

# **RACISM AND THE PRESS**

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Teun A. van Dijk

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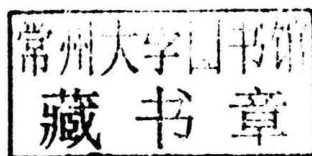
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Volume 5

RACISM AND THE PRESS

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# Racism and the Press

This book presents the results of an interdisciplinary study of the press coverage of ethnic affairs. Examples are drawn mainly from British and Dutch newspapers, but data from other countries are also reviewed. Besides providing the reader with a thorough content analysis of the material, the book is the first to introduce a detailed discourse analytical approach to the study of the ways in which ethnic minorities are portrayed in the press. The approach focuses on the topics, overall news report schemata, local meanings, style and rhetoric of news reports.

Highly original, accomplished and penetrating, the book is the fruit of a decade of research into the question of racism and the press.

The author is an internationally known scholar in the field of discourse analysis, and the first who has addressed the problem of prejudice and racism from a discourse perspective.

The readership for *Racism and the Press* is as interdisciplinary as the book itself: ethnic studies, mass communication and media studies, sociology and linguistics.

**Teun A. van Dijk** is Professor of Discourse Studies at the University of Amsterdam. After earlier work in text grammar and psychology, his present fields of expertise are news analysis and the study of racism in discourse. Professor van Dijk is the author/editor of several books in each of these fields, and founding editor of the international journals *TEXT* and *Discourse and Society*.





# **Racism and the Press**

**Teun A. van Dijk**



**London and New York**

# Preface

Racism remains one of the most pernicious problems of white society. Though often less blatantly and overtly than in the past, it continues to permeate racial and ethnic relations in Europe, North America and other westernized countries. Resistance and protests against this social, economic and cultural oppression of minorities have brought about limited civil rights gains during the past two decades, but the fundamental relations of inequality have hardly changed. Indeed, one of the main strategies of the ideological framework keeping white dominance in place is precisely to deny or to play down the prevalence of racism and to blame its victims for the persistent inequalities that are its outcome. Many white people may no longer believe in white racial supremacy. They may in principle even endorse values of social justice. However, massive legal and scholarly evidence, as well as the available accounts of the personal experiences of minorities, also show that white people and institutions still engage in the many daily practices that implement the system of white dominance, and seldom challenge its underlying beliefs and ideologies.

This continued existence of the ideological and structural dimensions of racism presupposes complex processes of reproduction. In my earlier work of the 1980s I have shown that discourse, language use and communication play a prominent part in this reproduction of the ethnic consensus of white groups. This is particularly true for all forms of elite discourse, including that of the mass media in general, and that of the daily press in particular. Other research in several countries has repeatedly demonstrated that ethnic and racial minority groups always have been, and continue to be, portrayed negatively or stereotypically by the press, for example, as a problem, if not as a threat. Similarly, ethnic minority group leaders and institutions are still considered less credible sources, while minority journalists are seriously discriminated against in hiring, promotion and story assignments. Again, in these respects the press is hardly different from most other institutions and organizations in white society.

These incontrovertible results of earlier scholarly work are the starting point of the present study, which focuses on ethnic affairs reporting in the 1980s. Thus this study does not primarily aim to show again that, as a whole, the Press is part of the problem of racism. Rather, against the background of the increased subtlety and indirectness of public discourse about race relations, also in the media, it will answer the question how exactly the Press is involved in the continuity of the system of racism. That is, we need to know which detailed textual structures and strategies are brought to bear by journalists in the discursive reproduction of the ideological framework that legitimates the ethnic and racial dominance of the white group.

Besides the usual content analysis which provides the necessary figures that show the overall prevalence and distribution of some of the properties of ethnic affairs coverage, this detailed analysis of textual structures requires the more refined, qualitative approach provided by discourse analysis. This new cross-discipline in the humanities and the social sciences aims at a broadly conceived study of the many forms of text and talk that characterize social life. Against the background of the developments in this new discipline, I have earlier argued that discourse analysis should also pay attention to both the study of media discourse and to the critical examination of the discursive mechanisms involved in the reproduction of ethnic prejudices and racism.

The present study combines the theoretical, descriptive and critical goals of this earlier work by focusing on the most crucial communicative means of the reproduction of racism, namely, the Press. Such a discourse analytical approach pays attention to the major levels of news discourse structure, such as topics, overall schematic forms, local meanings, style and rhetoric, as well as their relations with cognitive processes of production and understanding, and their socio-cultural and political contexts. To enhance the readability of this book, these analyses are kept rather informal, whereas each descriptive chapter begins with a theoretical introduction intended for those readers who are not familiar with discourse analysis.

Results of my earlier study of everyday conversations about minorities and ethnic relations strongly suggest how prominent a role the daily newspaper plays for white people in the definition of the ethnic situation and the construction of an interpretative framework for the understanding of ethnic events. After an earlier book about the portrayal of minorities in the Dutch Press, and several papers paying attention to special dimensions of the media coverage of ethnic affairs, this book provides a descriptive and theoretical integration of a decade of research into this role of the Press in 'north-western' societies.

This research and especially the writing of this book has been an arduous enterprise. The overwhelming task of analysing many thousands of newspaper articles and the lack of research funds and assistants proved to be a serious challenge. Being vastly labour-intensive, systematic content analysis is itself a daunting job. The much more detailed discourse analysis of so many data is virtually impossible, and self-defeating unless applied to representative selections of the Press coverage. At many points of this study, therefore, I had to make sometimes painful choices and limitations. Instead of the originally planned analysis of the Press in several countries in Europe and North America, this study focuses on the British Press, with occasional analyses of the Dutch Press, although I briefly report results of earlier research in other countries. Also, in order to make this book accessible to a broad public, I not only had to trim down a much larger study to the size of the present book, but also had to avoid the sometimes highly sophisticated analyses of contemporary discourse studies. The problem of racism in the Press is too important to make this critical enquiry accessible to only a small number of discourse analysts. Therefore, I hope that the present version of this study will be useful to all those interested in racism and the Press.

In particular, I hope that this book will stimulate more research. Despite the wealth of earlier evidence, we need many more, and more detailed studies of the ways the western media deal with ethnic affairs. Many countries still lack systematic content and discourse analyses of their major newspapers. For other countries, we only have data about a few local newspapers, or about past decades of coverage. Also, despite its obvious value, much earlier research is superficially content analytical, and thereby unable to convey the sometimes subtle details of prejudiced or stereotypical reporting. I therefore hope that this study will inspire more students and scholars in the humanities and social sciences actively to join the struggle against racism and to engage in the detailed and explicit analysis of the many dimensions of the discursive reproduction of racism by the Press in their own countries. They will discover that the complexity of the textual, cognitive and socio-cultural processes involved is a serious analytical and theoretical challenge, but also a very rewarding way to bridge the gap that still exists between scholarship and society. If popular artists can inspire many young people by bringing 'rock against racism', academics may try to stimulate their students and readers with 'research against racism'.

I hardly need, in this Preface, to justify my criticism of the Press, and especially of the sometimes appalling practices of right-wing journalists in Britain, who may be second to none in the world in propagating racial

hatred. However, to brand individual journalists or newspapers as 'racist' was not the purpose of this work. The problem of the reproduction of racism by the media is much more complex. Its structural and ideological ramifications require a more fundamental approach, accounting for the political, economic and socio-cultural role of the Press as a whole in white-dominated societies. In this framework, also the seemingly 'tolerant' quality Press, as well as readers, advertisers, politicians, academic researchers and many institutions may be directly or indirectly involved in this role of the Press. That is, although journalists are responsible for their own actions, these are embedded in complex relationships for which they cannot take the whole blame.

Nevertheless, I hope that journalists will also profit from this book, if only by seeing more clearly the implications of their everyday routine writing (or non-writing) about race. The ultimate aim of my research on racism and the Press is this: to make journalists, scholars and readers become more critical and more sensitive to the sometimes subtle role of news discourse in the maintenance and legitimation of ethnic inequality in society. Indeed, I sincerely hope that the readers of this book will no longer be able to read about ethnic affairs in their newspapers without routinely asking a few obvious questions, such as: Why is this topic newsworthy? Why does this topic or this information get so much (or so little) attention? Does this topic or this word challenge or maintain stereotypes or prejudices about minorities? Who are speaking and who are (or are not) allowed to give their opinion? Whose interests are defended? From whose perspective is this report written? Is discrimination or racism denied, mitigated or trivialized?

Once we have learned to ask such questions we are no longer 'innocent' newspaper readers. And once we have learned how to answer them critically, that is, from the perspective of true ethnic and racial equality and justice, we have begun to challenge part of the consensual and ideological underpinnings of racism, especially if our next question is: What are we going to do about it?

## **CALL TO THE READERS**

Research on the reproduction of racism in the Press is complex, difficult and time consuming. This means that it needs to be a collective, interdisciplinary and international enterprise. I have suggested that much more research is necessary in many countries. I also realize that the research reported here is far from perfect and hardly complete. This means that the continued study of this important issue would highly benefit from your critical comments, suggestions, examples, experiences



or own research results. Therefore, if you would like to make such a contribution, I would be grateful if you could send it to me at the following address: University of Amsterdam, Department of General Literary Studies, Programme of Discourse Studies, 210 Spuistraat, 1012 VT Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

# Acknowledgements

During the decade of research for this book, I have become indebted to many people, too many to name individually, and I hereby would like to thank them all. However, special thanks are due, in the first place, to my students, who participated in several research seminars on racism and the Press, collected data, coded newspaper reports, and wrote research papers that were helpful for my own work. Without their assistance, the quantitative content analyses in particular of this study would have been impossible. In various stages of this research, Piet de Geus has provided invaluable assistance with the statistical processing of the data.

I am indebted to the Commission for Racial Equality in London for providing me with clippings of the British Press and to the British Council for a travel grant to collect these clippings. Bob Miles has helped to trim down this study to the size required by his series, and I am grateful for his valuable time and patience.

Special thanks go to Gabe Kaimowitz for his stimulating energy in fighting racism as a lawyer and communication scholar, and for having supplied me with clippings from US newspapers, and to Luciano Vitacolonna for regularly sending me clippings about recent ethnic events in Italy.

As with my other work on discourse and racism, I owe most to Philomena Essed. Her continued interest in my work, her love, our numerous discussions about the issues dealt with in this book, and especially her own innovative research on everyday racism have been a decisive stimulating force behind this study.

Amsterdam, October 1990