach fails to make any connection between the fortieth anniversary of the Kerner Commission, also the year Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and the election of the nation’s first black president, Barack Obama. For many people, particularly historians, this was seen as a radical milestone.

Today, more than half a century later, with race relations especially tense, a media that is the target of unprecedented hostility from critics on both the left and right, continuing horrendous relations between law enforcement and many communities of color, systemic and systematic racism, ongoing patronizing treatment of many communities of color, brazenly intense political polarization, and other social maladies, such a book is indeed timely and would be an excellent book for use in courses in journalism as well as courses that focus on contemporary issues.

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Citation: Elwood D. Watson. Review of Hrach, Thomas J. *The Riot Report and the News: How the Kerner Commission Changed Media Coverage of Black America*. H-FedHist, H-Net Reviews. August, 2017.

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