Introduction

Los Angeles is wonderful. Nowhere in the United States is the Negro so well and beautifully housed. Out here in this matchless Southern California there would seem to be no limit to your opportunities.
(W. E. B. DuBois, 1913)

Stop your protest or we will use Los Angeles measures against you.
(Tadzhikistan police, 1992)

This book is about three disturbing events in the history of Los Angeles, and the ways in which those events were made meaningful in African-American and mainstream news media. The 1965 uprisings in Watts, the 1991 videotaped police beating of Rodney King, and the post-verdict events of 1992 have transformed the image of racial Los Angeles from one of a Utopian Oz,[1] extolled by DuBois in 1913 and named by the Urban League in 1964 as the best city for blacks to live; to a dystopian *Blade Runner*, with Los Angeles the setting for a tale of moral decay, despair, and the loss of authenticity.[2] Images of racial violence and police brutality hang heavily, casting a dark shadow over glitzy images produced in the dream factories of the City of Angels. Tourists no longer have to wonder what lies on the other side of the Hollywood sign; it is the haunting specter of racial fragmentation.

While most research on Los Angeles has focused on economic change, population shifts, and public space, this book focuses on civil society, culture, and the spaces of representation. The Watts and Rodney King crises were certainly indicative of significant structural strains which heightened racial tensions in Los Angeles and the nation. But they also provided key moments of public debate and public reflection about such heady matters as the meaning of the American dream, the promise of the civil rights movement, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. These

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crises offered social drama of the highest order to the American public. Would they end with unity or fragmentation? Trust or suspicion? An opening of social boundaries, or an increase in tribalism and other hyper-active forms of social closure? People who were otherwise disengaged from public life turned on their television sets and opened their newspapers, in the process having often heated arguments about what each crisis meant, and what should be done to resolve it. By exposing racial representations in their rawest form, the Watts and Rodney King crises changed public discussions about matters of common concern in ways which were far from trivial.

Mass media and civil society

In the social sciences, the study of public communication and democracy is coming increasingly to be framed through the twin concepts of *civil society* and *public sphere*. Civil society refers to the entire web of associational and public spaces in which citizens can have conversations with one another, discover common interests, act in concert, assert new rights, and try to influence public opinion and public policy.[3] This rather expansive definition includes the activities of social movements, voluntary associations, public relations specialists, media personalities, reading groups, and any other individuals or groups who gather together to discuss matters of common concern. It includes the pursuit of common political agendas as well as common cultural identities and solidarities. It understands that a vibrant civil society is supposed to prevent the state from dominating and atomizing the rest of society, allowing groups and communities simultaneously to resist subordination and to demand inclusion.[4] Finally, and most importantly, it binds the normative ideals of democracy to the arena of the public sphere.

The concept of the public sphere refers to a particular type of practice which takes place in civil society: the practice of open discussion about matters of common public concern. The concept owes much of its academic popularity to Habermas, and the publication of his now-classic *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas wanted to explain why the normative model of politics changed, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (particularly in the Anglo-American world), so that the principle of open public discussion came to replace that of parliamentary secrecy.[5] He explained this change in politics as being caused by the development of a bourgeois public sphere, which he defined as the sphere of private people come together as a public, who claimed the space of public discourse from state regulation, and demanded that the

state engage them in debate about matters of political legitimacy and common concern. Envisioning the public sphere primarily as a political space that could help challenge, engage, and regulate public authorities, Habermas emphasized face-to-face communication, rational-critical discourse, and a single public arena.

More recent scholars, however, have begun to question the historical, empirical, and normative validity of a single public sphere grounded in rational-critical discourse. Instead, contemporary theorists argue that civil society consists of multiple, frequently nonrational, and often contestatory public spheres, which are oriented just as often to cultural issues as to political ones.[6] Established and maintained by communication media, these public spheres support many different (but overlapping) communities of discourse.[7] The new model of civil society that is emerging is one of a multiplicity of public spheres, communities, and associations nested within one another, most of which are also oriented (in differing degrees) to a putative larger "national sphere".[8]

In this portrait of overlapping, interconnected, and competing public spheres, which are likely to remain always fractured and disconnected in some degree or another, the mass media – and in particular, the news media – take on an ever increasing significance.[9] News media provide a common stock of information and culture, which private citizens rely on in their everyday conversations with others. Indeed, sixty-eight percent of the American public watches at least one television news program in a typical day, for an average duration of fifty-eight minutes.[10] Fifty-four percent of adults read a newspaper every day, and eighty-eight percent read the paper at least once a week.[11] This common stock of information makes intersubjectivity possible, even among those who may never come into contact with one another. By creating an open-ended space where ideas can be expressed and received by a potentially limitless and universal audience of present and non-present others, modern communications media – contrary to theories of "mass society" – have actually expanded the public sphere.[12]

If mass media have expanded the public sphere, however, they have done so in rather unexpected ways. On the one hand, they have expanded the spatial and temporal limits of public communication, creating a "global civil society" that has the potential to impact any public discussion about matters of common concern. International media events today are addressed to a fictional world audience that is believed to be an important source of international public opinion.[13] On the other hand, mass media have multiplied the number of publics immeasurably, stretching the beliefs about shared communication, so important to democracies, to the limit. Mass media serve simultaneously as forces of inclusion and exclusion, universalism and

particularism, globalization and localization, integration and fragmentation, freedom and constraint. To understand their impact, they need to be located within a communicative geography of civil society.

In Chapter 1, I offer a theory about the role of news media in a civil society consisting of multiple public spheres. Recognizing that news media do not offer perfect public forums for open dialogue about matters of common concern, I argue that there are, nevertheless, many instances where news media do act as public spheres: during press conferences, interview shows, call-in shows, live broadcasts of public events, and the like. In addition, news media shape most other publics in significant ways, by defining the public agenda – a fact which leaders of social movements, voluntary associations, and other civil society organizations ignore at their peril. In order to gain a voice in the larger, more politically-consequential public spheres, these leaders must develop successful strategies for gaining media access.

In a civil society consisting of multiple publics, the media strategies of citizens, associations, and communities can be accommodated most effectively when there are both large and small news organizations. Access to large news media such as *ABC News*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times* is crucial for those who want to try to influence public opinion and public policy. Indeed, the lure of this kind of publicity leads many people to adapt their media strategies to the preferences and practical routines of mainstream journalism. But there are risks involved when people try to participate in large public spheres over which they have little or no control. There is no guarantee of gaining a larger public voice, and there is a danger of too much accommodation and too little cultural autonomy. Because of these risks, there is still a powerful need for smaller, more local spaces of discussion and news which offer greater autonomy and more control. This suggests that alternative media such as the African-American press have an important role to play in the creation of a more open and inclusive civil society.

If Chapter 1 provides a theoretical justification for multiple publics and multiple news media, Chapter 2 offers a more historical one, by describing the development of the African-American and mainstream press and public spheres over the last 200 years. Separate public spaces and communicative institutions formed among Northern free blacks in the 1700s; the black press was established in 1827. At least forty different black newspapers were published before the Civil War, and the establishment of a national black press was generally agreed upon as the second most pressing issue among African-American leaders. The historical need for a strong black press was three-fold: (1) to provide a forum for debate and self-improvement; (2) to monitor the mainstream press; and (3) to increase

black visibility in white civil society. African-Americans could not count on the mainstream press of the time to publicize black voices or to represent black issues in a non-patronizing manner. By establishing an independent black press, African-Americans were able to secure a space of self-representation: not only to craft common identities and solidarities, but also to develop arguments which might effectively engage white civil society.

The African-American press was never intended to substitute for participation in the majority media. Rather, it was designed to encourage continuous discussion about matters of common concern, to develop arguments for later engagement in the majority public spheres, and to correct the prejudices and misrepresentations which resulted from engagement in those other public spheres. The point was to continue discussion and conversation, and to keep open the possibility of expanding the conversation to include new participants and new venues. This, after all, is the ultimate value of civil society, regardless of how many different publics compose it: to keep a conversation going, to open up ongoing dialogue to new narratives and new points of difference, and to expand the substantive content of existing solidarities.

The normative vision of the black public sphere does not map perfectly, however, onto its history. The African-American press was strongest between 1900 and 1950, during the period of forced residential segregation and mainstream press neglect. During this time the black press provided an important and powerful space for forming arguments about integration and civil rights which would later find their way into the public spaces of communication in white civil society. Thurgood Marshall summed up the power of the black press in 1954, when he remarked that "without the Negro press, the NAACP would get nowhere."[14] In a certain sense, though, it was easier for African-Americans to prioritize the black press during the first half of the twentieth century, given their near-total exclusion from the mainstream press and public spheres. Before the 1960s, fewer than one percent of journalists were African-American, and it was rare for race news to account for more than one percent of total news space in the mainstream press.[15] Quite simply, the only publicity African-American leaders could count on was that which came from the black press.

Since 1960, however, most black newspapers have seen their circulation decrease rapidly, by some fifty to seventy-five percent. This decline has a number of reasons: a more general decline in newspaper use resulting from the rise of television news; an inability of black newspapers to publish a successful daily edition (with the notable exception of the *Chicago Defender*), which became more of a problem with the fast pace of life characteristic of the modern media age; and the increased distribution costs

arising from a more residentially dispersed black middle class. But in addition to these structural factors, there was another, more subjective one. Between 1950 and 1970, the attention to African-Americans and African-American issues increased dramatically in the mainstream press, as a result of the civil rights movement and the 1960s urban uprisings. With this increased visibility came an increase in participation and voice for African-American leaders desiring to speak in the mainstream media. This increased participation was limited and, as Chapter 2 shows, it has stagnated or declined ever since the early 1970s. Regardless, however, a significant minority of African-American intellectuals during the 1950s and early 1960s were beginning to believe that racial integration would remove the need for a separate black newspaper, and began arguing that the black press should fight for its own disappearance.[16]

There are new forms of black media, of course – such as talk radio, Black Entertainment Television, and Internet discussion groups – just as there are more black journalists and more black voices in the mainstream news media. But even if these new public forums were able to support a vibrant black public sphere without African-American newspapers, the loss of a vital black press would still constitute a crisis, just as the disappearance of multi-newspaper cities has been interpreted as a crisis for the mainstream press and mainstream civil society. A diversity of news media helps to guarantee a diversity of public voices, and increases the likelihood that there will be vital public debate about matters of common concern. The crisis of the black press, then, is a crisis for American civil society.

While the current crisis of the black press is largely the result of declining circulation, the actual power of the black press is not only tied directly to the number of people who read it. In addition to circulation, the potential power of the African-American press resides in the fact that people know it is there, available to be read should the need be perceived. Indeed, during periods of racial crisis, such as the Watts and Rodney King uprisings, sales of black newspapers surged, as African-Americans sought out the "black perspective," compared it with the news stories in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, or *ABC News*, and then proceeded to have conversations. Put simply, the existence of the black press adds diversity to civil society, and offers the possibility of new forms of discussion to emerge. Alternative news media provide public forums for subordinate groups to develop arguments free of the hegemonic gaze of the dominant group. They also provide public spaces for repairing the symbolic damage which inevitably occurs with participation in the larger, mainstream media. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 support this claim about symbolic repair conclusively,

as would any empirical analysis comparing African-American and mainstream media coverage of racial crises.

Comparing racial discourses in the news

Because news media are plural, the study of media discourse is best accomplished through comparative research. How does news coverage of racial crisis differ in Chicago, Los Angeles, or New York? How is race news in the mainstream press different from the African-American press? How has it changed over time? Does it matter if the events being reported took place in the geographic "home" of a newspaper and its readers? These are some of the empirical questions this book addresses, by comparing news accounts of the Watts and Rodney King crises in the African-American and mainstream news media of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles.

Three goals motivated my selection of news sources: (1) to use the same news sources for all three racial crises; (2) to compare news coverage in different cities; and (3) to compare African-American and mainstream news coverage. Ultimately, these goals led to the selection of six newspapers as primary source material. The *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *New York Times*, as the largest daily newspapers in their respective cities, were obvious choices to represent the mainstream news media. For the African-American press the choices were slightly more difficult, because circulation sizes for many African-American papers are not audited. In addition, there are very few black newspapers which are published daily. Only the *Chicago Defender*, in fact, has published a daily edition continuously between 1965 and 1992.[17] To try to equalize the comparisons of the African-American newspapers, I chose the weekly edition of the *Chicago Defender* (published Thursdays), as well as the two African-American papers regarded as the most important in New York and Los Angeles: the *New York Amsterdam News* and *Los Angeles Sentinel*, respectively. Data collection involved extensive microfilm research, as well as the use of electronic databases such as Lexis-Nexis and Ethnic Newswatch, and included the collection and analysis of every news article from the first twelve weeks of each crisis. All told, there were a total of 2269 news articles in the six newspapers.

News reports from *ABC News* were also collected, but only for the two Rodney King crises. Because transcripts of its news broadcasts are stored on the Lexis-Nexis news database, *ABC News* was the obvious choice among the television news organizations. Unfortunately, this collection of transcripts dates back only to 1990. In fact, systematic collection of television news broadcasts did not begin until 1968, with the establishment of the

Vanderbilt Television Archive. The Museum of Radio and Television only had a single television program about Watts, a one-hour news special from *NBC News*. Attempts to find complete holdings of television news about Watts proved unsuccessful, mirroring Gitlin's experiences of nearly twenty years ago.[18] Fortunately, my study of the Rodney King crises led me to the same conclusion that Gitlin had reached: namely, that the *New York Times* and network television news were similar enough to be analyzed together. This should not be surprising, of course. The *New York Times* is the only paper which can legitimately make a claim to be *the* national newspaper. It is virtually mandatory reading for the political, intellectual, and journalistic elite, and has a tremendous influence over the network television news broadcasts.[19] For these reasons, I treated the *New York Times* and *ABC News* together, as representatives of a more national news public.

In order to compare how the racial crises were reported and made meaningful in the different news media, I relied primarily on the methods of narrative analysis. As Abbott and Sewell have noted recently, narrative analysis has become an important analytical tool in the social sciences.[20] There are two main reasons for this. The first has to do with the role narrative plays in constructing identities and enabling social action. As Alexander and Smith have argued, narratives help individuals, groups, and communities to "understand their progress in time in terms of stories, plots which have beginnings, middles, and ends, heroes and anti-heroes, epiphanies and denouements, dramatic, comic, and tragic forms."[21] As studies of class formation, collective mobilization, and mass communication have demonstrated, social actions and identities are guided by narrative understandings.[22] Furthermore, by connecting their self-narratives to collective narratives, individuals can identify with such "imagined communities" as class, gender, race, ethnicity, and nation.[23] As Steinmetz has noted, these collective narratives can be extremely important for how individuals evaluate their lives, even if they did not participate in the key historical events of the collective narrative.[24]

A second useful feature of narrative for studying public communication is that it enables the analyst to consider the significance of events. Theories of civil society too often fail to consider how events have cultural significance "on their own terms."[25] Depending on how they are defined, how they are linked together in a story or plot, and what determines their selection or exclusion into a particular narrative, events can have important consequences for social identities and social actions. Some events "demand" narration and therefore have the power to disrupt prevailing systems of belief and to change understandings about other events in the

past, present, and future.[26] Other events get called up from the past, point-ing to a foundational point of origin for a newly mobilizing community. The point is that events do not have a unitary causal meaning; they contain multiple plot structures, multiple narrative antecedents, and multiple nar-rative consequences. The same event can be narrated in a number of different ways and within a number of different public spheres. These com-peting narratives influence not only how individuals will understand an event, but also how they will evaluate different communities, including the idealized "societal community" described by Parsons.[27]

Today, when global media collapse the space and time in which people experience their lives, events that "demand narration" are absolutely essen-tial for the possibility of a public sphere in which people can aspire to par-ticipate. Most people do not have the time to retire at the end of the day to the salon or coffeehouse, in order to discuss matters of common concern. In this sense, the bourgeois public sphere idealized by Habermas is a con-temporary impossibility. But there are certain events which encourage a break from the quotidian, the instrumental, the self-focused, and orient public attention to questions of society and morality. This is not an origi-nal point, of course. Durkheim recognized that all societies needed ritual events that provoked extended periods of collective moral reflection.[28] It is during these times, transcending the mundane moments of everyday life, that the affective bonds of sociality are mobilized, participation in the public arena is maximized, and past, present, and future are fused together in an ongoing, mythic, mystical collective story about "who we are." While "narrating the social" is an ongoing process, occurring at multiple moments that confound temporal and spatial assumptions of linearity, the process of narration does tend to slow down, to "linger" on certain events.[29]

Of those types of events that "demand narration," crisis is one of the most important. Crisis develops when a particular event gets narratively linked to a central cleavage in society and demands the attention of citizens as well as political elites.[30] In the modern media age, a crisis becomes a "media event," announced through an interruption of normal broadcast schedules, repeated analysis by "experts," and opinion polling about the central characters involved in the crisis.[31] Events such as Watergate, Watts, and Rodney King become important plot elements for the different narra-tives of civil society and nation. Crisis produces a particular kind of narra-tive lingering, which emphasizes not only the tragic distance between is and ought but also the possibility of heroic overcoming. Indeed, it is the tension between romantic overcoming and tragic failure which provides crisis with its dramatic power. Because the end of crisis is never known in advance, the

temporal lingering associated with it is charged with collective anticipation and tension; in certain respects, then, crisis is even more of a "moment out of time" than other forms of ritual.[32]

My approach to studying public sphere communication during times of crisis focuses on three different structural components of narratives. The first is *plot*, which is concerned with the selection, evaluation, and attribution of differential status to events. A narrative's plot is fluid and complex in its relationship to events; as Eco has shown, it can "linger" on a particular event, flash back to past events, or flash forward to future events.[33] Plot is the best way to study what Abbott has called the "time-horizon problem," where events can differ in their speed and duration.[34] A focus on which events are selected for narration (and which events are not selected) provides important clues about how a given individual, group, or collectivity understands the past, present, and future. For example, as Chapter 3 demonstrates, the *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* narrated the 1965 Watts uprisings in a way that linked it to a larger Cold War narrative. In this form of emplotment, all criticism of the American government was deemed illegitimate, and any discussion about the possible causes of the uprisings was criticized as Communist propaganda. In such a plot, considerations of the historical deprivations suffered by African-American urban residents were unlikely to be incorporated into the news narrative. Furthermore, within this type of plot, African-American leaders were unlikely to shift public opinion about matters of urban policy, because they would end up spending most of their time explaining why they were not Communist propagandists. Faced with such an environment, it is quite possible that their efforts would be better rewarded by participating in other large news media, such as the *New York Times*, where the plot was much more open to historical discussions about race and urban policy. In addition, participation in the smaller, more specialized African-American press would help to counter the forms of plots found within the more hostile publics.

In addition to plot, I also examine the *characters* portrayed in the narratives and their relationship to one another. The analysis of characters is particularly important for nonfictional narratives, because the narrators are often the same as the characters in the plot.[35] I analyze the characters in terms of the opposition between heroes and anti-heroes, using Alexander and Smith's recent work on the analytic code of American civil discourse to provide clues about how the characters are evaluated in various narrations.[36] This research has demonstrated how public actors make use of the binary structure of civil discourse to "purify" themselves and their allies,