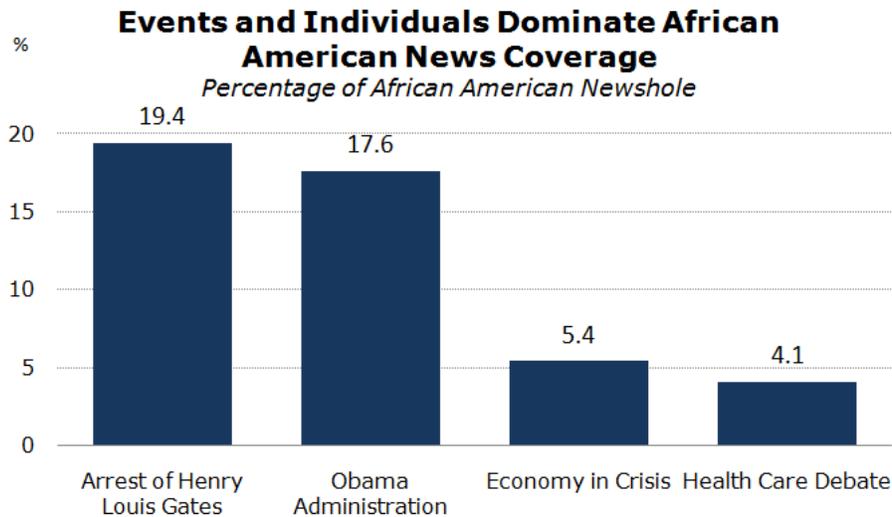




## Media, Race and Obama’s First Year: A Study of African Americans in U.S. News Coverage

As a group, African Americans attracted relatively little attention in the U.S. mainstream news media during the first year of Barack Obama’s presidency -- and what coverage there was tended to focus more on specific episodes than on examining how broader issues and trends affected the lives of blacks generally, according to a year-long study by the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism and its Social and Demographic Trends Project.

From early 2009 through early 2010, the biggest news story related to African Americans was the controversy triggered by the arrest last summer of a prominent black Harvard University professor by a white Cambridge, Massachusetts police officer. It accounted for nearly four times more African American-related coverage than did either of two biggest national “issue” stories covered by the mainstream media during the same period - the economy and health care.



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The study finds that 9% of the coverage of the nation’s first black president and his administration during Obama’s first year in office had some race angle to it. Here, too, this coverage was largely tied to specific incidents or controversies rather than to broader issues and themes.

These findings come from an examination of more than 67,000 national news stories that appeared between February 16, 2009 and February 15, 2010 in different mainstream media outlets, including newspapers, cable and network television, radio, and news websites.

Just 643 of those stories, 1.9% of the total newshole examined by the study, related in a significant way to African Americans in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> (To be considered a “significant” part of a given story, 25% of the content of that story must be about a demographic group and its race/ethnicity). However, this was more coverage than was given in the same time period to two other minority groups --- Hispanics (1.3%) and Asian Americans (0.2%). As a percentage African Americans make up 12.9% of the U.S. population.

The press coverage that did emerge tended to be a reaction to events involving black newsmakers rather than to issues relating to African Americans more generally. The arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, the Obama presidency, the death of Michael Jackson and the attempted Northwest Airlines terrorist attack by Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab accounted for nearly half (46.4%) of all coverage that had a substantial mention of African Americans during this time period.

The press explored substantial African American angles for just two of the major issues facing the country – the economic crisis and the health care debate. But together these stories accounted for less than 10% of the total African American-focused coverage overall. (Together, the economy and health care, accounted for 33.5% of all coverage studied).

A separate Pew Research analysis of three African American newspapers reveals a very different approach to the coverage of the Gates incident. While the mainstream media largely assessed political implications for President Obama, the commentary in the black press considered the arrest itself and the broader question of race relations in the U.S.

### **Cable and Talk Radio Coverage Hinges on Political Newsmakers**

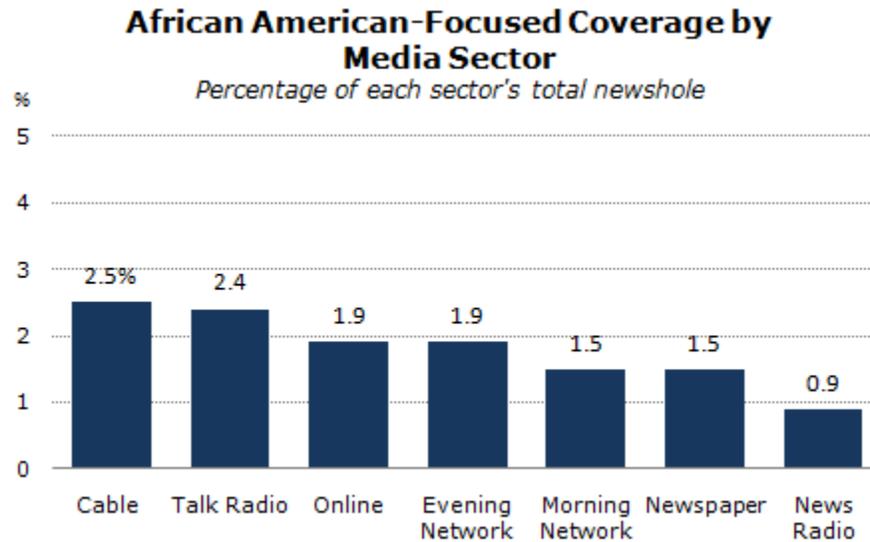
The media sectors studied differed in the degree to which they focused on African Americans in their coverage over the course of the year and in the angles they pursued. Cable TV and talk radio devoted the most time, with 2.5% and 2.4%, respectively, of their newshole (time studied on their programs) containing significant mention of African Americans. But, with the exception of CNN, the attention came largely through one lens—political debate, from both sides of the aisle, over events involving prominent blacks such as President Obama. CNN, during the time period studied, stood out for having segments about African Americans that went beyond that political debate, with a special series, *Black in America 2*, as well as other pieces that focused on issues facing the black population.

Online publications and evening network news came next, tied with 1.9% of their respective newsholes. News website coverage was also oriented largely around big events, but mainly through straight news accounts rather than ideological commentary. And network evening news, for its part, aired more produced packages (77.6%) than other broadcast media and often with a more positive light than in other media sectors.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Our measurement here is based on newshole, which is total time and space a story takes, not the number of stories. Therefore, 643 of 67,245 is a different percentage than the 1.9% of the newshole.

<sup>2</sup> This includes PBS NewsHour.



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The attention this population received on morning network news, 1.5% of the total newshole studied, came heavily through coverage of the Gates affair. Beyond that event, the morning shows provided little African American-related coverage.

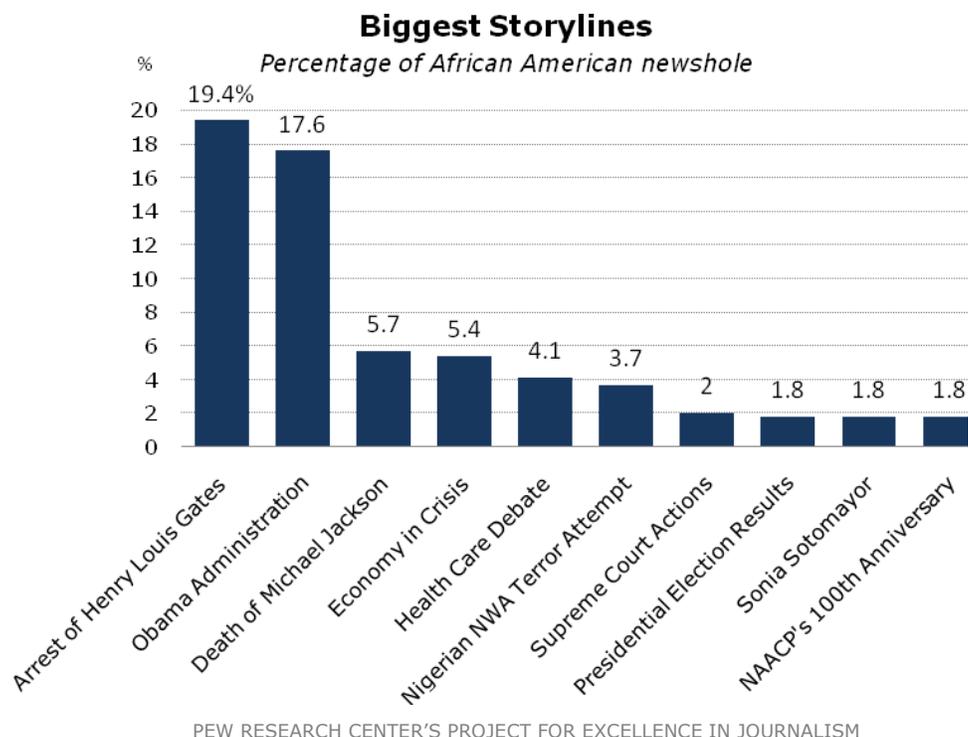
Newspaper front-pages, also at 1.5% of the total newshole, offered perhaps the widest mix of African American angles. Some of the attention was tied to news events of the day, some came in the form of profiles of individuals and some as analyses of issues facing the country. Whatever the storyline, this coverage tended to delve deeper into the impact or significance for the broader black population.

Just 0.9% of the news radio newshole included angles related to African Americans.

The differences across media play out in the storylines driving African American news coverage.

### **Biggest Storylines with African American Angles**

The storylines that generated the most press attention on African Americans were driven primarily by black figures who made news. In its coverage of race, in other words, the press largely responded to breaking news during the year studied rather than exploring the state of African Americans or developing African American angles around events or issues in the news.



Among the top-ten storylines during 2009 and early 2010, five stemmed from individuals who made news and five were tied more to issues in the news. Stories surrounding the five individuals accounted for 48.3% of all African American coverage – more than three times the coverage of the top five issues (15.1%).

News surrounding two figures alone – Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates and President Barack Obama – accounted for more than a third (37%) of the African American newshole.

Other individuals to spark coverage during the time period studied were Michael Jackson, who died on June 25, 2009; Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the Nigerian who attempted to attack the Northwest Airlines flight on December 25, 2009; and Sonia Sotomayor, whose confirmation hearings to become a Supreme Court justice triggered some debate over her ruling in a case involving white and African American firefighters.

The economic crisis, the biggest story overall in 2009 according to PEJ's News Coverage Index, accounted for 5.4% of all African American coverage. That makes it less than a third as prominent in African American news as the Gates arrest – a story that lasted just a couple of weeks and directly impacted only a handful of individuals. By contrast, the economic crisis was ongoing throughout the entire year under study and affected virtually everyone in America.

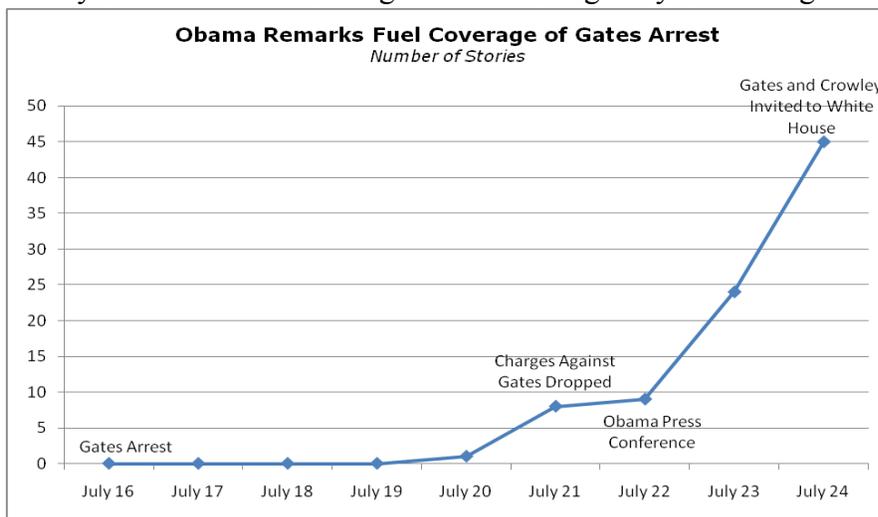
The other issue that generated any substantial African American angle was health care in America, at 4.1% of the African American newshole. Most of these stories looked at disparities in medical treatment among different socioeconomic groups; addressed diseases that

disproportionately impact African Americans; or questioned whether opposition to Obama’s healthcare plan was based on race.

### The Arrest of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

The largest single event explicitly tied to race in the way it was covered during the year was the arrest on July 16, 2009 of Gates, who was mistakenly suspected of trying to break in to his own home. Gates accused the arresting officer, who is white, of racism – and this sparked a sometimes heated national conversation about race. The debate was stoked even more as a result of public comments by Obama, a Gates friend, who said the Cambridge police “acted stupidly in arresting somebody when there was already proof that they were in their own home.”

Nearly one-fifth of all coverage studied during the year relating to African Americans (19.4%)



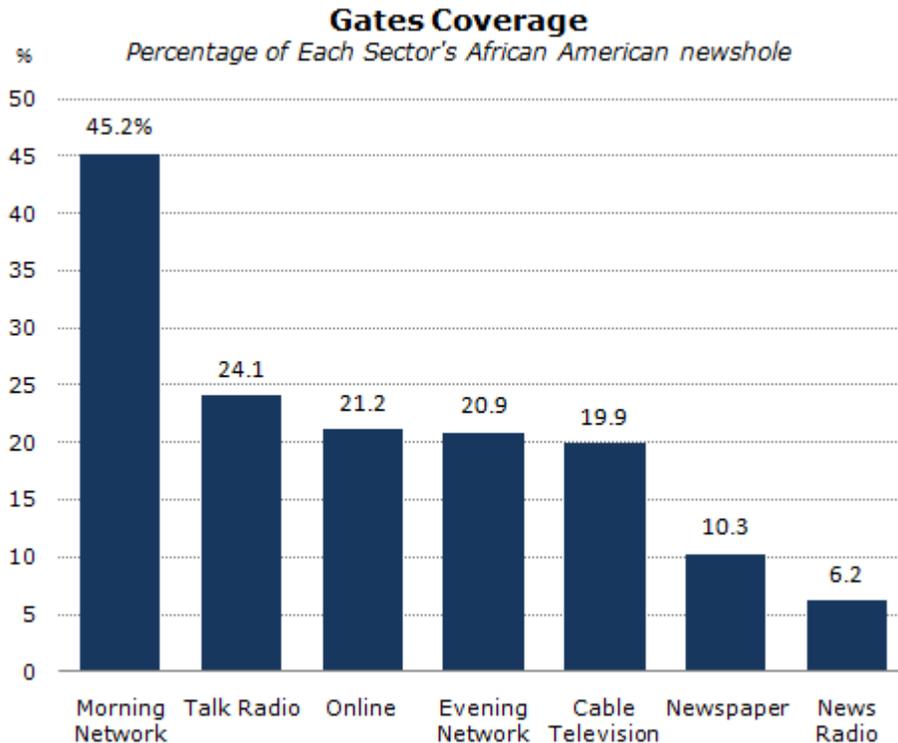
had to do with Gates’ arrest and the ensuing controversy, including Obama’s remarks. During its height, however, the Gates story was never huge. Its biggest week, according to [PEJ’s News Coverage Index](#), was the week the story broke, July 20-26, and it occupied 11.9% of the newshole, making it the No. 3 story for that week.

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The story took off in the mainstream press after Obama made comments about the arrest at one of his press conferences. Indeed, Obama, not involved at all in the initial incident, was a central newsmaker in roughly half of all African American-related Gates coverage.

In the time period studied, the Gates saga was the biggest African American storyline in all news sectors except for cable where the Obama Administration story was slightly larger.

Network morning news programs devoted the most time to the incident, as 45.2% of their African American-related coverage centered on the Gates arrest.



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Almost a quarter, 24.1%, of talk radio programming predominantly about African Americans was devoted to the Gates incident.

Online news filled 21.2% of its African American newshole with stories about the Gates arrest. On evening network news, the story filled 20.9% of the newshole.

On cable, that was true of 19.9% of its African American-related coverage, second only to the Obama Administration at 25.9%.

The storyline accounted for 10.3% of the African American coverage on newspaper front pages. More coverage could be found in the opinion pages of newspapers, but the front-pages considered a wide range of other African American related themes.<sup>3</sup>

What sort of African American angle emerged in the coverage of the Gates incident? Was there an attempt to discuss the black population more broadly, or did the media stay focused on the individuals directly involved?

To a certain degree, this varied according to each media sector.

Cable news and network morning television in particular focused on the aftermath, often bringing in pundits or other outsiders for discussion. But, even using some of the same sources, there was a distinct difference in the image that emerged from each of the two sectors. Morning

<sup>3</sup> PEJ codes only the front page of newspapers and the continuation of these stories for the News Coverage Index.

news segments, usually a brief packaged piece followed by a discussion with two or more guests, tended to be more symbiotic, with the guests often voicing agreement over the issues at hand and offering a positive sense of how things could move forward.

For example, on the July 23, 2009 Today Show, NBC's Matt Lauer interviewed Michael Eric Dyson, an author (and common interviewee across the media sectors), and Michel Smerconish, also an author and a radio host. Although the two men disagreed, they acknowledged each others' points of view, and never interrupted each other.

And on the July 24, 2009 Early Show on CBS, correspondent Harry Smith interviewed Professor Gates' daughter Elizabeth, a writer for DailyBeast.com, along with the mayor of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Denise Simmons. The two women remained very cordial throughout, with Gates even praising the other interviewee's words, "As the mayor just eloquently stated, my father has said that he'll participate in whatever the next step must be."

As the case went on, the coverage followed the same pattern, although the topic evolved. On a July 28, 2009 Early Show, after airing the taped recording of the 911 call, Harry Smith interviewed the Rev. Jesse Jackson about the debacle. Smith asked Jackson about the upcoming "beer summit" between Obama, Gates and Officer James Crowley and whether the men could find common ground; he also noted the feel-good mood after Obama was elected and asked whether the U.S. could ever be a color blind country.

Jackson responded that, "No one desires to be blind. We should be conscious...and we should be caring. I think the real deal here is that we do not have an explosive situation. President Obama has tried to reduce the temperature in the Doctor Gates and Crowley case."

On talk radio, the tenor was quite different. Most of the coverage in this sector came from the conservative talk show hosts. Liberal host Ed Schultz did not spend any significant time on this story. Another liberal talker, Randi Rhodes, devoted two segments to the arrest.

Since right wing talkers were most likely to talk about the issue, it is not surprising that most of the radio talk show coverage strongly critiqued Obama's response to the Gates arrest.

On Rush Limbaugh's July 23, 2009 show, the radio host said that "the president's reaction to this was not presidential... We got the militant black reaction, the Cornel West angry reaction. Basically we saw a community organizer in action last night, and he sends a message to young people all over the country that cops are stupid. The President of the United States says the police act stupidly... Obama is not a force for positive race relations in this country. He is not a uniter. He played into stereotypes with this, and he repeats them. He [should have] kept his mouth shut."

Also on July 23, Michael Savage called Obama a "jive artist" and said his and Gates' actions were anti-police.

Sean Hannity also blasted Obama in his radio show July 24, 2009 for saying that the cops acted "stupidly." He demanded that Obama apologize to Crowley.

Much of the internet news coverage was made up of wire stories that followed the same trajectory of the case that the other outlets followed. Although there was some analysis, most coverage described the events of the case, Obama's comments, the 911 call and the subsequent beer summit.

A July 21, 2009 Associated Press story published on AOL News explained that "supporters say Gates was the victim of racial profiling" and then went into a detailed account of the events that led up to the arrest. The article also pulled in quotes from several prominent African Americans including the Rev. Al Sharpton and some of Gates' colleagues.

Network evening news produced the most enterprising pieces, looking beyond the political issue at hand to broader racial implications. CBS Evening News aired a July 23, 2009 story on the recent history of clashes between African Americans and law enforcement. A day later, ABC's World News Tonight aired a report on the same issue.

On July 23, 2009, PBS' NewsHour aired a package about the incident and then Ray Suarez interviewed Antwi Akom, a professor of urban education and Joseph Thomas, Jr., the African American chief of police for Southfield, Michigan and an adjunct professor of political science. In this rather formal, polite interview, the three men focused on the problem of racial profiling as opposed to focusing solely on the Gates incident. The tenor of the discussion reflected much of

the coverage seen in the African American press about the incident.



Cable news attention was similarly focused on political implications, though here both sides of the aisle weighed in strongly. On cable news, particularly evening prime time, the tone was quite different. These programs fixated more on the political implications. Here, debate and disagreement came from both the guests and the hosts themselves.

On the O'Reilly Factor's July 23, 2009 show, for example, sit-in host Monica Crowley repeatedly criticized Obama for weighing in on the matter at all. "We weren't there, we don't know what happened, but neither does the president. So why is he taking sides in the case of a Harvard professor accusing a local cop of racism?"

CNN in some ways benefited from timing as the Gates arrest occurred shortly before the premiere of the Black in America 2 series. Several African American guests were already scheduled to appear on the various prime time programs. The conversation quickly turned to the Gates affairs, with heated remarks and exchanges among the guests. Wolf Blitzer on The Situation Room, for example, aired a live interview with African American comedian D.L. Hughley and an African American radio host, Bev Smith.

Smith was incensed about Gates' arrest and racism overall.

“We’re outraged. We’re outraged that an intellectual...He is not unknown in his community nor is he unknown by the police department. My listeners were calling the police department and registering our outrage. We cannot have our leadership treated in such a way. We’re outraged, but we’re not surprised, Wolf.”

Blitzer’s interview touched more on race relations than most other coverage of the arrest, asking the guests if they had ever been racially profiled and if the situation for African Americans was getting better – to which Smith’s quick response was that it was “absolutely not.”

Newspapers, at least on their front pages, stuck more to the events as they unfolded. The Washington Post, for example, had a front page story on July 22, 2009 about the arrest. The Post interviewed Gates, who said that the arrest will lead him to “turn his intellectual heft and stature to the issue of racial profiling.”

One area of commonality across media sectors came in the black voices they brought into the coverage. Most interviewed a mix of African Americans not tied to the case in any way but who were academics, political analysts and black activists, who could speak personally as a voice from the African American populace. Some of the most prominent voices included conservative Bob Parks and liberal Earl Ofari Hutchinson, American political science professor, Melissa Harris-Lacewell, Reverend Jesse Jackson and political analyst Donna Brazile.

### **The Obama Administration**

The nation’s first African American president was the No. 2 story explicitly related in the coverage to African Americans during the year studied, a time period that coincides with Obama’s first year in office. In all, 17.6% of the coverage of African Americans came through coverage of the Obama Administration. (This category does not include policy-oriented stories over such matters as health care or the environment that involved the Obama Administration generally. It includes, rather, coverage that focused on or assessed the Administration and its fortunes specifically.).

Add in coverage of the Gates incident involving the president and that number rises to almost a 30% of all African American coverage.<sup>4</sup>

Looked at another way, how large a component was race in the press’ treatment of the Obama presidency? In all, race-related themes were present in 9% of all Obama Administration coverage.

Nor did the media generally use his presence as a news hook or basis for examining the state of Black America during his first year in office. Instead, the attention, like other African American coverage, tended to be triggered by specific news events. In this case, two such incidents stood

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<sup>4</sup> The 134 stories about the Obama Administration that discussed race significantly were only stories about the administration itself and not any other major stories or policy controversies like health care or the environment. Even if the Obama Administration had a major role or was a big part of a story, it would be considered part of that category and not under the Obama Administration.

out with roughly equal parts of the coverage: an outburst by Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC) at a September presidential address to a joint session of Congress and Sen. Harry Reid's January 2010 apology about comments he made about Obama's skin color.

During the presidential address, a forum for the president to outline his new health care reform proposal, Rep. Wilson shouted "You lie!" when Obama said the plan would not provide health insurance to illegal immigrants.



Wilson's exclamation itself did not mention race, but several observers and commentators asserted that race lay at its core. Most prominent among these was former president Jimmy Carter, who told a town hall meeting in Atlanta that he thought Wilson's comment was "based in racism." Carter continued, "There is an inherent feeling among many in this country that an African American should not be president." One day later, he also said in a speech at Emory

University that the heavy anti-health-care-reform vitriol of the summer town hall meetings were fueled with racism.

Carter's response to Wilson's quote received extensive attention in the media but still did not bring out a much deeper discussion of racism in America. Instead, the coverage was focused on the words of Wilson and Carter.

While front page coverage tended to provide balanced coverage of the issue, cable news shows weighed in with their own – often alternative – opinions.

On his September 16, 2009 radio show, conservative Sean Hannity said that disparaging Obama's critics as being racist was a "clearly orchestrated campaign" by the Obama Administration and on his September 18, 2009 cable television show, the anchor tied Carter's comments with Nancy Pelosi's concerns about violence, calling them desperate scare tactics.

Anderson Cooper's September 16, 2009 show pulled together a panel to discuss the racism issue: African American singer John Legend, black conservative activist Nic Lott, white political analyst David Gergen and African American political analyst Roland Martin.



A September 22, 2009 Good Morning America piece interviewed Bill Clinton about Carter's statement about racism, but the conversation turned more to opposition to health care reform legislation than about racism. Later that day, Keith Olbermann discussed Clinton and Carter's differing opinions on racism on his Countdown show.

Others argued the claims of racism were unfounded and even politically motivated. On a September 17 show, Fox's Sean Hannity said that Democrats were trying to silence their critics by "defining conservatism as racism." And the Fox Report With Shepard Smith turned to Joe Wilson's son, saying there is "not a racist bone" in his dad's body.

Obama himself downplayed the situation. He said he thought dislike of government was a bigger factor in criticisms of his presidency than racism. He also deflected the topic with humor: when asked in an interview on the Late Show with David Letterman about whether there was basis to Carter's charges of racism, Obama quipped, "Well, first of all, I think it's important to realize that I was actually black before the election."

Four months later, another assertion with racial angles elicited heavy media attention. This one came in published form and, while lasting just three days in the media spotlight, accounted for most of the remainder of the coverage of Obama explicitly tied to race. Mark Halperin and John Heilemann's book, *Game Change*, released January 2010, quoted Sen. Harry Reid as saying that Obama could win the presidency because he was "light-skinned" and had "no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one." When the quote hit the media, Reid made a public apology as well as a phone call to the president.

Obama accepted his apology, but not before the story grabbed media attention – particularly among cable and radio talk programs, which again focused almost solely on evaluating the actions of the two individuals (Reid and Obama) rather than taking a larger focus on how African Americans might respond to such a remark. And the evaluations came largely along party lines as Rush Limbaugh, on his January 11 radio show, pronounced Reid's apology to be fake, while MSNBC's Chris Matthews claimed it to be sincere.

One other race-related accusation of the president came from within the media itself. Fox News personality Glenn Beck pronounced on July 28, 2009 that Obama "hates white people," prompting discussions across the media about public attitudes toward the first African American president.

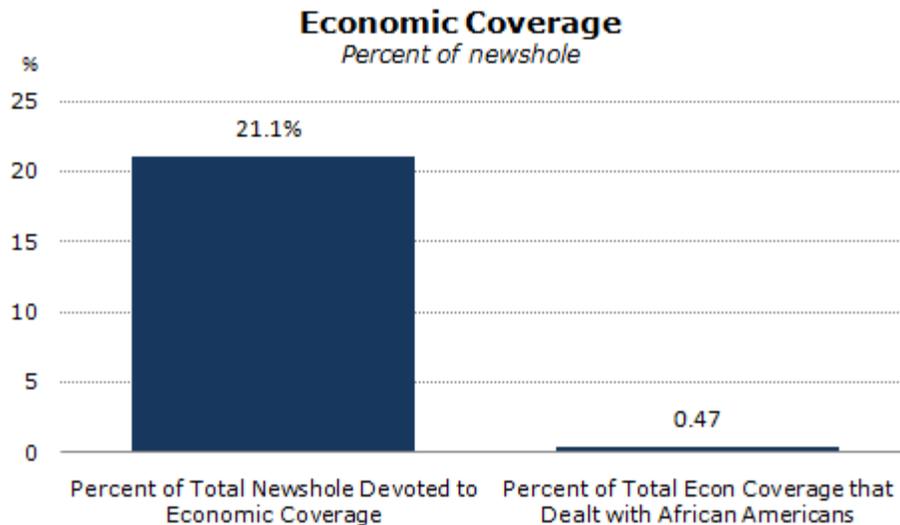
From there, cable channels aired responses to Beck's statement. On MSNBC's July 29, 2009 *Hardball*, Chris Matthews interviewed Kweisi Mfume, former congressman and president of the NAACP, and Joan Walsh from Salon.

Mfume said, "Glenn Beck owes the president an apology. He owes the American people an apology. This is an insult to our democracy, our way of life. It's divisive. It's throwing out race and trying to find a way to divide people."

When Matthews asked Walsh if Beck's statement was intended to "de-Americanize" the president, Walsh said, "I do. I think it's related. It's all an attempt to dehumanize him and to delegitimize him in a very deep way."

## The Economy and Health Care Crisis

In all, less than 1% of the coverage of the economic crisis was related in some significant way to African Americans. This came despite the media devoting more attention to the economy than any other story during the time period studied. From February 2009 to February 2010, the economic crisis accounted for 21.1% of all news coverage.



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What coverage there was tended to be bleak. Fully 51.4% of the economic coverage that mentioned African Americans was about unemployment and often contrasted unemployment of African Americans and whites.

The New York Times on December 1, 2009, for example, ran an article about the growth of the race gap in hiring and employment during the recession, even among those with college degrees. The article focused on several African Americans looking for jobs, including a 37-year old, Barry Jabbar Sykes, who has a degree from the historically black Morehouse College. Sykes uses the first name “Barry” on job applications even though he has gone by Jabbar his whole life because he thinks it will give him a leg up in hiring. “Barry sounds like I could be from Ireland,” Sykes said.

Other stories were about African Americans who had sub-prime mortgages or who confronted discrimination in the mortgage process and the NAACP suing Wells Fargo and HSBC for institutionalism racism.

The small portion of health care stories that included a racial component most often drew attention to disparities in coverage between the races and between the wealthy and the poor. Only 0.6% of overall healthcare coverage had an African American angle, and 4.1% of the African American newshole was devoted to healthcare.

A July 20, 2009 Anderson Cooper 360 package investigated racism in the health care industry, bringing to light “two systems” in New York City: those privately insured compared with those on Medicaid. There was a focus on how blacks faced this unfairness disproportionately to whites. In addition, a June 9, 2009 ABC News headline radio story covered black, Latino and Asian lawmakers seeking to call attention to disparities in medical treatment in poor areas.

## The Lives of African Americans in the U.S.

With most of the coverage about African Americans fueled by individual newsmakers, what kind of coverage emerged about the population of African Americans in general? Which media tended to produce these kinds of reports, and what sorts of themes and images emerged?



Overall these stories painted a downbeat picture of the state of African Americans in this county, mostly tied to health care or the economy. There was also a smattering of more uplifting coverage about individual stories of success.

Two outlets, CNN and the Washington Post, released special series about African Americans during the time period studied. CNN aired *Black in America 2* from July 22-23 2009, a sequel to its summer 2008 program that also examined the African American experience and looked at difficult issues facing the community. The Gates arrest, it turned out, came shortly before the series launched and redirected some of the on-air discussion and interview segments. Separately, though, CNN aired other packages focused on this population as well.

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The Washington Post series drew attention to some of the more discouraging statistics in African American life today. The four-part series, [Wasting Away](#), examined the “squandering of D.C.’s AIDS dollars” in Washington, DC’s predominantly African American neighborhoods from October through December 2009. Online, this series provided interactive breakdowns of where the money went, videos on the city’s AIDS crisis, and discussions about the AIDS crisis, focusing on African Americans.

In the first article, published October 18, 2009, Debbie Cenziper wrote, “More than 15,000 people have HIV or AIDS in the District, 3 percent of the population older than 12. For black men, the rate is more than double, at 6.5 percent – one of every 15 people.”

Other stories that displayed the struggles and challenges of this population included several from CNN, separate from the *Black in America 2* series. One was on budgeting for historically

black colleges and universities, another on the disparity between blacks and whites in unemployment and poverty levels, two stories about the killing of children in Chicago, and several on racism throughout the country.

On evening network television, there were several stories on health issues facing this population. NBC aired a story about high rates of HIV, CBS on colorectal cancer and ABC on higher breast cancer rates among African Americans.

Morning network television did not cover the lives of average African Americans much at all, whether in a positive or a negative light.

Although not as common, there were some stories that put a more positive outlook on the lives of African Americans today.

A May 3, 2009 New York Times article examined differences in race relations in light of the Obama Administration through interviews with African Americans.

“In dozens of interviews in seven states over the last several days, black men and women... said they were feeling more optimistic about race relations than even a year ago, when Mr. Obama emerged as a serious presidential contender after a strong of primary and caucus victories. Many whites said they were feeling better, too, expressing an invigorated sense of openness toward people of other races. Yet no one claims that racial prejudice has disappeared.”

CNN and NBC Nightly News both aired segments honoring Jackie Robinson 62 years after he broke the race barrier in baseball. Other more optimistic stories on evening network news included the unveiling of Disney’s first African American princess and the election of the first African American mayor in Philadelphia, Miss. – a city with a history of racial violence.

NBC Nightly News also aired a story about the once crime-riddled community of Miami Gardens, Fla. that worked to become a more peaceful town as well as entrepreneurs trying to clean up a crime-ridden area of Newark, N.J to build affordable homes. And several news outlets covered Philadelphia, Miss.’ swearing in of its first black mayor.

CBS Evening News singled out individual black achievements such as in an April 9, 2009 story about a group of students from Howard University who went to Chicago on an alternative spring break trip in an effort to introduce Chicago’s youth to success stories – college-educated youth emphasizing the choice of dialogue over violence.



The program also aired two stories in October 2009 about African American youth making a difference. One story focused on a sixth grader’s crusade to stop the use of the n-word in the African American community and the other was about a young African American entrepreneur who sold t-shirts with positive messages.

And there were a few stories about racial tensions, like a Los Angeles Times piece on January 28, 2010. This story focused on a small Nebraska town where Mexicans, Somalis and Sudanese work together in a meatpacking plant and touched on both struggles and a sense of progress.

These stories, however, were not the norm, and the picture they offered about life for blacks in America generally portrayed economic disparity.

## **African American Press**

In addition to looking at how the mainstream media covered African Americans, this study also examined how issues of race were treated in the African American press. To do so, we looked at coverage of the biggest race story of the year, the Henry Louis Gates arrest and its aftermath. For this separate analysis, we examined the three highest circulation African American newspapers in the country from February 16, 2009 through February 15, 2010:

- [The New York Amsterdam News](#), published weekly in Harlem, NY.
- [The Afro-American](#), published weekly in Washington D.C. and Baltimore.
- [The Philadelphia Tribune](#) which publishes three times a week.

Given that these papers are not daily, the coverage would naturally be less about providing the latest breaking news. What kind of coverage did they provide? And how was it similar to or different from the mainstream press? Several findings emerged.

First, much of the coverage of the Gates arrest came from the opinion and editorial pages. These newspapers were not providing breaking news: they offered few analysis or summary pieces about the Gates incident in the main pages of the paper. The remainder of the coverage came through a mix of voices in the opinion sections.

Second, the discussion and columns offered here took a starkly different angle than the commentary in the mainstream press. While the mainstream media largely assessed political implications for President Obama, the commentary in the black press considered the broader question of race relations in the U.S. It was also evident that these papers saw themselves as a voice of the black community. Even within the opinion columns, there was a clear sense of providing an African American perspective to the story. The tone, however, in many cases, came across as less “us” versus “them” and more of an assessment of steps needed from all sides.

The papers varied in the extent to which they covered the story, but most were heavy on opinion coverage of the Gates incident. The Philadelphia Tribune published the most pieces about the Gates arrest overall, with eight articles. Three were summaries of the events surrounding the case, four were opinion pieces and one was an editorial about the case. The New York Amsterdam News published five pieces about the incident: two editorials, two opinion pieces and one article about the case. And the Afro-American published four: one editorial and three news stories.

The coverage and discussion in the black press moved beyond the incident itself and delved deeply into the complex and thorny area of race relations in America.

In a front-page Philadelphia Tribune article on July 24, 2009 staff writers Melanie Holmes and Arlene Edmonds described the issue as “bigger than Gates.” The article then offered reaction from African Americans in the community and noted scholars about broader implications. One quote came from Harvey Crudup, the present of an area NAACP and the first African American deputy police commissioner of operations for the Philadelphia Police Department, who offered, “Sometimes these things happen so that we, as a race, realize that racism is still alive. We can never get so relaxed that we think everything is OK.”

And the Amsterdam News ran an editorial by editor-in-chief Elinor Tatum for the week of July 23, 2009, in which she wrote, “but the fact still remains that it does not matter that you are a PH.D., it does not matter that you are a lawyer, it does not matter that you are a police officer or a teacher or journalist or a pastor. What first matters is that you are Black. And because you are Black, you are a suspect first and foremost.”

Within the analysis, the papers also clearly see themselves as a voice for and of the black community. Columnists and editorial writers also used inclusive language to show they are the articulating the community’s point of view. For example, in an op-ed in the August 7, 2009 Philadelphia Tribune by Clarence Page, a columnist for the Chicago Tribune, Page wrote, “we attune our cultural antenna and react sharply to any signs of preference shown to any group besides the one to which we happen to belong. That’s nothing new for women or nonwhites. Men and whites are still getting used to it.”

In the articles examined, 20 of 28 people quoted (71.4%) were African American.

An August 8, 2010 article in the Afro-American, for example, quoted Georgetown professor Michael Eric Dyson, Schott Foundation president John Jackson and BET’s Jeff Johnson. (Dyson was also a frequent guest on many cable news shows in the weeks after the Gates arrest.) Another example was in Philadelphia Tribune staff writers Melanie Holmes’ and Arlene Edmonds’ July 24, 2009 article which quoted vice chairman of Concerned Black Men, Jim Newton saying, “As Black people we have to always realize that no matter how far you go you are still Black to racists.”

Even with this community identity, though, there was not blind or universal blame put on Crowley or whites in general. Several columns discussed changes that needed to occur on both sides of the racial divide.

One example of an article attempting to reflect the voice of the black community was in an August 6, 2009 opinion piece in the New York Amsterdam News, columnist Richard Carter wrote, “Did Sgt. Crowley racially profile professor Gates? Probably. Did Gates behave badly? Absolutely. Did President Obama put his foot in his mouth? Definitely. Ugh!”

And a July 24, 2009 Philadelphia Tribune report worked to ensure that officer Crowley was not falsely maligned staff writer Robert Hightower wrote, “Friends and fellow officers Black and

white – say Sgt. James Crowley is a principled cop and family man who is being unfairly described as racist.”

Finally, some of the newspapers talked about the importance of growing from the experience and making positive changes toward racial harmony.

An August 8, 2009 Afro-American opinion piece by George E. Curry, former editor-in-chief of Emerge magazine, called for making the Gates arrest a “teachable moment” and provided examples of ways to make this happen. This editorial did not seem to speak only to an African American audience, but pleaded with the entire populace to focus on breaking racial barriers.

Curry wrote that it was up to everyone to improve race relations in the U.S., “But improving race relations is too important to be left to President Obama or a beer summit at the White House. A major impediment to racial progress is the lack of meaningful interaction between the races away from the workplace. One of the things that helped race relations in the 1960s were structured programs that allowed people of all races to talk directly with one another...Perhaps they should be revived. Today, we still talk about race, but usually among our own racial group. Of course, we need to do more than talk.”

## Newsmakers

Who were the people who made news that related to African Americans?

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### Lead Newsmakers

*Percentage of African American stories*

<b>Barack Obama</b>	31.7%
<b>Henry Louis Gates, Jr.</b>	9.0
<b>Harry Reid</b>	6.2
<b>Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab</b>	3.6
<b>Jimmy Carter</b>	3.4
<b>Michael Jackson</b>	3.3
<b>James Crowley</b>	1.9
<b>Michelle Obama</b>	1.4
<b>Eric Holder</b>	1.2
<b>Joe Wilson</b>	1.1

PEW RESEARCH CENTER'S  
PROJECT FOR EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM

PEJ tracks who is a lead newsmaker in every story. To qualify as a lead newsmaker, someone must be related to at least 50% of the story in space or time. The lead newsmakers in stories that were predominantly about African Americans were primarily those who were involved in the major stories of the year, with Barack Obama taking the lead.

The president was the lead newsmaker in 31.7% of all African American-mention stories, more than three times any other figure.

The second leading newsmaker was Henry Louis Gates, Jr., himself, featured in 9% of all stories in which African Americans were mentioned prominently.

The third lead newsmaker with recurring references to African Americans was Harry Reid, with 6.2% of stories because of a January 2010 apology for his comment that Obama could win the presidency because he was “light-skinned” and had “no Negro dialect, unless he wanted to have one.”

The fourth lead newsmaker was Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a Nigerian man who attempted to blow up a U.S. plane on Christmas Day, with 3.6% of stories.

Rounding out the top five lead newsmakers was Jimmy Carter who criticized Joe Wilson’s “you lie” statement at Obama as a racist outburst. He was a lead newsmaker in 3.4% of the African American stories. The sixth on the list, the late “King of Pop” Michael Jackson, represented 3.3% of stories that mentioned African Americans prominently.

Sgt. James Crowley, the policeman who arrested Gates, was mentioned in 1.9% of all African American stories.

Michelle Obama was a lead newsmaker in 1.4% of the stories that focused on African Americans. All but one of these stories was about her family ancestry and genealogy, traced in October 2009. The one other story focused on her discussion with African American students at a school in Washington, D.C.

Attorney General Eric Holder was the lead newsmaker in 1.2% of stories about African Americans because of comments he made about race in February 2009. Congressman Joe Wilson also was in the top ten, with 1.1% of stories.

## Methodology

This study by the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism (PEJ) and [Social & Demographic Trends](#) analyzed news coverage of African Americans during a 12-month time period, February 16, 2009 – February 15, 2010. The analysis is based on coding conducted as part of PEJ's weekly [News Coverage Index \(NCI\)](#).

During this period, PEJ researchers coded 67,245 stories as part of the NCI. These stories span across five media sectors: newspapers, online, network TV, cable TV and radio. The universe of stories was coded by a team made up of 17 trained coders, a coding administrator and a senior research methodologist.

In addition to the main variables that are a regular part of the NCI, we added variables to track significant mentions of four separate demographic groups. We began coding for significant mentions of Hispanics, Africans and African Americans on February 9 and Asians on February 16, 2009.

We also added a variable for significant mentions of President Obama's race.

To create the set of stories used for this study, we combined the stories coded for prominent mentions of African Americans with those coded prominent mentions of Obama's race.

We only looked at domestic stories for this study; we did not include stories coded as U.S. international or non-U.S. international.

### The Universe

In 2009, PEJ monitored 55 different news outlets, and in 2010 PEJ monitors 53 different news outlets each week Monday–Friday, and Sunday newspapers. The specific content collected is as follows:

- Newspapers: All stories on the front page with a national or international focus are captured and coded.

2009: A rotating group of seven out of 13 newspapers daily, ranging from the Kansas City Star and San Jose Mercury News to the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, USA Today, Washington Post, and New York Times were coded.

2010: A rotating group of five or six out of 11 newspapers daily, ranging from the Ventura Star and The Day to the Seattle Times, the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal are coded.

- Broadcast network television evening news shows:  
2009: The entirety of ABC's World News Tonight, CBS's Evening News, and NBC's Nightly News are captured and coded every weekday. A half hour of every episode of

PBS's Newshour with Jim Lehrer was captured and coded, with coding alternating between the first and the second half-hour of the show.

2010: PEJ started rotating the broadcasts so that two out of the three commercial network news shows are coded every weekday.

- Broadcast network television morning news shows: Every Monday to Friday the first 30 minutes of ABC's Good Morning America, CBS's Early Show, and NBC's Today show were captured and coded.

2010: PEJ started rotating the broadcasts so that two out of the three commercial network news shows are coded every weekday.

- Daytime cable news: Every weekday, a half-hour of news from two of the following channels was recorded between 2-2:30 p.m. ET: CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC.
- Evening cable news: Every weekday, the first half-hour of a rotating schedule of six news programs from CNN, Fox and MSNBC were recorded and coded, ranging from CNN's Situation Room and Anderson Cooper 360, to Fox News's O'Reilly Factor and Special Report With Bret Baier to MSNBC's Hardball and Rachel Maddow.
- Radio news:

2009: Twice a day (at 9 a.m. and again at 5 p.m. every Monday to Friday), all news headlines from ABC and CBS radio were captured and coded, as was a half-hour of NPR's Morning Edition, with coding alternating between the first half-hour of the first hour, and the first half-hour of the second hour.

2010: PEJ was rotating the coding so that one set of 9 a.m. and one set of 5 p.m. headlines were coded every weekday. For NPR, PEJ now codes both Morning Edition and All Things Considered on NPR. On any given day, PEJ codes the first half-hour of either the first or second hour or one of these shows every weekday.

- Talk radio: Every day, the first half-hour of a rotating selection of two or three different talk shows was recorded and coded, ranging from Rush Limbaugh and Michael Savage to Ed Schultz and Randi Rhodes.

2010: PEJ codes either one or two of the radio talk shows every weekday. The total sample includes Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity and Ed Schultz only.

- Online news: Once a day (Monday to Friday), the top five stories on a rotating schedule of the following news sites were captured and coded: CNN.com, Yahoo News, MSNBC.com, Google News, FoxNews.com, USAToday.com, NYTimes.com, AOL News, WashingtonPost.com, ABCNews.com, BBC News (international version), and Reuters.com.

2010: PEJ replaced the BBC News and Reuters websites with WSJonline.com and HuffingtonPost.com.

For a methodology of our News Index, see here:  
[http://www.journalism.org/about\\_news\\_index/methodology](http://www.journalism.org/about_news_index/methodology)

## **Tracking Demographic Groups**

In order to track stories in which certain demographic groups had a significant presence, PEJ devised a comprehensive set of rules.

### *Significant Mention*

- To be considered a significant part of the story, 25% of a story needed to be about that demographic group and their race/ethnicity/religion.
- The race/ethnicity/religion needed to be explicitly stated. If a person was pictured or named without his/her race stated explicitly, that story was not coded. This rule applied even if one might assume/guess their ethnicity from the picture or name.
- Stories about foreign governments, businesses, etc. were not be coded unless they referred to how those governments/business are affecting one of the groups of people below.
- A story could be about multiple demographic groups. For example: Asian and Hispanic could both be selected if the story was 25% or more about Asians and 25% or more about Hispanics.
- Any person, group or organization referred to using the term “name of country + American” or “name of region + American” were coded for this variable if they are 25% in the story.
  - *For example:* Mexican American, Asian American, etc. would be coded if that person satisfied the 25% rule in the story.
- Any person, group or organization referred to by their nationality only was coded for this variable if they were 25% of the story.
  - *For example:* A person or group referred to only as Peruvian, Kenyan, Chinese, etc. would be coded for that ethnic/demographic group.

From the greater universe of 67,245 stories, we culled down to a smaller group of 643 stories for this study that was made of only stories that were coded for African American presence, presence of Obama’s race or both of these variables.

## **African/African American Presence Variable**

*Definition:* This applies to stories that are 25% or more about an African American/African person, people or organization. Note: President Barak Obama is specifically excluded from this variable. Instead, African American angles of coverage about him are captured in a separate variable described below.

### **SPECIFIC TERMS AND NATIONALITIES TO CODE FOR:**

- African American
- Black
- African

ALL countries (with only one exception, see below) on the continent of Africa, including those in North Africa, are automatically considered as African, i.e.:

- Algerian
- Congolese
- Ethiopian
- Kenyan
- Libyan
- Malian
- Moroccan
- Nigerian
- Rwandan
- Somali
- South African
- Sudanese
- Tunisian
- Zimbabwean
- Etc.

The islands of the Seychelles, Madagascar and Mauritania are also African.

The exception is **Egypt**: for Egypt to be considered as African under this variable the story must explicitly mention Egypt, Egyptians or Egyptian organizations as African – such stories are likely to be rare.

\*Please see the note below about exclusion of Africans coverage in this analysis

## **Obama's Race Variable**

*Definition:* This applies to stories that are 25% or more about Obama's race.

Stories coded for this variable may or may not also be coded for the African American variable.

If a story features Obama at 25% or more and mentions his race even once, it qualifies for this variable.

For this analysis we added together stories that were coded for significant mentions of Africans/African Americans and those that were coded for significant mention of Obama's race as "African American."

We then took one additional step. The purpose of this study was to examine African Americans in the news rather than Africans. Thus, in the African American Presence variable we excluded international or foreign stories such as those of the pirates in Somalia.

The total number of domestic stories came to 49316. That is 73% of all stories studied (67,245). The total number of domestic stories that talked about African Americans came to 643.

### **African American Press**

For the separate study examining African American publications, PEJ researchers examined coverage of the Gates incident from February 16, 2009 through February 15, 2010 in the African American press.

Articles and editorials were identified using a Lexis Nexus search for "Henry Louis Gates" of the three largest circulation African American newspapers in the U.S., The Afro-American, the Philadelphia Tribune and the New York Amsterdam News, based on figures from the [2010 State of the News Media](#). Then articles were selected based on whether they would meet the qualification to be coded under the category "Arrest of Henry Louis Gates," according to NCI coding rules. Stories about Gates that were not related to the arrest were excluded.

This resulted in 17 stories: Four from the Afro-American, eight from the Philadelphia Tribune and five from the New York Amsterdam News. In all, ten of these articles were editorials or opinion pieces.

These stories were then read through and examined for sources interviewed, format (editorial, opinion, straight news or analysis) and other markers such as whether race relations or President Obama was mentioned.

The articles were qualitatively analyzed, with a close attention to how these newspapers differed in their coverage of the incident compared with the mainstream press.

### **Other Ethnic Measures**

#### **Hispanic Presence**

*Definition:* This applies to stories that are 25% or more about a Hispanic person, group or organization.

SPECIFIC TERMS AND NATIONALITIES TO CODE FOR:

- Argentinean
- Belizean
- Bolivian
- Brazilian
- Chilean
- Colombian
- Costa Rican
- Cuban
- Dominican
- Ecuadorian
- Salvadoran
- Guatemalan
- Honduran
- Mexican
- Nicaraguan
- Panamanian
- Paraguayan
- Peruvian
- Portuguese
- Puerto Rican
- Spanish (not language)
- Uruguayan
- Venezuelan
- Mexican/Mexicana
- Mestizo/Mestiza (mixed race)
- Mexican American
- Spanish/Spaniard
- Latin/Latino/Latina
- Indian (Only if Latin American indigenous heritage)
- Chicano/Chincana
- Mulatto/Mulatta
- Moreno/Morena

**Asian/ Asian-American Presence**

This applies to stories that are 25% or more about an Asian person, people or organization.

*SPECIFIC TERMS TO CODE FOR:*

- Asian
- Asian American
- Asian American Pacific Islander
- Pacific Islander

- Hawaiian

Certain ethnicities are automatically considered Asian if their country of origin is mentioned. These ethnicities and nationalities are:

- Burmese (Myanmar)
- Cambodian
- Chinese
- Filipino (Philippines)
- Indian
- Indonesian
- Japanese
- Korean
- Malaysian
- Pakistani
- Taiwanese
- Thai
- Tibetan
- Vietnamese

Other ethnicities are sometimes considered Asian, but sometimes considered as part of a different group. For these ethnicities, there must be something explicit in the story linking them with an Asian culture or ethnicity. These include ethnicities/nationalities such as:

- Afghan or Afghanistani
- Armenian
- Georgian (Republic of Georgia)
- Kazakhstani or Kazakh
- Kyrgyzstani or Kyrgyz
- Tajikistani or Tajik
- Turkmenistani or Turkmen
- Uzbekistani or Uzbek

### **Big Storyline**

Big storyline is defined as and storyline that is been covered in multiple national-news outlets for more than one news cycle or as storylines that occurred often in the news. A story needs to be 50% about the big storyline to qualify as such.

### **Lead Newsmaker**

This is the person who appears as the main focus of a story. The newsmaker is a person whose actions or statements constitute the main subject matter. The lead newsmaker must be discussed in at least 50% of a story

**Topline**  
 Domestic News Coverage of African Americans  
 February 16, 2009 – February 15, 2010

	<b>Number of stories</b>	<b>Percent of newshole</b>
African American Presence	643	1.9%
Hispanic Presence	383	1.3
Asian Presence	79	0.2

N=49,316 domestic stories

<b>Top Stories with Significant African American Presence</b> <i>Percent of African American newshole</i>	
<b>Story</b>	<b>Percent of newshole</b>
Arrest of Henry Louis Gates	19.4%
Obama Administration	17.6
Death of Michael Jackson	5.7
Economy	5.4
Health Care Debate	4.1
NWA Terrorist Attempt	3.7
Supreme Court Actions	2.0
Presidential Election Results	1.8
Sonia Sotomayor	1.8
NAACP's 100 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary	1.8

<b>African American-Focused Coverage by Media Sector</b> <i>Percent of each sector's total newshole</i>	
<b>Media Sector</b>	<b>Percent of newshole</b>
Newspaper	1.5%
Online	1.9
Morning Network	1.5
Evening Network	1.9
Cable	2.5
News Radio	0.9
Talk Radio	2.4

<b>Coverage of Henry Lewis Gates' Arrest</b> <i>Percent of African American newshole by media sector</i>	
<b>Media Sector</b>	<b>Percent of newshole</b>
Newspaper	10.3%
Online	21.2
Morning Network	45.2
Evening Network	20.9
Cable	19.9
News Radio	6.2
Talk Radio	24.1

<b>Coverage of the Economy</b> <i>Percent of newshole</i>	
Domestic coverage of the Economy	21.1%
Percent of domestic economic coverage that dealt with African Americans	0.47

<b>Lead Newsmakers</b> <i>Percent of African American stories</i>	
Barack Obama	31.7%
Henry Louis Gates Jr.	9.0
Harry Reid	6.2
Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab	3.6
Jimmy Carter	3.4
Michael Jackson	3.3
James Crowley	1.9
Michelle Obama	1.4
Eric Holder	1.2
Joe Wilson	1.1

### African American Press

<b>Publication</b>	<b>Number of opinion/editorial articles</b>	<b>Number of total articles</b>
Afro-American	1	4
New York Amsterdam News	4	5
Philadelphia Tribune	5	8