The Rhetoric of "Political Correctness" in the U.S. Media

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The Rhetoric of Political Correctness in the U.S. Media[1]

Abstract

Using a case study approach, this article explores the role of the U.S. media in the political correctness (PC) debate in an attempt to understand what message the public receives about PC and how that message is delivered. After a brief discussion of the history and definition of the term PC, the article describes the functions of the media in the U.S. and the possibilities for bias in covering the PC debate. Next the article provides an analysis of a typical U.S. newspaper's coverage of PC, identifying the PC topics covered and the stance (pro- or anti-PC) taken on them and analyzing the persuasive devices used to deliver these messages to readers. The analysis reveals that local media have a strong anti-PC bias both in reporting and editorials. The article concludes by exploring possible reasons for the observed bias, including the interests of the media itself and the deeper symbolic meanings the debate holds for a changing society like the U.S.

The Rhetoric of "Political Correctness" in the U.S. Media

Political correctness or PC is one of the most overused terms in the U.S. media today. Advocates of liberal, Left, and minority causes complain bitterly that conservatives and traditionalists ranging from Dinesh D'Souza to Roger Kimball, from George Will to George Bush, from mainstream magazines like <u>Time</u>, <u>Newsweek</u>, and <u>New York</u> to conservative journals like <u>Commentary</u>, from radio agitators like Rush Limbaugh to evangelist Pat Robertson have joined forces to denounce any attempts to make American society more pluralistic. Neo-conservatives counter that they are responding to a new Left totalitarianism that threatens

American values and constitutional rights like free speech and will lead to the division of the nation.

But the importance of media in the political correctness debate is one point that all sides in this argument agree upon. From the conservative position Dickman has stated, that "with remarkable alacrity, media throughout the land took up the refrain of 'political correctness' and began writing a plethora of articles on this new variant of intolerance and ideological orthodoxy sweeping the universities" (vii). From the Left, Perry suggests a "media campaign to discredit the Left" has been taking place in the U.S. (77).

No matter what their position in the debate there is no denying that media have been covering the topic closely. But why has PC become a topic of almost daily interest in the media? How are the academic or intellectual issues that comprise PC filtered down and presented in the media, and how does this affect public opinion on the subject? These are some of the questions that we address in this article. After we first give a brief history of the term, we will then explore the role of the media in the U.S. and analyze the coverage of PC in a local newspaper, describing both what the media consider important in the PC debate and how those topics are presented to the public.

Etymology of the Term "PC"

If an issue receives attention such as described above, it can hardly be considered an isolated academic or intellectual fad that will disappear as fast as it appeared. In fact, an examination of the etymology of the term and the topics it includes reveals that PC has been in the U.S. a long time and isn't likely to disappear soon. According to Perry, the term PC originated in Maoist and Stalinist literature. It came into use as a self-critical statement among Leftists in the 1960s when "guilt-tripping" or being "guilt-tripped" about their commitment to their beliefs (73). If they did something that was not consistent with their professed political belief it would be called, either by themselves or by another member of their in-group, "not politically correct."

However, with the publication of a <u>Newsweek</u> article on political correctness in 1990 (Adler) the term PC has been transformed in the media and in general public usage into term to describe and attack perspectives and programs that are associated with a Left political agenda (Berube 137). Isserman characterizes this transformation a usurpation of the term by Right enemies of Left and liberal politics (82). Daniels writes in his article "Diversity, Correctness, and Campus Life-A Closer Look" that now "Political correctness . . . serves as a rhetorical shorthand for . . . dissatisfactions with higher education, as well as for the entire debate about diversity and multiculturalism" (18).

In this article, we will use the term PC in its current public denotation, accepted by supporters and opponents alike--a symbol for programs, initiatives, and attitudes designed to improve the public representation of and interaction with certain social groups, in particular minorities and women. But we do not subscribe to any of the derogatory or self-critical connotations attached to the term by either side of the debate. Many of the issues we will discuss are also labeled "multiculturalism," but we do not consider the term synonymous with PC. Multiculturalism is a part of the PC debate, but not its entirety.

The Role of the Media in the PC Debate

In order to address the question of what role the media have taken in shaping the outcome of this debate and how they have influenced public opinion, we must examine the media's own stake in the discussion. We first will describe our understanding of the role of the mass media in public life in the U.S. Then we will analyze the role of the print media in presenting the PC debate.

 We believe the mass media are essential aspects of modern industrial societies. The media have replaced the traditional form of personal and face-to-face communication. Considering the number of hours the average American uses media daily, a number that seems to increase with the decreasing need to spend time at work and with other chores, media have become an integral part of daily interaction, communication, and socialization, providing

education, information and entertainment. In addition, the functioning of American representative democracy depends largely on the mass media.

In accordance with the postmodern notion of simulacrums (Baudrillard), social and personal interaction is nowadays to a great extent artificial and simulated. News from worlds apart reach individuals isolated from that particular civilization or event. Knowledge and behavior are indirectly learned from and exercised in interaction with media. Feelings of hate, joy, boredom, and love can be evoked by media. Politics and participation in public affairs are deliberately directed and arranged in front of media. Some observers have said media can decide how and if a country enters wars or offers peace (von Harpe 36).

According to Lasswell, the media interpret information for their audiences and socialize them.[2] Moreover, they are a source of entertainment. And in the U.S. the media are usually privately-owned businesses that need to run on a profit. It is a well known fact that the print media, though representing an impressive quantity (e.g., about 1750 daily newspapers), are, in two out of three cases, outlets of a few national or regional news empires. Gannett, for example, controls 83 newspapers, plus TV and radio stations, advertising agencies and information systems (Ham A11). AP and UPI deliver almost 99% of the daily information (Kleinsteuber 277). Large newspapers like the <u>New York Times</u> offer special agencies and article services. Up to four out of five reports in smaller and local newspapers derive from a few agencies (Kleinsteuber 277). These facts relativize the notion of a free marketplace of ideas and make the availability of news and information surprisingly homogeneous in the U.S. To what end might this control and "gate-keeper" function be used?

<u>The Political Bias of Print Media: Liberal, Conservative or Neutral?</u>

To examine the possibility of media bias one has to consider the functioning of print media in the U.S. and the interests behind the media. The media are described by some as being liberal, even anti-establishment. They are known for recent reporting that has revealed such political scandals as Watergate and Whitewater. Moreover from a historical perspective the

media have been involved in muckraking, "investigating and attacking social, economic, and political wrongs," since the turn of the century (Norton et al. 608).

In this vein, Baker claims a liberal bias in the U.S. media. His explanation is that the personal views of journalists, editors, producers, and news division executives naturally influence their reporting (105). He supports his argument by pointing to polls, surveys, biographies, and practices during the Bush/Reagan administration which indicate that only 15 to 25% of journalists identified themselves with Republican or conservative politics or ideas.

Others insist that the print media are balanced, neutral information-gatherers, reflecting a variety of opinions. Those with this view maintain that media are only messengers of an existing plurality of opinions, not part of the message. They do not attempt to influence the opinions of readers. Supporters of the media counter their Left and Right critics that they are killing the messenger simply because they do not like the news (Levine 103).

On the other hand, some, such as Chomsky, feel that the media are a channel for propaganda serving the corporate and government establishment. One of the most radical critics of American politics and media, Chomsky claims that the mainstream media are subordinate to such power. In an interview for the journal The Humanist, Chomsky made the point that the media focus on matters that will discourage popular participation; they cover controversial issues in a manner that does not threaten the established order, and they feign dissent and pluralism at the same time that they support the existing system (Chomsky 104, 110). A case in support of this perspective might be the media coverage of the Persian Gulf war in which the media painted a much rosier picture of what was happening to enlist support at home. Critics like Chomsky also suggest that the media's "liberalism" is limited. Ultimately, they do not question America's essential values and icons or its economic and social foundations.

Chomsky's analysis may appear extreme at first. However, if one considers the process of information gathering used by reporters, some of his claims of dependency seem plausible. Journalists rely on sources that in many cases are not in their control. For example, Gamson and Modigliani found that in the case of reporting on affirmative action, journalists primarily rely on

governmental interpretations and information, private news agencies, and other institutionalized "networks" controlled by private or government interests (165) . News conferences, press releases and spokespeople are important sources of information for reporters. Moreover, Gamson and Modigliani point out that the American public is organized in networks of interrelated journals, think tanks, and other institutions that promote certain opinions. Their activities concentrate on giving talks, writing numerous articles and books, giving press conferences, scheduling official events, and presenting press reports to journalists with whom they have routine relationships and channels of exchange. In sum, few journalists rely exclusively on independent research and their own investigations.

The investigative or "watch-dog" journalism that is used by some as proof of the media's liberal bias is limited to the extent that the media prefer simple statements and tend to focus on personalities and events instead of abstract concepts, ideas and programs. Investigative journalism is further hampered by the preference of editors to publish articles that build upon pre-existing clichés in the minds of their readers. They rarely challenge the mainstream icons and ideology of society ("Germany in the U.S. Media"). Although media have the power to form public opinion and set agendas because they control the flow of information, they take into account the expectations of their audience and are "demand-oriented." The individual reporter cannot easily challenge the public's preconceived notions or the agenda of his or her editor or publisher.[3] After all, the media are profit organizations that respond to the desires of their customers rather than risk losing business.

The print media in the U.S. react to a plurality of demands and are therefore subordinate to outside influence and interests. They are open to many different perspectives representing a multitude of opinions, but this openness does not necessarily mean that all existing opinions are treated even-handedly. According to Faludi, the press does not intentionally plan to take part in any debate. But it is "grossly susceptible to the prevailing political currents" (77). In the case of the feminist movement, she states, the press "acted as a force that swept the general public, powerfully shaping the way people would think and talk about the feminist legacy" (77).

Other facts that reveal the media's influence derive from their function--to disseminate information. This function allows the media to decide which stories to cover and which not to cover and to designate the amount of coverage each story should receive. This role gives journalists, editors and publishers the power to educate the public on a particular subject in the way they see fit. The media can take a relatively small bit of information and make it news, creating a demand for more reporting on that topic. Or they can choose not to report something which might seem important to some, if only they knew about it. Because of the perceived limitations of their audience, the print media are also compelled to reduce the length of material and to translate complicated subject matter into something digestible by the average reader. All of these tasks provide opportunities for the press to influence public opinion on a multitude of issues--intentionally or unintentionally.

Moreover as the so-called "Fourth Estate" the print media can be assumed to have an overall conservative, status quo-oriented bias regarding the functioning of American society, economy, and culture. The owners, shareholders, advertising agencies, wire services--in other words the interests behind the media as enterprise--can be considered a conservative "establishment" because they are part of the institutionalized economic make-up of modern capitalist America.

It follows that media have a tendency to be shallow and to become more a forum for "mainstream" propaganda than a means to criticize and challenge dominant opinions, news, and information. Tendencies to conform are even more accentuated in the case of journalists reporting news. They are impeded by the centralization of media organizations that exert control not only by placing limits on space and time but also by requiring certain institutional ethics and group norms. Finally, reporters do not always have the knowledge or time to investigate thoroughly issues they are assigned to report. Often they do not command the same resources as those who provide them with information, such as the Administration, the Pentagon or large news agencies (Russ-Mohl 27).

A Local Newspaper Analysis

<u>Sample and Method</u>

Given the power of the media to gather and disseminate information and the various constraints on them as they performs these tasks, how, in the end, do the media present a topic such as political correctness to the public? We know the subject has received a lot of coverage--but <u>what</u> is the coverage saying about political correctness and <u>how</u> is the message delivered?

In order to understand the media's PC message and how it is delivered, we examined an unrepresentative sampling of 48 newspaper and magazine articles, mostly from the <u>Durham Herald Sun</u> with some from the <u>New York Times</u>. In addition to newspaper clippings, we have retrieved now-classic articles from the national newsmagazines dating to as early in the PC debate as 1990.

The <u>Durham Herald Sun</u> is a typical American newspaper covering a town of approximately 135,000 people with a daily readership of 53,500. It has stories about local politics, sports, and activities. Its national news and editorial sections consist mainly of reports from syndicated news agencies. We undertook an informal analysis of articles from this paper covering a period of about 18 months from October, 1992 to April, 1994.

We cannot claim that our findings are representative for the U.S. in general. However, because many of the articles analyzed were written by syndicated columnists and appear in hundreds of papers nationally, we can assume that many readers across the country are receiving a similar message about PC. Nevertheless, this analysis serves primarily as an empirical illustration of hypotheses we have developed to describe the role of the media in the emerging culture of PC in the U.S.

We analyzed the articles first to discover the topic categories they covered, such as speech and behavior codes or the academic canon. Then we determined whether the articles were pro-PC, anti-PC or neutral. (We found no neutral articles.) We decided an article was pro- or anti-PC depending on the stand it took on topics concerning PC. From analyzing the types of

PC topics that are reported, we got a sense of what the media considers important with regard to the subject of PC and a notion of their opinion on the subject. Editorials revealed even more directly the opinions of the powers that be in the print media: journalists, editors and publishers.

After exploring coverage, we were interested in understanding how these articles got their pro- or anti-PC message across to their readers. The media are supposed to be unbiased, yet editorials clearly give opinions as do letters to the editor. Moreover, reporters covering "hard news" may intentionally or unintentionally write a story in such a way as to influence their readers on the subject. We attempted to discern how journalists influence their readers by analyzing the persuasive devices employed by the writers.

<div align="center">Findings: Anti-PC Media Bias</div>

Coverage

Our analysis of the articles and editorials reveals what appears to be the mainstream media's bias against political correctness. Thirty-eight of the pieces analyzed were what we have called "anti-PC" whereas ten were "pro-PC." Of editorials alone, 26 of 33 were anti-PC. In straight reporting, we found 12 anti-PC articles and 3 pro-PC. Incidentally, the seven of the ten pro-PC editorials were written by the same female editorialist.

The importance of considering coverage is illustrated by the way the newspapers studied responded to visiting personalities who spoke about PC. When Shelby Steele, a critic of affirmative action and other PC issues, came to Durham, he made the front page one day, a feature article the next day, and the editorial page later that week. And when Lynne Cheney, former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities during the Bush administration, was in Durham, headlines read "PC Threat to Society." But when Ronald Takaki, who supports a multicultural approach to teaching American history, came to town, he received only a feature article in section C, and his ideas were slightly misrepresented so that he seemed almost a foe of PC.

If the media not only report the news but also have the ability to set the national agenda by interpreting and setting coverage, then such choices as described here reveal a possible bias in the reporting of PC. In the next sections we will describe the topic categories discovered in the articles analyzed and what these suggest regarding the media's role in the PC debate.

Topic Categories

The most common topics found in the articles analyzed were multicultural curricula, affirmative action, and conflicts of free speech in relation to ethnicity- or gender-based behavior and attitudes.

"Multiculturalism" is a term used to describe efforts to include non-white cultural issues into the white dominated American culture, to increase the representation of minorities and women in political affairs, and to raise public awareness of the achievements of formerly oppressed groups. In its original form, multiculturalism was a tool to deal with violence and hate speech on college campuses. It included creating awareness through mandatory ethnic studies classes, training in cross-cultural communication, the empowerment of targets of violence, and the fostering of social and cultural interaction between whites and minorities ranging from quota-based admission policies to public forums and festivals.

In the articles we analyzed, we found arguments on both sides of this issue. Kennelly, in USA Weekend, wrote with great skepticism about courses designed to increase cultural awareness, concluding his article with a quotation from a student reflecting after taking such a required course. She said, " I felt like common sense lost out in favor of being too politically careful" ("Required Course" 8). In contrast, Levine argued in favor of diversity programs when writing that each college campus should "define clearly what it means by diversity and . . . develop a long-term, comprehensive plan for achieving that definition" (5).

Teaching diversity and consciousness-raising about ethnicity and gender have been defamed in the media as the manipulation and political indoctrination of students (Will, "Radical English") that results in making knowledge and "truth" open for the interpretation of interest groups (Leo, "Customized History"). Such arguments suggest that the public has lost control

over the education of its youths and that students are being taught a political agenda rather than getting a value-free education.

Another strand of the multiculturalism debate is about keeping the traditional curriculum or "canon." PC supporters have been accused by anti-PC conservatives like Douglas, neo-conservatives like Kimball, and liberal traditionalists like Schlesinger of replacing the old established canon with a multiculturalist, essentially un-American and divisive, one. They resent the notion that America needs to break with a tradition of uncritically glorifying the history of the West and the underlying assumption of a cultural supremacy of Western, i.e. American, culture.

The mainstream media reported and editorialized on issues related to the canon by depicting supporters of change as sectarians, segregationists, or worse, oppressors of free speech, as in the case of the curriculum "revolutions" at Stanford and the University of Texas at Austin. Syndicated columnist George Will in his editorial "Radical English" claimed that professors bring the issues of race and gender into the classroom because "campuses have become refuges for radicals who want universities to be as thoroughly politicized as they are" (259). Attempts to add diversity to curricula have met with responses ranging from questioning the veracity of revisionist histories (Leo, "Customized History") to subtly misrepresenting the goals, intentions, and perspectives of multiculturalism (Folkenflik).

Besides the canon, theories reaching from Nietzsche to Heidegger, from Marx to Gramsci, from Sartre to Foucault, and from Freud to Lacan have become the target of media attacks as well. Some conservative opponents reject the post-modern and post-structuralist view that truth and knowledge are relative because they are historically and socially determined. In a typical commentary on this discussion, columnist John Leo writes that the new academic theories such as deconstruction are "all intellectual junk" ("Customized History" A8).

A second issue that regularly appeared in our analysis was the question of how or if ethnic, cultural and racial diversity and equality should be encouraged in American society. This question has resulted in a debate over affirmative action policies that admit equally or less

academically prepared minority students into colleges and universities or into jobs before their white counterparts. Similarly, the increased use of quotas in the hiring of minority and female faculty members at universities has brought forth accusations of "reverse discrimination" and of violations of the principle of meritocracy (D'Souza 24; Glazer; Lynch; Short).

In our analysis, nearly every article on this topic seemed opposed to the effects of affirmative action. For example, in a major article on the subject, U.S. News and World Report wrote that affirmative action has led to the "stigmatization" of people of color and a "double standard" in grading because students of color feel they deserve more than equal opportunity, they deserve "equality of reward" (Elfin and Burke 55-56).

According to Gamson and Modigliani the media have presented affirmative action, like other PC issues, in a simplistic "for-or-against" style, despite the fact that the public has a more subtle opinion about the subject, which Gamson and Modigliani characterize as a "delicate balance" position. Furthermore, Gamson and Modigliani have also found that the media's presentation of affirmative action issues has moved from being supportive of it in the 1970s to being opposed to it in the 1980s.

Finally, constitutional arguments have been raised to challenge the enforced effects of multiculturalist awareness on individual behavior. Hotly debated in the media are the desirability, appropriateness, and even legality of campus policies regulating the speech and behavior of students and faculty toward women and minorities. The proliferation of speech and behavior codes has resulted in policies at many colleges outlining detailed rules for dating and sexual encounters. This concern has resulted in frequent hearings of students and faculty charged with racially and sexually insensitive comments and behavior.

In the media, any codes regarding speech or behavior have been strongly disapproved of. A Newsweek report on "Sexual Correctness" stated, "How silly this [sexual behavior codes] all seems; how sad. It criminalizes the delicious unexpectedness of sex . . .What is the purpose of sex if not to lose control?"(Crichton 54). Others argue that such codes spawn distrust between

the races and the sexes (for example, "Political Correctness") or that any rules limiting free speech infringe upon First Amendment rights (see Cooper).

From our analysis, the print media seem predisposed to write mostly on PC issues related to speech and behavioral codes and less so on the canon or affirmative action, a topic discussed in great depth in the academic literature on PC. In a local setting with a comparatively large African American population and four major universities (Duke, University of North Carolina, North Carolina Central and North Carolina State University) this finding was unexpected. Why would the print media limit their discussion of the canon and affirmative action?

There could be several reasons. With regard to affirmative action, the publishers may fear provoking a debate that will lead to conflict and public polarization among their readership. While there is a relatively large African American population in the Durham area, there is an even larger contingency of white Southerners and a legacy of racism.

With regard to speech and behavior codes, the press might imagine that the public is more directly affected by or offended by such codes than by a controversy about what is taught in classes that the public more than likely does not attend and which many readers may perceive as esoteric or irrelevant. Or it could be that the media are more interested in speech and behavior codes because they are more directly affected by attempts to restrict free speech. Journalists, publishers, and editors might want to persuade the public against any attempts to censor that indirectly or directly affect their ability to publish freely. Moreover, those who wrote about teaching at the universities seemed more concerned about ensuring that the public continues to believe that knowledge can be neutral. After all, what would become of the news media if people began to believe that there were no objective facts and that science is biased or does not represent "The Truth"?

Common ground.

Although the media write from different perspectives about the meaning, importance, and interpretation of speech codes and other PC issues, we found that they do fight on a common ground. Their arguments are built on common assumptions which are generally not contested. The majority of PC opponents and supporters do not question the following axioms of American society: capitalism, constitutional democracy, and national unity. The PC debate does not, therefore, appear to portend a major political or economic revolution in the U.S. However, not surprisingly, extreme positions or exceptional anecdotes are often used to denounce or ridicule the opposition.

Persuasive Devices

Our analysis of how the media influence their readers revealed that on the whole the media use relatively simplistic and highly emotional devices when writing about PC (as opposed to the more complex arguments found in the books on the subject). The most common types of "arguments," if you wish to call them such, were attempts to identify the opposition with extremist views and academic fads. These could be found both in articles and in editorials about PC.

Those who are proponents of PC were called such names as "New Fundamentalists," "demagogic," "fanatical," "thought police," and "totalitarian" in New York magazine (Taylor). In one of the nation's largest weekly magazines, Newsweek, PC was called the "New McCarthyism," and a "repressive orthodoxy." John Leo implies that Holocaust deniers and Afrocentrists have appeared as a consequence of "disastrous intellectual trends on campus" ("Customized History" A8), particularly deconstruction.

In the academic literature on PC, proponents of PC are just as likely as their opponents to invoke emotionally-loaded labels for their side. The labels of "racism," "sexism," "hegemony," "exterminism," "anti-Semitism," "homophobia" and "fascism" are most common (Martin; West).[4] Perhaps this advanced form of name-calling was not found in the pro-PC newspaper articles because there were so few pro-PC articles in the first place. More likely it was because

the media avoid labels they feel are too derogatory or extremist. The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual referred to by journalists throughout the U.S. emphasizes conservatism and consistency in language use (Siner). In other words, the media may follow voluntarily informal restrictions on usage and at the same time, perhaps for this very reason, decry attempts to restrict language use in the name of political correctness.

Another frequently used persuasive device was the use of ridicule and sarcasm. In such articles, the author used humor to make various aspects of PC seem ridiculous. John Leo used this method frequently. In one article on the topic of politically correct terminology he lists 21 "isms" from "racism" and "sexism" to "shavism," which he defines as "prejudice against the bearded" ("The Political Taboos" 21). To purposefully put serious concerns in the same category with such a frivolous one is an attempt to make them all appear frivolous or ridiculous and thereby suggests not only that those who favor PC have gone too far but that these sort of language games are a pompous waste of time and energy. Political cartoons on the subject were not analyzed but they too editorialize through ridicule and humor.

The use of a single anecdote from which broad generalizations were made was a common way that editorial arguments about PC were developed. Mike Royko, another syndicated columnist, argues that hate speech such as "nigger" should never be banned because it was used in one case to argue against hate speech in an ironic political cartoon. In another article false harassment allegations against a Black school teacher in Chicago were used to question the usefulness of harassment legislation in general (Feldman). Such arguments are effective because a single example allows the author to develop concrete detail and sympathy (or disgust). Using examples or singular events also tends to personalize an issue. However, to generalize or draw conclusions from very unique examples or exceptions can be logically problematic.

Some strongly conservative PC opponents have openly recommended using anecdotes to denounce PC. For example, Bonevac writes that "the public knows repression and outright silliness when it sees it. One anecdote is worth a thousand words on hegemony and interpretive communities" (22). PC supporters have responded that such methods are typical of the infamous

campaign waged against them. "PC critics mischaracterize the enemy, exaggerate its presence, and fail to debate or even acknowledge the important substantive issues underlying the controversy. In doing so, they not only obscure, but also help to prove, the insights they themselves do not appear to understand" (Bartlett 122).

The most common method of responding to anti-PC arguments was denial of opponents' claims, questioning their authority, logic, evidence and expertise and calling allegations at best "errors" or "ignorance" and at worst lies or deliberate distortions of facts and ideas. For example, a student at Stanford wrote an article denying that PC had limited students' ability to voice opposing opinions or take a variety of courses (Mabry 55). PC supporters tend to be more defensive and conciliatory in their tone. Some have publicly accepted some of the problems arising from policies that support political correctness on campuses, but conclude that these difficulties are primarily the result of difficulties adjusting to change in the status quo (Goodman).

Related to the device of denial is the strategy of portraying those on one's own side of the debate victims and on the other side oppressors. Hughes sarcastically calls this approach "the culture of complaint," and it can be found quite often in the articles about sexual harassment. Editorialist Ellen Goodman writes frequently about women's new-found power ,which comes from the legitimization of the role of the victim in sexual harassment cases (e.g., "Women are Revising"). But from the other perspective, articles are frequently written (usually by men) that portray men as victims of this new-found power. They blame women and successful sexual harassment lawsuits and legislation for a variety of ills from the inability of boys to have a "normal" adolescence because they can't tease girls about sex or their sexual attributes (Teepen) to the inability of men to teach effectively because they fear closely interacting with their female students (Kennelly, "The Big Chill").

Writers often attempted to sway an audience on a topic, even while appearing for the most part balanced, by using a clincher that revealed their perspective. Many of the apparently informative articles about PC appeared to give both sides of the argument, citing experts and

providing anecdotes on either side of the story. The closing or "clincher" of the article, however, often left readers with a clear sense of which side of the debate they were meant to find more justified. The clincher was usually a statement by an expert on one side or the other that called into question the opposing view.

For example, in an article about sexual harassment in the public schools, Barringer of the New York Times first gave the results of a survey and talked to students and professionals who supported those conclusions. In the last three paragraphs, however, he gave quotations from students who felt the statistics were inflated and then ended with a quote from an expert who also questioned the statistics. By concluding in this manner the author indirectly suggested to readers that they should not believe the results of the survey. Many of the reports about PC called aspects of it into question in this way. They also used questions in their titles so that the readers were searching for an answer throughout the "neutral" article. Almost invariably the answer was easily found in the article's conclusion.

Another persuasive device we found was the unmasking of the opposition. Here those on one side of the debate (usually anti-PC) reveal the adverse impact of the policies of the other side. They might argue, for example, that while the goal of speech codes is increased sensitivity, the actual outcome will be the inhibition of free speech. In a Durham Herald Sun editorial ("Political Correctness") the contradictory nature of PC is unmasked. It is argued that PC has as its goal "to assure mutual respect among cultures, races, genders and those with physical differences"(A14). However, it argues, the outcome is "to breed mistrust between individuals" (A14). The editorial concludes that PC uses tactics not unlike those used by the "establishment" to repress women and minorities in the past. In addition to revealing the adverse impact of PC, by attacking "the establishment" the editorial purports to be above the partisan fray, providing a neutral observation of the PC debate.

Another way that the media attempted to denounce the positions of opponents was through the revelation of a double standard on the part of the opposition that served to undermine the opponent's credibility. In an editorial written for national distribution, Joseph Perkins argues

that to accept the beating of the white truck driver, Denny, by African American youths but at the same time denounce the beating of African American Rodney King by white police officers reveals a double standard that undermines the right to equal protection under the law. Moreover, he writes, it represents a "twisted way of thinking."

Some editorial writers used an approach that evokes American principles and beliefs to persuade their audiences. In the case of how PC has affected campus life, Elfin and Burke write that PC has led to segregation or Balkanization on American campuses. Few people in the U.S. openly favor segregation these days. In fact, they may fear it. The suggestion of cultural separatism raises the specter of a fragmented society rather than the melting pot so many Americans still strongly believe in. And the term Balkanization understandably brings to mind pictures of ethnic fighting in the streets. After generations of work to integrate, Americans get upset at the suggestion that re-segregation may be occurring (of course there are exceptions on the fringe). By making multiculturalism and national unity apparently opposed, this argument depends upon the reader's reaction as an American who knows from history how destructive civil war (and more recently other types of civil unrest, like riots) can be and who believes that the States should stay United.

Arguments claiming that PC was opposed to American values were also found in editorials on the free speech issue. On the topic of campus speech and behavior codes for interaction with women and ethnic minorities, the opposition often argues that any codes are an infringement of the First Amendment right to free speech and are a form of censorship, two highly loaded terms for Americans (see, for example, Cooper) . They also argue that any attempt to regulate human interaction threatens it (see, for example Crichton, "Political Correctness"). Finally, PC opponents argue that the perceived need for rules suggests that women and minorities are helpless victims rather than effective actors in society (Crichton, "First, Hear his Words").

These arguments call upon the most sacred of American values--liberty. Freedom of speech, freedom to interact how and with whom we please, and independence and individualism

are challenged. Such codes also presumably threaten the Declaration of Independence's promise of the right to the "pursuit of happiness" and are therefore indirectly presented as "un-American" to the reader. Such interpretations ignore the arguments of those in favor of speech and behavior codes who claim a need to ensure sensitivity to the needs and differences of minorities and women on campus (Goodman) and of those who struggle for increased recognition and participation by women and minorities.

Interestingly, the appeal to constitutional principles is aimed at precisely the common ground that we have found to exist between the various sides of the PC debate. All of those involved are in favor of maintaining rights for Americans, and it is on this assumed value, one deeply ingrained in all Americans, that the media make their anti-PC arguments. In this way they are appealing to themes that have what Gamson and Modigliani have called "cultural resonances." These are themes that reflect and play upon deep-rooted values of a particular society and are highly effective and, in this case, difficult for PC supporters to counter since they, too, believe in these core values.

The use of name-calling, ridicule, argument from anecdote, denial, and appeals to American values serve to elicit emotional, gut-reaction responses from an audience. Often the language is full of moralism and saturated in guilt. These devices simplify complex facts and arguments into a yes or no, right or wrong, victim vs. oppressor discussion, changing the character the debate. In doing so, they decide which aspects of the debate will receive attention or coverage, and which will not, thereby setting the agenda for the discussion and interpreting for the audience what they think are the important aspects of the issue.

The use of these types of arguments in daily newspaper reports or commentaries suggest that in many cases editorialists, journalists and media assume a naive audience (It is said that some newspapers gear their writing for a 6th grader or twelve year old.) In fact, it is much easier to resort to emotional appeals of sound bite length ridicule and name calling (e.g., "radical," "Marxist," "sexist") than to explain the advantages and disadvantages of the various positions in the debate. In the case of the PC debate, too often it appears that the media are more interested

in entertaining and influencing than in informing. Rather than provide an intricate discussion of PC, they'd rather choose a side and argue for it.

Media Bias: A Discussion

Possible Origins of Media Bias

The reason that such an unexpectedly strong anti-PC bias was found in our print media sample remains unclear. As we have noted, the media have several functions to fulfill. First, they educate and inform, thereby influencing their audiences. Whether there may be a real or perceived need to simplify the news, this simplification leaves much leeway for writers, editors and publishers. Second, the press must make coverage or selection decisions. Practically speaking everything cannot be in the newspaper. Coverage decisions also leave much room for biases to creep in , intended or unintended. Third, the press interprets the material for the public. The room for bias in that function goes without saying. And last, in the TV culture of the U.S., the print media also feel a strong need to entertain. Here they need to make even the news exciting and interesting enough to hold the short attention-span of a consumer who spends several hours a day in front of the television. So all four of these functions provide the media opportunities to influence public opinion.

As Faludi has noted, while the media may not necessarily act intentionally to influence the public, whatever they do, they cannot escape bias. We can speculate that the bias may reflect the self-understanding of print media as defenders of free speech. The pro-PC understanding of free speech and ethnocultural sensitivity could be perceived as a threat to the traditional interpretation of journalistic freedom of expression. The media themselves may feel threatened because of the skepticism towards eternal "truths" and standards and fear that the demands of multiculturalists are more radical than the mainstream understanding of "liberal pluralism." But it may also be in part a result of how the media are run in the U.S.

As we pointed out earlier, the media are owned by relatively few, large companies. Therefore a conservative bias from this bastion of the establishment would be expected. Because

few companies control most of the editorializing and reporting done in this country, they have a great effect through mass dissemination. On the other hand, the media might lose their clientele, markets, customers, and support if they pursued a print policy that promotes the pro-PC position, which is still heavily contested by the general public.

The Influence of Media Bias on Public Opinion

It is yet not clear how much and how intensely the media presentation has influenced the public awareness about PC issues such as feminism and multiculturalism. Further, we do not know for certain if the media's biased presentation of the issues will have a durable impact on the public and their attitudes toward PC-related issues.

However, as mentioned in the introduction to this article, each side involved in the PC debate agrees that the media have had an effect, although each side believes the media have been biased and unfair to its cause. And certainly, the term PC became abused in the mass media as a derogatory term. This fact will prohibit the term from becoming a positive slogan for some time to come. PC will remain a negatively-charged buzzword identified with multiculturalism, affirmative action, and speech codes as long as the media and influential political and cultural groups are opposed to PC-related issues.

While some might argue that there is a media conspiracy against PC, others (e.g. Daniels) see the media-fed anti-PC stance of the public as an indication of a general dissatisfaction with current trends in higher education, the arts, and academe. This position seems supported by what some observers have called a grassroots, neo-conservative backlash. For example, local school boards have been inundated with parents complaining about changes in the curricula to make them more multicultural. Colleges have revised new policies for fear of lawsuits finding them unconstitutional on the basis of first amendment free speech rights. And professors who were once embarrassed to be accused of sexual harassment are now going public and fighting back against a rash of abuses in this area.

In other words, as long as PC continues to be institutionalized in harassment codes, equality legislation, speech codes and other regulations, it will stir up emotions and foster some polarization because such changes raise individual and collective fears of infringement of basic rights, speech codes, and ingrained modes of behavior between the sexes and races. It also stirs up other fears that can best be understood if we briefly consider the origins of the PC debate and its underlying meaning for American society.

Origins of the PC Debate

To understand why the PC debate is so emotional, it is important to look at broader demographic, historic, and socio-cultural changes in American society in the last few decades. Most observers and commentators agree that the roots of PC are in the 1960s. Quickly following the civil rights movement came the women's liberation movement of the 70s, the gay rights movement of the 1980s, and the ensuing anti-discriminatory legislation. These movements led to an increasing awareness of prejudice and discrimination and to the discovery of ethnocultural identification. These changes in the cultural and political fabric of America were paralleled by changing demographics, immigration, and high birthrates of some minority groups. Once a microcosm of European nationalities, America has become more and more a microcosm of the world.

At the heart of the controversy is not just the question of "correct speech," postmodern literary criticism in a few English departments, or the inclusion of minority representatives in the canon. The deeper significance of the debate that surrounds affirmative action, multiculturalism, and PC is the fact that America is becoming a less white and male dominated society. This phenomenon has led to an reassessment of dominant values and cultural standards. More and more old certainties are questioned: What does it mean to be an American? What is the legacy future generations can draw from? What of the past values will survive the requirements of the future? Is a nation based on Western values able to integrate the cultural diversity of the future? Or should the "center" be redefined, if it cannot hold anymore increasing plurality and diversity?

In other words, the representation and participation of formerly oppressed or neglected groups, in particular women and minorities, and the redefinition of America's cultural identity are the sources of the debate.

The intellectual debates surrounding PC have become a tool to negotiate and legitimize the redistribution of societal resources: material, cultural, linguistic, and normative. Theories that are--right or wrong--identified with PC, e.g. postmodernism, poststructuralism, and neo-Marxism represent theoretically what multiculturalism, affirmative action and other PC-related topics represent on the policy level. Both are supportive of the advancement of minorities and women, criticize the traditional values of American society, and represent a sinking belief in the superiority of the traditional, white dominated, American way of life.

Theories and ideas such as multiculturalism and affirmative action, however, are difficult for the public to comprehend. At this point the role of the media becomes crucial. Although PC started as isolated counterculture and radical criticism in small academic circles, it has become a public topic "loaded" with meaning by distribution through modern communications, mainly television and newspapers. The media did not invent PC, but they brought the slogans, symbols, and demands of PC to the attention of the public and reflected in particular the backlash against PC that started in the second half of the 1980s.

Summary and Conclusion

Opponents and particularly supporters of PC have castigated the mass media as responsible for distorting complex issues. Supporters allege the media were ridiculing the serious objectives of PC, depicting PC as a kind of "thoughtpolice" and misinterpreting multiculturalism and respect for minorities as an infringements on American values that will lead to the "Balkanization" of America (Schlesinger). In fact, our findings suggest that such negative images dominate the messages the American public receives from the media about PC.

In an informal study conducted on articles collected from our small city newspaper in Durham, North Carolina, we found a distinct anti-PC bias. Of 48 articles analyzed, 38 were anti-

PC whereas 10 were pro-PC. Reporting and editorials were equally biased against PC issues. As mentioned earlier, Gamson and Modigliani found a similar bias in the reporting of the media on affirmative action issues. Name-calling, ridicule, anecdote, denial and unmasking were common forms of argument in these articles and editorials.

The print media's interest in political correctness and their desire to comment on it was evident from the preponderance of editorials. Moreover, the content of both the reporting and the editorials was strongly opposed to initiatives that come under the heading of PC. While editorials are supposed to have an opinion, reporting choices regarding coverage, the use of carefully crafted "clinchers" and the use of appeals to American beliefs also revealed an anti-PC bias.

The print media reported about PC unflatteringly, often using simplistic stereotypes. The method of presenting arguments, emotional and simplistic, with the use of name-calling, negative anecdotes, and other derogatory methods revealed the media's attempts to elicit sympathy for the neo-conservative, anti-PC cause. Considering these findings it is not surprising that PC proponents complain that multiculturalism and related issues have suffered setbacks as a result of a distorted and falsely politicized debate and the public presentation of the issues at hand.

Our analysis confirms the finding of Gamson and Modigliani that the media tend to reduce an issue to two opposing packages, pro-and contra-PC (155). Although the "balance norm" is considered ethically correct in the media, it is a vague norm. Many reports and editorials that start out with a seemingly balanced view end with a partisan conclusion. Such a Manichaean division of "us" and "them" seems to pervade not only in the arguments of supporters and opponents of PC in the mass media but also in politics and academia. "Every side uses the language of innocence and victimization. People have scant experience of a 'middle ground' of public life where there is no eternal struggle between saints and sinners, innocents and moral monsters, but rather a dynamic, honest, and pragmatic public bargaining process among different interests, values, traditions, and ways of looking at the world" (Boyte 178).

The media, however, did not invent the issues that have come to be known as PC, and its current efforts to persuade the country against programs and policies that grow out of PC would not be attempted and certainly would not be successful if they didn't appeal to the public on some level. A deeper socio-historical exploration of the causes and fears evoked by PC help us better to understand the emotional reactions these debates create.

Demographic changes, immigration, and changes in the distribution of societal, political, and cultural assets have forced individuals to question the dominant culture and American identity, and to consider a redefinition of America's past, present, and future. Conservatives and even parts of the old liberal establishment perceive this attack on traditional cultural icons as not only a threat to the canon and academic standards but also as contributing to neo-tribal fragmentation which will lead the "Balkanization" of America, and thereby destroy the common and shared values and traditions that are the foundations of the American nation. Although this neo-conservative or traditionalist rhetoric is overdramatizing the impact of PC, it reflects a serious concern based on the current state of affairs in American society.

Conservatives invoke the American creed as the necessary foundation of national identity. They use constructed images and concepts of American national identity such as "individualism," "pragmatism," "progress," "freedom," and "democracy," depicting American liberalism as the apotheosis of individualism, democracy and economic well-being. They ignore the consequences of the 1960s civil rights, anti-Vietnam, and feminist movements that created more awareness of the diversity and plurality of American identity and repudiated a superficial notion of consensus, commonality, and truth. But to reveal the heterogeneity of American identity does not necessarily abandon the concept of American identity or replace it automatically with a hyphenated patchwork. It brings to light the process of inclusion and exclusion in the U.S. and reveals it as the result of an ongoing process of negotiation. The struggle over PC is "a tug of war over who gets to create the public culture . . . . Far from undermining the search for unity, identity and purpose, the multicultural enterprise has the

potential to strengthen it" by including all Americans in the search for a new democratic culture of participation (Kessler-Harris 7).

For some time to come American society will be characterized by a narrow path between conservative traditionalism and pluralist diversity, between the self-righteous proclamation of "universal truths" and skeptical relativism, between those representing the dominant hegemonic culture and the marginalized minorities. America will not escape the almost certain future of becoming a pluralist and diverse microcosm of the world and its ensuing conflicts. The media will undoubtedly have an important and evergrowing role in shaping the views of the populace in this complicated transition of modern societies into the 21st century.

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Notes

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[1]This article is based upon a paper given at the 41st Annual meeting of the German Association for American Studies, Universität Tübingen, May 25, 1994.

[2] Harold D. Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society." <u>Mass Communications</u>. Ed. Wilbur Schramm. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960 103, qtd. in von Harpe 32.

[3] A case in point: A columnist in Nixon's home county, Orange, California, was fired in May, 1994 after he wrote an editorial criticizing Nixon posthumously. An editor explained that the writer's piece "didn't fit in with what [the paper was] trying to do editorially" ("Journalist Loses").

[4] Kimball uses a barrage of name-calling to denunciate PC as "nihilist," "anti-scientific," "anti-intellectual," "separatist," "brainwashing," etc. (63, 82).