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Journalists and academics and the delivery of race statistics: being a statistician means never having to say you're certain

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Abstract

This article examines a number of public issues that have been framed in racial terms with the aid of statistical data and analysis. It explores the efforts of journalists and public intellectuals to shape public understanding of the causes and consequences of racial disparity through the strategic use of statistical data and representations. Journalistic frames emphasize discrimination in financial markets and in the administration of justice. Public intellectuals interpret the statistics behind the debates over racial profiling as they engage the alternative frames of “Intelligent Bayesians” and other “reasonable racists.” Expert witnesses confront a judiciary that is unwilling or unable to establish and be guided by meaningful standards of confidence and regard for statistical evidence. Statistical reasoning is likely to extend its influence on the social construction of race; the consequences remain uncertain.

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1. Introduction

While it is generally recognized that statisticians need not be burdened by the demands of certainty, especially when they are asked to draw inferences and arrive at conclusions on the basis of samples, they are nevertheless still called upon from time to time to be more precise than their resources will allow. Where professional standards and the weight of peer review may impose greater restraint upon the scholarly muse in the context of publication within elite journals, traditional scholarly caution and reserve often wither under the glare of public attention that the charge of racial discrimination often attracts. Indeed, we note that some of

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our colleagues and associates appear quite willing to throw caution to the wind in their haste to provide warnings, advice, and counsel about issues involving racial disparity. Journalists, public intellectuals, and expert witnesses increasingly rely on the tools of statistical analysis to buttress their claims, but as my examples will suggest, these interpreters of the gospel of chance are often unwilling or unable to avoid the sin of hubris (Gigerenzer et al., 1989).

As a communications scholar, I focus most of my attention on the behavior of communications professionals—the journalists and their editors who play such an important role in directing public attention to the problems that data and statistical analysis suggest exist. But even though the practitioners of “precision journalism” (Meyer, 2001) are ultimately responsible for most of the statistically-based claims we encounter in the news, they are not alone. Public intellectuals and issue advocates often introduce the statistics and the interpretations that journalists and editorial writers pass on far too readily to their readers (Best, 2001). Because the social problems that get defined in the press may ultimately be reified in the legislatures and in the courts, the ways in which the public testimony of experts is likely to mislead politicians, lawyers, judges, and juries ought not be ignored (Faigman, 1999).

This article will examine a number of public issues that have been framed in racial terms with the aid of statistical data and analysis. In many cases, the selection of interpretive frames (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001) reflects strategic goals of the sort that Omi and Winant (1994) refer to as “racial projects,” in that their “sponsors” hope to achieve a redistribution of wealth and other resources. In other cases, the interpretive frames selected reflect the anger and resentment of people who have grown tired of paying what they see as an unjust but seemingly unavoidable “tax” on being Black (Armour, 1997; Essed, 1991). In still other circumstances, they reflect the view of people who have come to believe that Affirmative Action and other programs that institutionalize racial preference unjustly threaten the well-being of White males and their families (Kinder & Sanders, 1996).

2. Journalists, databases, and the framing of disparity

The new precision journalists, on their own or with the assistance of university researchers, have played an increasingly important role in keeping the problem of racial inequality on the national policy agenda. These reporters have, from time to time, produced a series of investigative articles that prominently feature analysis of statistical data that are said to reveal the nature and extent of racial discrimination in particular cities, and at the national level. The past fifteen years has seen a dramatic increase in the number of Pulitzer prizes awarded to journalists who relied on computers, rather than unnamed sources, to gather evidence of outrageous behavior. Several of those prizes have been awarded to reporters who have charged governmental and business decision makers with racial discrimination in the delivery of goods and services. They have been aided in their efforts by a professional organization, Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), that produces seminars and handbooks designed to teach journalists how to mine the wealth of data that exist in public records.

The number of journalists who have turned toward statistics and away from pithy quotes has also increased in part because journalism schools have begun to include courses in computer-assisted reporting in their curricula. In addition to teaching the skills and techniques of database

management and statistical analysis, these courses attempt to teach budding journalists the most effective ways of merging data analysis with traditional news reporting (Garrison, 1998; Houston, 1999). In some cases, it appears that those journalistic traditions that emphasize the importance of “personalizing” a story with a poignant example (Rucinski, 1992) result in readers gaining a false impression of the base rates and distributions of particular risks that the journalists seek to describe (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). It is clear, however, that some journalists are being warned about the ways in which statistics can be used to mislead the public (Best, 2001; Cohn, 1989; Mauro, 1992).

Armed with these resources, investigative reporters have assumed the role of traditional muckrakers, and have published stories that have been crafted with the goal of provoking outrage, and hopefully mobilizing sustainable political activism on the part of their target audiences (Protest et al., 1991). The topics that investigative journalists choose to pursue reflect the operation of several constraints, including the availability of data and “common sense” professional standards about newsworthiness, as well as the potential value of particular stories as contributions to their professional reputations and career trajectories.

Differences in the distribution of story types over time suggest that journalists may also face a more demanding evidentiary standard when they seek to characterize some particular disparities as the product of racial discrimination, rather than bad luck, or some rather complicated causal process (Gandy, 1996). In their pursuit of professional recognition, IRE members have submitted stories about racial disparities in the delivery of health care, education, and social services, as well as stories that focus explicitly on discrimination in employment: hiring, compensation, and safety on the job.¹ More recently, investigative journalists have begun to use geographic information systems to uncover the spatial character of discrimination, and utilize this research to formulate stories about environmental racism. These journalists and their editors have been far less willing to frame stories about disparities in health care, or even racial bias in determining eligibility for government service eligibility, than they have when they publish stories about disparities in mortgage lending (Gandy, Kopp, Hands, Frazer, & Phillips, 1997).

Banks and mortgage lenders have been among the most popular targets of journalistic zeal. Dozens of investigative series have charged local financial institutions with discrimination against African American and Hispanic applicants seeking to acquire or improve their homes. Some of these stories have been treated as major news events at the national level, and have subsequently been followed up and duplicated with stories at the local level. The publication of similar studies serves to move a particular issue toward a position of prominence on the public agenda (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993). This was clearly the case in 1991. Within one day of the release of a study of racial disparity in mortgage lending by the Federal Reserve Board, 92% of the major newspapers in the United States published at least one article on the issue (Goshorn & Gandy, 1995).

Many of the earliest published stories on discrimination in mortgage markets relied upon quite crude statistical analyses that were offered in support of the charge of redlining, or racially-motivated geographic discrimination. A common analytical approach, limited in part by the data that were generally available, focused on comparisons across census tracts. Analyses reported in several cities indicated that more mortgages per thousand households had been approved in “White” neighborhoods than in “Black” neighborhoods. On occasion, reporters

gained access to the records of individual lenders, and in those stories, lending rate comparisons reflected the differences in the number of applications that had been made. In only a few isolated cases were reporters able to gain access to individual case records that would support an analysis of the broad array of factors that influence lending, and if included in the analysis, might explain racial disparities in approval rates (Leven & Syrkuta, 1994).

Another popular target of database journalists has been the criminal justice system. Investigative series have presented what they felt was compelling statistical evidence of racial discrimination in the granting of plea bargains, winning convictions, and in setting the length of sentences. Of course, it was investigative journalists who helped to put the problem of racial profiling on the national agenda. What these journalists claimed was that driving, walking, or even flying while Black, could be hazardous to one's health, or at the very least, to one's self-esteem (Harris, 1999).

In one story, reporters for an Atlanta television station followed up on a tip that suggested that Customs officials at the Atlanta airport had been systematically targeting African Americans for intrusive body searches for drugs (Russell & Larcom, 2000). Initially, the reporters came to doubt the accuracy of the initial claim because when they examined the official records of the Customs office, they found that actually, more Whites than African Americans were being searched. However, when they re-examined the data taking into account the ways in which the decision to search had been made a more striking disparity emerged.

It seems that when drug-sniffing dogs indicated a target, they tended to point to Whites, and the dogs were almost never wrong. However, when the invasive searches were initiated in response to a human agent's call, two out of every three passengers tapped for a search were African Americans. Yet, 99% of those searches failed to produce any contraband. When the most invasive searches (those requiring the help of a hospital) were requested, 90% of the people searched were African American. And despite the inconvenience, embarrassment, and actual risk involved in conducting these searches, only 20% of the people examined were found to be concealing drugs.

Academic researchers are quite aware of the fact that reports of the studies they have carried out—designed to measure the nature and extent of racial discrimination, published in scholarly journals, and presented year after year at professional conferences—are unlikely to have the impact that a well-timed newspaper or television series is likely to have. Indeed, some stories published by investigative journalists have even been responsible for initiating changes in the law as well as influencing the careers of politicians and other public figures. The greater impact that policy-oriented academics could realize by distributing their research results through the press, bypassing peer review, has not been lost on many (Gandy, 1982).

One investigative series utilizing such research, "The Color of Money," not only won its author, William Dedman, the Pulitzer Prize in 1989, but also spawned a host of follow-up stories by newspapers in other cities; this increased attention to lending practices eventually led to changes in the reporting requirements of lenders. The passage of the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act meant that journalists as well as academic researchers would be able to investigate differences in acceptance rates by race, gender, and income, as well as by factors that might reflect differences in the real estate markets in different communities (Leven & Sykuta, 1994).

Similarly, although media critics have charged the news media with failing to pay sufficient attention to the nature of racial inequality in the criminal justice system (Westfeldt & Wicker, 1998), some important stories publicized by journalists have had an impact on public policy. It seems likely that the widespread media attention drawn to the problem of racial profiling has led to demands by citizens at local, state, and federal levels for government to collect data about the racial and ethnic identity of individuals stopped by police as they pursued the “war on drugs” (Allen-Bell, 1997; Jenkins, 1999). Indeed, growth in the number and variety of these data gathering efforts led the Department of Justice (DOJ) to publish a “resource guide” in an effort to ensure the quality of the data being compiled (Ramirez, McDevitt, & Farrell, 2000).

Among the concerns expressed in the DOJ report was an apparent need to guard against threats to the integrity of these data. DOJ consultants suggested that the same police officers who would be responsible for collecting the data were also likely to be the targets of criticism regarding racial profiling. Investigative reporters are not alone in recognizing that when statistical data might reflect poorly upon an administrative agency, there are powerful incentives for those who generate the statistics to engage in strategic mismanagement of the data gathering process. The police are no exception (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). The police officers who were accused of shooting four young African American men during a traffic stop along the New Jersey turnpike were later charged with falsifying the racial identification of other persons they had stopped (Davis, 1999).

Guidelines issued by the DOJ recommended that police departments spot-check reports of car stops and searches by comparing them to the racial identification recorded on automobile registrations or in some cases on the drivers’ license applications. The consultants also noted that in some jurisdictions, police unions or representatives were likely to oppose the use of arrest and investigation records for the purpose of gathering evidence of discrimination (Ramirez et al., 2000, p. 27).

The collection of statistical information is of only limited importance to the investigation of crimes, and of only marginal importance to the administration of justice (Marx, 1988). Yet, the collection of information in standardized form continues to be a time consuming and highly routinized aspect of modern policing. There are a variety of institutional actors who depend upon the numbers generated by police reports to inform their own decisions. The insurance industry is the most dependent, and as a result, it is the most demanding (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). Unfortunately, neither journalists nor their academic advisors seem to be fully aware of the ways that the requirements made by these institutions that are only indirectly involved in policing come to influence the people who come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Crime statistics also reflect the influence of political opportunism, but that influence is rarely reflected in journalistic interpretation of crime statistics. The cyclical phenomenon we recognize as “crime waves” can best be understood as reflecting the efforts of politicians to generate support for their re-election. As a result of the pressure that mayors and other elected officials impose on police administrations, the rise and fall in the number of arrests of persons charged with “quality-of-life” crimes is often highly correlated with turning points in municipal electoral campaigns. On rare occasions, however, the flow of public attention actually moves toward focusing on the police as the sources of crime. In something of a classic example of publishing the right story at the right time, an investigative report about police brutality in Chicago helped mayoral candidate Harold Washington organize an angry

electorate to support his reform-oriented campaign (Protess et al., 1991). The mobilization of police activity following the assaults on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon in September 2001 is certain to transform the character and substance of crime related statistics.

3. Public intellectuals

Although journalists are the means through which the general public comes to be informed about racial disparity and its causes, it is public intellectuals who bear much of the responsibility for interpreting the data, and for assessing the meaning of the more “objective” analyses that journalists tend to produce. It is the liberal public intellectual who is supposed to remind us that racial profiling actually *inflates* the statistics that are likely to be used by conservatives as validation of their claims regarding the distribution of criminal tendencies among African Americans. It is the same public intellectual who is most likely to help us understand the nature of the vicious circles that help to generate the crime statistics that are then used to justify racial profiling and increased attention to the activities of African American males.

Randall Kennedy’s commentaries on racial profiling stand as a prime example. Kennedy noted that for some police officers “racial profiling is a sensible, statistically-based tool that enables them to focus their energies efficiently for the purpose of providing protection against crime to law-abiding folk” (Kennedy, 1999, p. 30). Kennedy then cited some of the crime statistics that are often used by police and their supporters as a justification for using race as an index of criminality. Arguments in support of racial profiling that are based on crime statistics often point to the “fact” that “Blacks who are only about 13% of the population, make up ‘35% of all drug arrests and 55% of all drug convictions,’ ” implying that African Americans are responsible for a “disproportionate share of the crime” (Muharrar, 1999, p. 8).

It then falls to public intellectuals like Kennedy to remind us not only that the implication one is likely to draw from these statistics is dangerously incorrect, in that arrest and conviction rates bear no necessary relationship to the commission of drug-related crimes, but also that the social cost of using race to activate police surveillance exceeds the short term benefits that the supporters of profiling might reasonably expect. Kennedy (1999) suggests that each encounter that an “innocent” or non-offending African American has with the police increases their sense of alienation, resentment, and disregard for the police and for the criminal justice system. Public opinion data support this claim, in that African Americans are more likely than Whites to hold unfavorable opinions of the police, with young Black men most likely to hold unfavorable opinions of their local police (Newport, 1999). This alienation feeds back into the system and weakens it, inviting high level concern about the nature and extent of “jury nullification” and the reluctance among African Americans to participate in the imprisonment of still more young men (Cole, 1999).

Most of what we have read about racial profiling has been framed in terms of the importance of the war against drugs (Allen-Bell, 1997). The police and much of the general public have come to believe incorrectly that African Americans are far more likely to be users of illegal drugs than Whites. For many, the numbers of African Americans in prison for drug offenses supplies all the proof that anybody might need. But those “facts” deserve greater scrutiny. If the truth is that African Americans are no more likely than Whites to be carrying drugs as they

drive the New Jersey turnpike (ACLU, 1996), yet they are far more likely to be stopped and searched by the police, then the end result will be that more African Americans will be charged and convicted of drug-related charges (Cole, 1999).

Public intellectuals are also likely to provide the “common sense” understandings that ordinary citizens adopt as their own. The statistical claims made by these policy elites are more likely to move into the mainstream from the pages of periodicals and newspaper editorial pages than from the lead paragraphs of investigative reports in the nation’s leading newspapers (Michael, 2000). Often, the circumstances that propel some of the less visible commentators into the mainstream debate is the broadly felt need to respond to some of the more highly visible, and thereby more dangerous, interpretations of racial statistics by those who oppose traditional liberal responses to inequality. The publication of *The Bell Curve* by Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein (1994) generated an outpouring of barely civil critique, and much of it was focused on the flaws, distortions, and misrepresentations of the data that were at the core of the authors’ analysis (Jacoby & Glauberman, 1995). Equally flawed analyses have been allowed to pass on into history because they failed to achieve some requisite level of visibility.

4. Expert witnesses

It is often the expert witness or consultant who collects, or directs the collection of, the statistical data used to formulate claims of discrimination or disparate impact when criminal or civil cases are brought before the nation’s courts. The expert witness is often called upon to produce an analysis that describes a causal chain and ultimately identifies a responsible party or agent who may be sued or otherwise brought to justice. There are a great many ways in which suitable statistical evidence may be gathered in support of such a claim. Methods run from the randomized control group experiments through the variety of data intensive epidemiological studies conducted in support of toxic tort claims. Each relies to some degree upon assumptions about the degree of certainty that can be derived from samples and compared against theoretical distributions (Zeisel & Kaye, 1997). Indeed, ongoing debates about the appropriate models for assessing the probability of a match between samples of DNA represent another in a stream of troubling challenges to the ability of judges and juries to evaluate the counsel of experts (Faigman, 1999).

The nature of the evidence, and most importantly, the nature of the procedures that are used to bring the data into being are especially troublesome when the evidence of disparate impact, and discriminatory intent has to meet a burden that is not well defined (Baldus & Cole 1980; DeGroot, Feinberg, & Kadane 1994). In some cases, bureaucratic agencies have established guidelines that are supposed to facilitate making a distinction between statistical and legal significance. In the area of employment discrimination, for example, experts have argued in support of an “80% rule,” whereby “the hire rate for the group allegedly discriminated against must be less than 80% of the rate for the most favored group” (Meier, Jacks, & Zabell, 1994, p. 2). The use of such a rule of thumb is justified in part by the extent to which statistical significance can be affected by the size of the sample available for analysis. Large disparities observed in small samples can easily fail to achieve significance (Kaye, 1986).

More problematic for determining which rules should govern the interpretation of statistical evidence is the lack of comparability in the circumstances under which choices and decisions are made. As we noted with regard to charges of discrimination in the mortgage markets, as more and more information about applicants, homes, and housing markets are introduced into multivariate models, the importance of racial classification tends to shrink toward non-significance. In the case of employment discrimination claims, comparable data about the selection process are rarely captured in the records available to the courts. They are even less likely to be available to petitioners who seek to convince the courts that some administration agency was motivated by racial animus when it approved locating hazardous waste facilities in one community rather than in another (Roberts, 1998).

As Faigman (1999) reminds us, however, we have little basis for assuming that either judges or jurors are likely to appreciate the arguments made in support of toxic torts colored by racialized marketing schemes. Recently, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit concluded that representatives of the class of African Americans who claimed that R. J. Reynolds, Inc. had unlawfully targeted them in order to promote the consumption of a dangerous product (mentholated cigarettes) were not supported by the statistical evidence and arguments presented on their behalf (*Brown v. Philip Morris*, 2001). In his impassioned dissent, district judge Milton Shadur argued that his colleagues didn't understand, and thereby failed to reject what he described as the "hypocritical" and "deceptive" use of statistics by the defense. By emphasizing the fact that 69% of menthol cigarettes are consumed by non-Blacks, the defendants sought, in his opinion, to distract the court's attention from the more compelling fact that African Americans, who represented somewhat more than 10% of the population, nevertheless consumed 31% of the defendants' dangerous product.

Judge Shadur referred to another so-called "rule of thumb" that was supposed to be used in establishing "proof" of discrimination in the case of large samples—a difference between the observed and expected statistic that is "more than 2 or 3 standard deviations." Judge Shadur estimated that the difference between 10 and 31% in this particular case was some 7 standard deviations, an outcome marked by a likelihood of chance occurrence "so small to beggar the imagination: 1.28 in a trillion" (*Brown v. Philip Morris*, 2001, p. 50). Unfortunately, not all courts have been as willing, as Judge Shadur implied, to accept guidelines based on standard deviations, standard errors, or *p*-values (Baldus & Cole, 1980; DeGroot et al., 1994; Zeisel & Kaye, 1997, pp. 79–98).

Somewhat greater success has been observed with regard to racial profiling. John Lamberth, a psychology professor from Temple University, provided the data and analysis that the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) used in arguing that only the use of racial profiles could explain the remarkable disparity between the treatment of White and Black drivers along Interstate 95. Central to Lamberth's task was (1) the need to establish the prevalence of African Americans among all drivers, and (2) the extent to which African Americans were behaving in ways that made them more or less likely to be stopped and then searched.

Lamberth developed a number of creative techniques for gathering evidence in the field. Observational data from static and moving vehicles were used to establish the extent to which African American, Latino, and other drivers were exceeding the speed limit. Lamberth used state police records of traffic stops and searches for evidence of risk, and the efficiency and fairness of their strategies. As the expert witness for the ACLU, Lambert had to demonstrate

that disparities in the relative risk of being stopped by the highway patrol, which was higher for African Americans, could not be explained by chance variations in selectivity. Lamberth argued that the difference between the number of Black drivers eligible to be stopped on the basis of their behavior and those actually stopped and searched exceeded 34 standard deviations! This was a difference that he claimed should not have occurred by chance more than once in one quintillion samples (ACLU, 1996). Lamberth's analysis of stop and search records from the Maryland State Police found virtually indistinguishable success rates when White and Black motorists' vehicles were searched. African Americans were "holding" 28.4% of the time, and Whites were in possession of contraband 28.8% of the time. Here, of course, it would be up to the journalists, and the public intellectuals to use these data to point out how stopping and searching more African Americans would necessarily produce more arrest, conviction, and time behind bars for young Black men.

5. Engaging the reasonable racist

Unfortunately, expert witnesses employ more than data to portray the sense of injustice African Americans derive from their experience with and indirect observation of the workings of the criminal justice system. Expert witnesses have helped to establish the standards of "reasonableness" with which defendants might justify their discriminatory treatment of African Americans. Armour (1997) examines the concept of reasonableness primarily with regard to claims of self-defense, but he does so in terms that can readily be applied to many of the routine encounters that define "everyday racism" (Essed, 1991). In Armour's view, these standards of reasonableness are likely to be based on flawed reasoning and inappropriate statistical comparisons.

Armour notes that legal scholars and jurists these days seem broadly committed to introducing Bayesian statistical reasoning into the courtroom (Gigerenzer et al., 1989, pp. 263–269). Armour identifies the so-called "Intelligent Bayesian" as one of the three types of "reasonable racists" who are likely to justify enacting violence against or avoiding contact with African Americans because they are believed to represent an unacceptably high risk. Whereas racial stereotypes may no longer be used as an explicit justification for discriminatory acts, the Bayesian makes use of statistics (of the sort likely to be cited by public intellectuals and quoted by journalists) to support his actions as being reasonable, rather than racist. Unfortunately, Bayesian estimates of probability are subjective, rather than based on experiments, or samples, and Fisherian or Pearsonian statistics. More problematic still is the likelihood that Bayesian jurors will rely upon wildly varying sources of base rates in the "calculation" of their "posterior probabilities" of risk.

As noted earlier, journalists may distract their readers from the base rate information that they provide in their stories by using a purposively chosen but unrepresentative exemplar as a lead for their story. When journalists are motivated by a policy goal, or when they have been influenced by issue activists, they tend to "err on the side of exaggeration" in presenting relevant facts (Best, 2001, p. 34). They may do this by choosing a "representative" of the problem, even if the chosen representative is, in fact, unrepresentative of the facts that matter. In an analysis of stories in news magazines, Zillmann and Brosius (2000, p. 21) found that 25% of the stories

included exemplars that were inconsistent with the focus of the story, although they had no way to assess whether the focus of the story was also at variance with the facts. However, they did note with regard to television news magazines that rather than providing precise quantities or statistical measures, 56% of the stories made “comparatively vague assertions, such as that the incidence ‘is skyrocketing,’ . . . or ‘is increasing at an alarming rate’ ” (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000, p. 25).

Imprecision and exaggeration are likely to influence the probability estimates of Bayesian jurors, especially if these impressions happen to interact with and reinforce existing stereotypes of African Americans. Gilens (1996) observed the misuse of exemplars in ways that might lead jurors to make at least two sorts of biased estimates of the prevalence of African Americans among the poor. Gilens found that the photographs used in stories about poverty in weekly news magazines over-represented African Americans among the poor. In addition, the images that were used tended to under-represent African Americans among the so-called “deserving” or sympathetic poor, such as the elderly, and the physically handicapped. The African Americans used to illustrate stories about poverty seemed to be able bodies, and such representations invite victim blaming attributions of responsibility.

6. Conclusion

While Armour (1997) holds out the hope that “rationality-enhancing group references” might come to replace the distortions that “Intelligent Bayesians” and statistical illiterates may introduce into the courts and the legislative process, other signs invite greater caution about the future of the law and social policy (Habermas, 1998). On the one hand, we have observed that the evidentiary requirements that must be met by those who would pursue a charge of discrimination have been raised by a series of court decisions that have concluded that a disparate impact is not enough (Cole, 1999). At the same time, we have observed an increase in the rhetoric of markets and the efficient pursuit of wealth that suggests that racial discrimination may be rational, and thereby justified in a broad range of contexts (Kuttner, 1999). While communication scholars cautiously appeal for greater attention to the ways in which journalists and editors present statistics and interpret their social meaning (Best, 2001; Zillmann & Brosius, 2000), there are others who suggest that the nature of competition and an increased concern with the bottom line in the media industry does not bode well for the pursuit of traditional journalistic standards (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Indeed, the emergence of the Internet as an alternative source of ideological critique and a medium with even less of a tradition of fairness and balance is seen by some observers as leading to even greater polarization and less opportunity for direct comparison of the facts and figures that support competing views (Sunstein, 2001).

As Gerd Gigerenzer and his colleagues (Gigerenzer et al., 1989) have argued, probability and statistics have come to rule the world. The application of statistical reasoning to the concerns of the public sphere has helped to produce an uncertain and on occasion troubling state of affairs. As a product of “La technique” (Ellul, 1964), racial statistics have taken on a life of their own. They enable discrimination at the same time that they provide evidence of its existence and estimates of its social cost. It seems unlikely that statistical literacy will keep pace with the

opportunities for its strategic misuse. The most we can hope for is the occasional reminder that the resolution of uncertainty about what is just is a goal that can never really be achieved (Hochschild, 1981).

Note

1. Investigative Reporters and Editors maintains a database of stories and investigative series that publishers and program managers have submitted for the annual competitions. A recent search of the database turned up numerous examples in each of these areas.

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