

# **Distorted Images, Uneven Policies: How the Media Shape Public Policy Outcomes**

**Women of Color Policy  
Network**

**April 26, 2011**

**ON**

***“The New York Times Looks at One Block in Harlem: Narratives of Race in Journalism.”  
Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 15:  
1-19 (September, 1998).***

***“A ‘Sort of Compassion’: The Washington Post Explains ‘The Crisis in Urban America’.”  
Howard Journal of Communication, 9 (3): :  
187-203 (July-September, 1998)***

**Peter Parisi, Associate Professor  
Dept. of Film & Media Studies  
Hunter College  
pparisi@hunter.cuny.edu**

**“Another America: Life on 129<sup>th</sup> Street”**  
NY Times takes a deep look at one block in Harlem



**Designed to address frequent  
criticisms of journalistic approach  
to coverage of minorities & the poor:**

**Tight deadlines,  
Tight space  
Reporter's identity**

- Reporter FELICIA R. LEE is black**
- Six months reporting time**
- Generous space (3 multi-page parts)**

**“ON A HARLEM BLOCK, HOPE IS SWALLOWED BY DECAY” (Part I)  
(NY Times, 9/8/1994, Section A1 )**

## **“Decay”?**

- Injects idea of *moral* decay beneath block’s physical disrepair

## **“Decaying 129th Street”**

- Abstract: The area is plagued by poverty, with few people having steady jobs, and drug dealing is rampant.

## **“Another America”**

- Found nationwide but sealed off from real “America”
- (ironic--allusion to Michael Harrington’s “The Other America,” book said to launch the War on Poverty)

**Stories organized thru individual, personal profiles confirming standard stereotypes**

**--drug dealers**

**--welfare mothers**

**--Elderly caring for daughters’ children**

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## **POLICY INITIATIVES MEANINGLESS**

- This is 129th Street between Malcolm X Boulevard and Fifth Avenue in Harlem. It is a block in the other America, the America of the black underclass. It is a place -- and it could be in Chicago, Miami or Los Angeles -- *with its own values, rules and economy.* While the experts debate welfare reform, education and job training, generations live and die on this block, a world apart.

## **Times's Iconic Image of the African-American family**

Vicki, "a harbor of love on the block"



- Taste issues generally limit showing bare flesh in newspapers.
- Vicki objected
- Would this photo be run if Vicki was white?
- Cropping Vicki's eyes ("window to the soul") dehumanizes her
- Result: An image of black physical fertility cut off from mind & soul

## **Conservative ideology**

- Policy doesn't work**
- These people too decadent to deserve assistance**

## **Another Framing**

- Affirmative values
- Community sociability
- Coping strategies
- Individual viewpoints
- I.e., residents are like “us”

## EVIDENCE?

- Times photographer by definition seeks humans in action
- Urban anthropologist working in neighborhood cites constructive community actions, *never mentioned in series*

Neighborhood DJ sets up for sidewalk birthday party



**“The scrappers on this block -- the ones who call the police on drug dealers and who badger landlords for repairs...”**



## **Urban anthropologist working in neighborhood:**

- Residents created community garden
- In summer, take kids on outings
- Mothers take parenting classes
- Reporter extensively interviewed this anthropologist and a “street intellectual” for background on the block.
- *None of this appeared in the series*