

Ronald N. Jacobs. *Race, Media and the Crisis of Society: From Watts to Rodney King.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xii + 189 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-62578-4.



Reviewed by Jim Leonhirth

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Prior to the second half of the 20th century, newspapers in the United States divided along regional, racial, and ideological grounds. Black newspapers prospered during World War II and enjoyed their largest circulations at the end of the war. The successes of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, however, resulted in questions about the survival of black newspapers. With the nationalization of the news media after the success of television, with mainstream newspapers' hiring of African-American reporters and editors away from the black press, and increased mainstream newspapers' attention to issues of interest to African-Americans, the black press faced a drain of personnel and economic travails.

In *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society: From Watts to Rodney King*, Ronald N. Jacobs contends that maintenance of an active black press and greater mainstream press attention to the work of the black press are necessary to maintain positive communication between the constituent communities of U.S. civil society. For Jacobs, an assistant professor of sociology at the University at Albany (State University of New York), such com-

munication should be reciprocal and not merely an awareness by these constituent communities of the products of the mainstream media and their roles in the larger civil society. Also key to a stronger black press may be greater use of online communication technologies.

To illustrate the role that the black press can play in providing alternative voices for U.S. civil society, Jacobs uses a narrative analysis of mainstream and black press coverage of three examples of racial confrontation in Los Angeles, which prior to the 1960s had received some acclaim for racial harmony and equality of opportunities. Reviewed were coverage of the Watts uprisings in 1965, the beating of Rodney King in 1991 and the aftermath of the acquittal of four police officers in the King beating in 1992 to examine the differences in narratives between mainstream and black newspapers and in different regions of the nation. The study included coverage of the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Chicago Defender*, and the *New York Times* and the *New York Amsterdam News*.

Among Jacobs' findings was that the black newspapers provided much broader historical and cultural contexts for their coverage of these events and their aftermaths. Of particular concern to Jacobs, however, was the transition in narratives from the Watts uprisings and the King beating to the acquittal of the police officers and O.J. Simpson. Although the mainstream and black newspapers disagreed about their identities, all of these newspapers saw heroes and villains in the Watts uprisings and the King beating. The newspapers also saw possibilities, although differing in nature, for crossing the racial divide. With the acquittals, however, Jacob found an acknowledgment of a U.S. racial divide without likelihood of any bridging.

Lack of adequate communication between the U.S. civil society and its constituent communities may be responsible for this divide. Jacobs contends that three factors have prevented the black press from having a more significant impact on U.S. civil society: the place-bound nature of news media, the racial stratification of the public sphere, and the rise of tragic discourse as the dominant cultural form for discussing race and race crisis. His solutions include broadening of racial and culture perspectives beyond geographical boundaries, greater awareness by the mainstream media of voices in the black media, more black voices in the mainstream media, and rather than unchecked tragic discourse, having collective mobilization, public engagement, and motivation to work through difficult public problems.

While Jacobs provides interesting perspectives on the nature of racial narratives in the mainstream press and in the black press, *Race, Media, and Civil Society* fails in its historical analysis to include any significant discussion of the black press during World War II. Black newspapers noted significantly and continually the ironies of U.S. battles against the Nazi view of race superiority in Europe while maintaining policies of racial superiority in the U.S. armed forces and

on the home front. Fair-employment and other civil rights advances in the Northeast, Midwest, and West during the war allowed more focus on civil rights inequities in the South after the war.

Jacobs also expressed surprise that some black press criticism of rioters during the Watts uprisings was greater than that of the mainstream media. A review of black press coverage during the civil rights and anti-war demonstrations of the 1960s and 1970s, however, shows that the mainstream black press opposed any actions that detracted from "middle class" propriety. This view extended even to the demonstrations led by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Jacobs' conclusion about the place-bound nature of news media is interesting in light of the growth of Web-based news operations. While traditional newspapers retain geographical coverage areas, access to Web-based publications is available around the world, and such availability has varying levels of effects on the news operations themselves. Jacobs also decries the lack of a Web presence for many black newspapers, and that situation deserves more study.

Race, Media, and Civil Society is a valuable addition to studies of the black press and raises significant questions about the role of the black press that deserve continued attention. Jacobs's advocacy of his contentions, however, seems to guide his analysis of his findings rather than to derive from those findings. Jacobs has a point to make, and he makes it fairly effectively.

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