

RACE AND THE NEWS

Coverage of Martin Luther King Day and Dia de los Muertos in two California dailies

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News coverage of multicultural celebrations has been categorized as stereotypical and apolitical—portraying racial minorities in festive, non-threatening ways that appeal to Anglo audiences without challenging the political system that oppresses people of color. Analyzing 10 years of Martin Luther King Day and Day of the Dead celebration coverage in the Los Angeles Times and the San Francisco Chronicle, this paper concludes that a significant number of celebration stories discuss serious political issues affecting people of color in ways that contradict the assumptions of racial equality and peaceful coexistence generally associated with multicultural projects. Because of the “sphere of consensus” status of these “soft” news stories, non-elite sources and oppositional perspectives are prominent in ways that are not typical of “hard” political news.

KEYWORDS multiculturalism; non-elite sources; public rituals; race in the news; racial stereotypes; soft news; sphere of consensus

Introduction

News coverage of multicultural celebrations is widely considered to be apolitical because of its focus on children, family entertainment, and “exotic” cultural performances that stand out from the everyday conventions of mainstream Anglo Americans. Such news falls within the journalistic realm of the “sphere of consensus,” which Dan Hallin defines as “the region of motherhood and apple pie: in its bounds lie those social objects not regarded by journalists and by most of the society as controversial” (1994, p. 53). Typically accompanied by photos, news on ethnic festivals such as Chinese New Year, Native American pow-wows, or Cinco de Mayo has evolved from relatively rare (pre-1980s)¹ to routine fare at newspapers across the United States. Coverage of these events came in response to demands of civil rights activists for more positive representation of racial minorities in the news, aided by the findings of the 1968 Kerner Commission Report.² However, prominent media scholars have argued that such stories are stereotypical “zoo stories” that safely exhibit non-White peoples for mainstream consumption (Wilson and Gutierrez, 1985; Wilson et al., 2003), presenting hackneyed images of multicultural harmony without challenging the larger socio-economic system that oppresses racial minorities (Campbell, 1995; Entman and Rojecki, 2000).

Analyzing news coverage of US Day of the Dead and Martin Luther King Day celebrations, this paper offers an alternative perspective, illustrating that ethnic celebration stories can bring political concerns of minority populations to the front pages by way

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of their “exotic” and “festive” status. Precisely because these stories are considered non-controversial, they are opportunities for the discussion of political issues from the vantage point of non-elite news sources, without the privileging of government, business, military, and other official sources that characterizes “political” or “hard” news. While some journalists produce clichéd coverage that highlights interracial harmony, others utilize these holidays to draw attention to the political and economic struggles facing minority populations. This is possible because event participants frequently communicate oppositional messages during public celebrations, illustrating that in addition to encouraging feelings of unity, public rituals within class-based, racially-structured societies are also important spaces for expressing a *lack* of consensus felt by a given population towards the larger society (Lukes, 1977; Scott, 1990).

Methodology

Day of the Dead (El Día de los Muertos) and Martin Luther King (MLK) Day were selected for analysis because these are the two most widely-covered celebrations corresponding to the two largest racial minority populations (Latino and Black) in the United States.³ As an official national holiday, MLK Day commemorates civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and is also a time when civic organizations, municipal governments, schools, churches, and other institutions honor and celebrate African American culture. Day of the Dead, an unofficial but widely observed celebration in US schools, universities, community centers, museums, churches, and civic organizations, became popularized in the 1970s as a way to honor Mexican American heritage. Over the past 35 years, its popularity has grown across the United States, becoming an increasingly pan-Latino celebration in areas of the United States where diverse Latino populations live in close proximity (Brandes, 2006; Cadavál, 1985; Marchi, 2007).

The present study entailed a content analysis of newspaper coverage of these two celebrations in *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The Los Angeles Times*⁴ over 10-year periods to determine the percentages of stories that included discussions of racism, racial inequality, and related political topics.⁵ This was achieved by counting the number of Day of the Dead and MLK Day stories with political themes published by each paper during the decades analyzed⁶ and dividing these figures by the overall number of Day of the Dead and MLK Day stories published by each paper during the same periods. Articles with political topics were coded for content and designated into categories. Additionally, a textual analysis of coverage was also conducted to determine the thematic context in which political topics were discussed, noting descriptions of sources, placement of political themes within the articles, and background information given on the themes mentioned. All articles were collected via the search engines Lexis-Nexis and Proquest, using the terms “Day of the Dead,” “El Día de los Muertos,” “MLK Day” and “Martin Luther King Day.”⁷

Home to the country’s second largest Latino and fifth largest African American population (2005 US Census), California is the site of important “firsts” for both holidays. It is the 1972 birthplace of US Day of the Dead exhibits (Morrison, 1992; Romo, 2000), and also the first state to pass legislation, in 1970, making Martin Luther King Day a school holiday. The fact that both observances have been celebrated for over 35 years in California allows longitudinal analysis of news coverage that is not possible in states where these celebrations have only more recently begun. No long-term, multi-year analysis of

newspaper coverage for either celebration has been conducted, although single-year TV and newspaper coverage of MLK Day was analyzed by Entman (1990) and Campbell (1995).

News Coverage of Minorities

Historically, US news coverage of Blacks and Latinos has reflected and reinforced racist stereotypes by portraying these populations as lazier, less intelligent, less moral, and more prone to crime than Whites (Gerbner, 1993; Gray, 1995; Friedman, 1991; Rodriguez, 1997; Smith, 1992; Wilson and Gutierrez, 1985). As blatant racism in media became unacceptable in the latter 20th century, more subtle forms of “modern” or “enlightened” racism developed, whereby the framing of seemingly objective news stories located the blame for crime and poverty in the individual choices and behaviors of people of color, rather than in the institutions that systematically denied racial minorities equal access to quality education, housing, and employment (Campbell, 1995; Entman, 1990, 1992). A stock feature of modern racism is the prominent news coverage given to “up by their bootstraps” stories that emphasize individuals who have achieved middle-class status, thereby validating the status quo socio-political system by implying that anyone, regardless of race, can achieve the American Dream (Campbell, 1995; Entman, 1990, 1992; Jhally and Lewis, 1992; West, 1993; Wilson et al., 2003). In both media and political discourses, discussions of the structural reasons for racial inequality are typically avoided in favor of paradigms that blame the victim or frame racism as merely a product of intolerant attitudes (Entman and Rojecki, 2000; Omi and Winnant, 1994).

Multicultural celebration news stories have been classified within the realm of modern racism (Campbell, 1995; Entman and Rojecki, 2000) and dismissed as stereotypical and ineffectual gestures towards providing coverage of minorities. Wilson and Gutierrez (1985) and Wilson et al. (2003) have argued that such news is designed to neutralize White apprehension about non-Whites while accommodating the presence of people of color. They contend that articles about festivities such as MLK Day, Chinese New Year, or Cinco de Mayo are devoid of substantive information regarding the struggles of racial minorities and are produced to placate minority demands for more inclusive news coverage, while leaving intact the racist ideologies of a socio-political system in which disproportionate numbers of people of color live in poverty. Thus, multicultural news stories are seen as either devoid of political content or as reinforcing individualist rather than institutional explanations for racial inequalities. While these conclusions apply to much multicultural news coverage, they do not capture the full picture.

MLK Day Coverage

Analyzing TV and newspaper coverage of Chicago’s 1990 MLK Day celebrations, Entman (1990) and Entman and Rojecki (2000) concluded that the stories presented hackneyed images of singing church choirs and snippets of the “I Have a Dream” speech, without discussing Dr. King’s policy agenda or his underlying goal of reducing poverty among Blacks. While glorifying Martin Luther King and denouncing racism, they noted, reporters rarely made connections between racism and poverty. Instead, they focused on the effects rather than the causes of racism, failing to discuss how government policies might relate to King’s goals of a more egalitarian society.

Similarly, in an analysis of TV and newspaper coverage of MLK Day celebrations occurring on January 18, 1993, Campbell maintained that the reports perpetuated dominant assimilationist mythologies about race while largely ignoring issues of racial conflict and inequality. He concluded that news on the holiday projected superficial messages of racial harmony, supporting “the enlightened racist view that white racism has nothing to do with the economic and social injustice that pervades black America” (Campbell, 1995, p. 104). Most stories relegated the battle against racism to history, reflecting “a sense that King’s dream—of an America that does not discriminate on the basis of race—had been attained, and that the day’s events represented America’s triumph over its racist past” (Campbell, 1995, p. 94). When rare hints of the persistence of racial intolerance in the United States appeared in stories, he noted, they were typically downplayed or contradicted by the celebratory spirit of the coverage (Campbell, 1995, pp. 98–107).⁸

The present study’s analysis of newspaper coverage of MLK Day celebrations over a 10-year period complicates the above findings in that a significant number of stories in the sample drew attention to institutional racism and its impact on people of color, indicting rather than praising the political status quo. Despite their often celebratory openings, with descriptions of gospel choirs, children’s essay contests, or cultural performances, MLK Day articles also reflected minority perspectives on “hot” political topics.

For the years 1996–2006, roughly half of all MLK Day articles analyzed—45 percent in the *Times* (27 of 60 articles) and 70 percent in the *Chronicle* (14 out of 20 articles)—discussed political topics (Table 1). Many noted that while progress had been made in race relations, with increased numbers of Blacks in universities, government, and business than in earlier decades, racism persisted. While sometimes portrayed as an individual attitudinal problem, racism was also discussed as an institutional problem. For example, a 1998 *San Francisco Chronicle* article that began with quotes from both Latino and Black MLK Day parade marchers noting that “King would not be pleased with how little race relations have advanced,”⁹ included a quote from a high school student who was critical of legal policies that disproportionately punish people of color. She argued that the nation had “taken racism to a new level with three-strikes laws and welfare reform being used to abuse minority groups.” A 1998 *Times* article, which focused entirely on the paucity of African American elected officials in southern California, opened with the lead: “On a day for taking stock of race relations in America, Kathryn McCullough measures progress by

TABLE 1
Political themes in MLK Day news coverage, 1996–2006 (%)

	Persistence of racism	“The Dream” unfulfilled	Structural causes of poverty	Affirmative action (1996–1997)	Opposition to war (2003–2006)	Total% of MLK articles with political themes
<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i> (N=20)	50 (10 of 20 articles)	40 (8 of 20 articles)	40 (8 of 20 articles)	100 (2 of 2 articles)	60 (6 of 10 articles)	70 (14 of 20 articles)
<i>Los Angeles Times</i> (N=60)	45 (27 of 60 articles)	37 (22 of 60 articles)	43 (26 of 60 articles)	60 (6 of 10 articles)	78 (7 of 9 articles)	45 (27 of 60 articles)

the length of time it takes her to count the number of Black elected city officials in Orange County. It is a short list, beginning and ending with her."¹⁰ As the article described a systematic lack of black political representation in Orange County, California, the lone city councilwoman was quoted saying, "We've got 31 cities here. Give me a break! There is something seriously wrong." In 2000, a *Times* article on page A1, located directly under a large MLK Day photo, also highlighted institutionalized racism in the lead and throughout the text, this time reporting on the MLK Day speech of a White politician who, the article noted, took the highly unusual step of publicly discussing White skin privilege on the campaign trail.¹¹ In the lead and full text of another *Times* article the next day, the persistence of institutionalized racism facing African Americans was front and center in the description of an MLK Day march in which 46,000 people protested the flying of the Confederate flag over the state house in Columbia, South Carolina.¹²

About 40 percent of all MLK Day articles analyzed (37 percent in the *Times* and 40 percent in the *Chronicle*) drew attention through their texts and/or headlines to "unfinished work," "insufficient progress," "the unfulfilled dream" and "backsliding" regarding civil rights since Dr. King's death, contradicting notions that the civil rights struggle is a thing of the past. These articles noted celebration participants' feelings that a conservative backlash was occurring against civil rights gains, with quotes such as: "It seems like we're going backwards instead of forwards," spoken by an African American teacher; "King's dream has not been realized,"¹³ spoken by an African American husband and wife, in reference to then Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich's efforts to cut welfare and Medicare spending;¹⁴ "We have made some strides, but we have not come as far as we should have . . . I think we are backsliding a lot," spoken by an African American parade marcher,¹⁵ and "Have we made progress? Yes and no. Not enough. We haven't come even halfway to Dr. King's expectations," spoken by a 67-year-old African American grandfather, marching with his grandchild.¹⁶

Forty-three percent of articles in the *Times* and 40 percent in the *Chronicle* mentioned government policies impeding the economic advancement of Blacks, such as insufficient funding for civil rights enforcement, cuts in educational and social spending, the lack of living wage ordinances, decreased levels of affordable housing, and the scaling back of fair housing legislation. A 1996 *Times* article about Dr. King's theological beliefs noted that his death was followed by "court rulings that failed to advance the cause of school desegregation, political attacks on Affirmative Action, and erosion of commitments to integration."¹⁷ A 2005 *Chronicle* article recalling the blatant discrimination African Americans faced in housing and employment prior to the Civil Rights Movement quoted a 60-year-old black man who, while noting progress from the days of his youth, stated, "We still have a long way to go. I'm still fighting for equality."¹⁸ As the final sentence in the 612-word article, this quote provided a powerful conclusion to the preceding description of King's Civil Rights work, and reinforced earlier sentiments by marchers who said, "the country is starting to take a step back on civil rights."

During the years 1996–1997, when Californians debated and approved Proposition 209, a ballot initiative to end Affirmative Action, 60 percent of MLK Day articles in the *Times* (six out of 10 articles) and 100 percent of articles in the *Chronicle* (two out of two) noted the disapproval of Proposition 209 among Blacks. A 1996 *Chronicle* article, which led by noting "long-festering tensions" between Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan and African Americans, quoted Black state senator Diane Watson as she condemned Proposition 209, welfare reform, and the conservative "Contract with America."¹⁹

A 1997 *Times* article described an MLK Day speech given by Martin Luther King Jr.'s son in which he condemned Proposition 209 and stated that his father's work: "... isn't finished. Thirty years ago, civil rights was about getting the right to vote and getting fair housing. In the 1990s, it's about getting a decent paying job ..."²⁰ The article also emphasized the ramifications Proposition 209 could have nationally, noting that its passage in California had inspired conservative lawmakers in other states to introduce similar legislation. A front-page story in the same paper two days later noted with irony that intense poverty, rather than equal opportunity and prosperity, lined the prominent Los Angeles boulevard named after Dr. King. The article quoted a representative of the New African American Vanguard Movement (formerly the Black Panthers) who condemned Proposition 209 and advocated the need for economic and racial justice for African Americans.²¹

Suggesting governmental rather than individual responsibility for racial inequalities, a 1998 *Times* article on page A1 noted in its headline and text the US government's shortcomings in enforcing existing civil rights laws. It discussed President Clinton's proposal of a 17 percent spending increase to better enforce fair housing laws and process thousands of backlogged racial discrimination cases.²² Government policies were also indicted in a 2003 *Chronicle* article, through the words of an MLK event organizer who said:

We're saying here in 2003, [King's] legacy still points to all the things we need to do to come together and empower people ... We're on the brink of war and facing issues around health, housing, disenfranchisement, civil and human rights that affect largely the minority communities in large numbers, and when you look at his speeches, he seems to be speaking on these issues even though he's not even here.²³

As the final sentence in the 724-word article about a decrease in MLK celebrations nationally, the quote dramatically summarized the relevancy of King's work to contemporary Americans.

It was not uncommon for sources to emphasize the need for collective action, as in a *Times* article about how activists in the Black community of Inglewood, California were educating people at an MLK Day celebration about the importance of participating in the 2000 census. The article noted that Inglewood had been undercounted by some 14,000 people in the 1990 census, depriving the city of a million dollars per year in government funding. Noting another example of collective organizing, the same article described the presence of youth groups at MLK Day celebrations in Inglewood, Oxnard, and South Central Los Angeles (neighborhoods with large African American populations) carrying signs that opposed Proposition 21, an initiative to increase the number of juvenile offenders tried in court as adults.²⁴ Another *Times* article focused on members of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), started by Martin Luther King Jr., who were holding voter registration drives at the MLK parade as their primary way to observe the holiday. Noting the SCLC's goal of fighting economic inequality and political marginalization, the article also observed that the Conference supported a major California grocery workers' strike.²⁵ The inclusion within MLK Day coverage of political organizing examples (education about the census, voter registration, support for striking workers, opposition to penal legislation that disproportionately harms low-income minorities) increased readers' awareness about the existence of collective political organizing work being done to address racial discrimination.

Other MLK Day stories revealed the skepticism of many Blacks towards politicians who appropriate King's words to support policies detrimental to low-income and minority

communities. For example, a 1998 *Times* article on the top of page B1 featured an African American minister from Oakland, a largely Black city with one of the nation's highest poverty rates, who "chastised politicians for capitalizing on the King holiday to appear sympathetic to the problems faced by many minorities."²⁶ Conveying that structural disinvestment in Black communities mocks the "bootstrap" rhetoric of conservative politicians, the minister exclaimed, "You've dismantled the infrastructure of the inner city . . . you've taken away jobs . . . you've said to the young people 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps,' and they don't even have boots at all." Similar skepticism about the claims of conservative politicians was found in a 2001 *Times* article discussing George W. Bush's MLK Day address to a low-income African American audience. In response, a Black audience member was quoted saying: "He needs to be a man of his word . . . I'm trying to make it in this world too, and most Republicans who've been in office haven't helped the less fortunate."²⁷ Still another example was a *Chronicle* article about an MLK Day speech made by California's Republican governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger. The article quoted a gospel choir member who said of Schwarzenegger's presence at the MLK Day event: "I'm happy he's here—I really appreciate that—but I'm not so happy with him . . . I'm not happy with the governor cutting money for education or with Republicans in general messing with social security . . . I feel like our governor is willing to break promises and hurt our children so his wealthy friends can keep more of their money."²⁸

In 2001, after narrowly winning the presidential election in what many considered to be a fraudulent process that particularly disenfranchised Black voters, George W. Bush appointed the ultra-conservative, Affirmative Action opponent, John Ashcroft, as US Attorney General. MLK Day coverage that year reflected African American disapproval: on the front page of the Metro section of the *Times* was an article about Los Angeles residents who marched on MLK Day to protest Ashcroft's appointment. Described as one of dozens of marchers carrying signs proclaiming, "Justice yes! Ashcroft no!", a 61-year-old African American grandmother was quoted saying, "If he [King] were here today and saw the mess that went on in Florida [2000 elections] and what's going on in Washington, he would be greatly disappointed."²⁹ Reporting that, "Civil rights leaders call on the Department of Justice to investigate allegations that voting officials in Florida systematically interfered with minority voters' access to the polls," the article evoked comparisons between the pre-Civil Rights and contemporary disenfranchisement of Black voters in the United States. Similar sentiments were expressed in a *Chronicle* article that connected the Florida 2000 elections with a long history of institutionalized racism in the United States, quoting African American mayor of San Francisco, Willie Brown: "Whenever I think of the brothers and sisters in Florida . . . America hasn't changed all that much."³⁰

Since the 2003 start of the US War in Iraq, MLK Day parades throughout the country have included anti-war contingents invoking Dr. King's advocacy of non-violence and opposition to the Vietnam War. Holiday coverage has reflected this, as 78 percent of MLK Day articles in the *Times* and 60 percent of articles in the *Chronicle* published from 2003 to 2006 discussed opposition to the war as part of MLK Day proceedings. A 2003 *Times* article stated that parade participants felt "King's message of non-violence is particularly important as the nation stands at the brink of a possible war with Iraq . . . Several who will speak at commemoration events said that if King were alive today, he would be leading protests and speaking out against war, much as he vehemently opposed the Vietnam War."³¹ A 2003 *Chronicle* article was entirely about anti-war protests planned in Washington DC and around the country during MLK weekend.³² A 2004 *Times* article

centered on the booing of President Bush during his visit to Dr. King's grave, noting: "An estimated 700 protesters, deriding the president's agenda as harmful to blacks, denounced his visit and the Iraq war,"³³ while a 2004 *Chronicle* article focused on the Oakland-based People's Non-Violent Response Coalition, which celebrated MLK Day by performing multiple public readings of King's 1967 speech, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence." A coalition volunteer explained: "This is the speech in which Dr. King made direct connections between United States foreign policy and its impact here at home in terms of racism, poverty and injustice."³⁴

Day of the Dead Coverage

Almost unheard of in the United States 35 years ago, Day of the Dead, or "El Día de los Muertos," has become an annual autumn ritual in schools, community centers, and museums around the country. Reflecting Latin American attitudes and practices of remembering the dead, the holiday has captured the interest of both Latinos and non-Latinos as an annual period to honor deceased loved ones via a variety of traditional and contemporary activities. These include public exhibits of altars honoring deceased family members, friends, pop culture icons, and political activists, as well as street processions, performances, films, lectures, concerts, poetry slams, and craft workshops organized by Latino artists and educators. Initiated in California in 1972 by Chicano artists who were inspired by Mexico's Día de los Muertos rituals, US expressions of the celebration, which center around public altar exhibits, emerged as part of the multi-faceted Chicano Movement.³⁵ In the Chicano context, the traditional Latin American ritual took on political as well as cultural import, with many exhibits and activities drawing attention to the socio-political causes of death affecting low-income Latinos (Marchi, 2006; Morrison, 1992; Romo, 2000). The popularity of Day of the Dead spread throughout California, the Southwest, and much of the United States as a way to honor Latino heritage, with diverse Latino ethnic populations joining in the festivities. Like MLK Day, Day of the Dead is now a staple of K-12 multicultural curricula, used to teach about art, history, social studies, and language. Many universities observe the celebration as part of Latino Studies, Ethnic Studies, Anthropology, Religion, and Spanish classes. Hundreds of art galleries across the United States, including prestigious museums such as New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Institute, hold Day of the Dead exhibits, while growing numbers of municipal governments and civic organizations sponsor Day of the Dead festivals (Marchi, 2007).

The mass media have played an important role in popularizing Day of the Dead within mainstream America through coverage ranging from the Associated Press and NPR, to local TV stations, newspapers, radio, film, and the Internet. There have been Day of the Dead episodes on primetime television shows such as PBS's *American Family* (2002 season) and two of HBO's popular TV series, *Six Feet Under* (2002 season) and *Carnivale* (2003 season). A recent John Sayles movie, *Silver City* (2004), included a Day of the Dead scene and the Tim Burton film *Corpse Bride* (2005) was filled with Day of the Dead imagery. Travel publications such as AAA's *Horizons* and the *Elderhostel Annual Program* annually promote Day of the Dead trips to New Mexico, Texas, and California to see altars and processions, and mainstream lifestyle magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Travel and Leisure*, and *Holiday Celebrations* have featured articles on the celebration. While news stories of Day of the Dead were scant in the 1970s, the holiday

now receives coverage in most large US cities during the months of October and November,³⁶ with articles typically placed on front pages and accompanied by colorful photos. As with MLK Day coverage, individual newspapers may publish multiple Day of the Dead articles each season. These usually describe the celebration's aesthetic aspects (i.e. altars for the dead made with fresh flowers and fruits, elaborate paper decorations, candles, and incense), and range from news of children's crafts to avant-garde art exhibits, community altar-making events, street processions, and vigils. As the lengthiest Latino festivity in the United States (with altar exhibits and craft workshops extending over several weeks each year), the annual media coverage the celebration attracts is a ritualized opportunity for Mexican Americans and other Latinos to communicate about themselves to each other and the larger US public.

This media space is significant, given that while Latinos are the largest minority group in the United States, representing 14 percent of the national population (US Census 2005), they receive the least media coverage of any racial group (Alvear, 1998; Hoffman and Noriega, 2004, p. 6). Analyses of mainstream US newspaper coverage of Latinos note that, in addition to being under-represented, Latinos are frequently portrayed as lacking agency—presented as *objects* rather than authoritative subjects of news (Fregoso, 1993; Lopez, 1991; Taylor and Bang, 1997; Vargas, 2000). Even newspapers that attempt to provide positive coverage of Latinos present a disproportionately high numbers of stories focused on token athletes or entertainers, rather than on everyday people (Fishman and Casiano, 1969; Kraeplin and Subervi-Velez, 2003, p. 119). Thus, after a long history of media "brownout" (Carveth and Alverio, 1997; *Hispanic Business*, 1999), Day of the Dead stories on the front pages of the Metro, Region, Culture, Arts, and Calendar sections of mainstream newspapers validate the presence of Latinos and Latino culture in US society.

Scholars of news note that because of journalistic criteria for newsworthiness, events get more prominent coverage than issues (Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Ryan, 1991; Tuchman, 1978). It is precisely the "exoticism" of Day of the Dead that attracts media attention, creating public space for narratives that not only disrupt the usual "Latino" stories of poverty and crime, but also provide high-visibility opportunities for the discussion of political issues from "below." While the celebration is a positive, community-building event that appeals to all-age audiences, it often reflects somber realities by remembering those who die from avoidable socio-political causes. Like much multicultural event coverage, the articles analyzed in this study described the visual spectacle of the celebration, discussed the holiday's history, and noted the presence of "community spirit." However, exploitative labor conditions, anti-immigrant violence, and pollution-caused illnesses in urban neighborhoods were also the focus of Day of the Dead events, and news sources shared personal stories of how their communities were affected by forms of death that disproportionately affect low-income, minority populations. Teens spoke of losing friends to gang violence. Parents spoke of losing children to war. Friends spoke of losing friends to domestic violence or drugs. Others discussed "the death of the environment," "the death of free speech," "the death of arts funding," "the death of unionized jobs," or death and destruction caused by racism, homelessness, and human rights violations. Of the total number of Day of the Dead articles analyzed in the 10-year sample, 28 percent of the *Chronicle's* articles (20 articles out of 71) and 41 percent of the *Times's* articles (30 out of 74) discussed political themes (Table 2). Whether implicitly or explicitly, these stories drew attention to the classism and racism in US society that makes people of color the

TABLE 2

Political issues by category in California daily coverage, 1994–2004 (%)

	Migrant deaths on the border	Violence (gangs, hand guns; domestic violence)	Labor struggles	Women of Juarez	Anti-War	Other political issues*	Total% of Day of the Dead articles with political themes
<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i> (N=71)	15 (11 of 71 articles)	15 (11 of 71 articles)	10 (7 of 71 articles)	10 (7 of 71 articles)	15 (11 of 15 articles)	35 (25 of 71 articles)	28 (20 of 71 articles)
<i>Los Angeles Times</i> (N=74)	27 (20 of 74 articles)	20 (15 of 74 articles)	13.5 (10 of 74 articles)	9.5 (7 of 74 articles)	7 (5 of 74 articles)	23 (17 of 74 articles)	41 (30 of 74 articles)

*The category "other" includes articles that discussed death/destruction caused by racism, homelessness, human rights violations, and the California ballot Propositions 187 and 209 (anti-immigration and anti-Affirmative Action measures, respectively).

recipients of disproportionate levels of violence, environmental injustice, and dangerous or exploitative jobs.

By far the largest single category of political news discussed in Day of the Dead articles was immigration, particularly the US border patrol program Operation Gatekeeper.³⁷ Immigrant rights activists blame this policy for the deaths of more than 3000 Mexican and Central American migrants since 1994 who, they argue, have been forced to attempt border crossings in desolate areas of the Imperial Desert as a result of Gatekeeper's drastically militarized infrastructure along the traditional migrant crossing routes of the San Diego/Tijuana region.³⁸ While most US politicians and other official news sources (business leaders, security forces, and policymakers) argue that the remedy for illegal immigration is a more heavily armed border, they seldom discuss the root causes of migration. Statistics by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), the Mexican consulates, and human rights organizations documenting the monthly death toll of migrants crossing the border are generally not the focus of government and other elite news sources quoted in hard news stories about immigration. However, Day of the Dead articles have brought these deaths to the front pages in dramatic ways.

In its lead and throughout the text, a 1998 Day of the Dead article in the front news section of the *Los Angeles Times* discussed government policies as institutional triggers of illegal immigration, particularly neoliberal economic measures promoted by the US and Mexican governments that have lowered wages and living standards for the majority of Mexicans. After explaining that Day of the Dead is "a holiday when Mexican families traditionally honor their deceased ones through graveside visits and altars," the article noted that immigrant rights advocates saw the day as "an opportunity to publicly commemorate many who died in obscurity" attempting to cross the border.³⁹ Along with a description of altars "heaped with sweet bread and candles, flowers and fruit in honor of the deceased," the article prominently quoted Latino human rights activists who were critical of US–Mexican economic policies. The article's conclusion was a moving quote from a 73-year-old Mexican man whose two sons migrated to the United States: "A lot of people came to find work, and all they found was death." A 2002 *Times* Day of the Dead story on the front page of the Metro section noted border death statistics prominently in

its headline and lead, observing that the annual number of migrants who died trying to cross the border had climbed sharply during the prior year.⁴⁰ The article began by describing a somber celebration in which “a priest blessed nearly 600 crosses that were erected to honor those who have died while trying to come to the United States.” Drawing attention to the largely unseen ramifications of Operation Gatekeeper, the article observed:

Advocates say 131 illegal immigrants have died so far this year along California’s border with Mexico, compared with a total of 85 deaths in 1997 . . . Critics blame Operation Gatekeeper for driving immigrants into dangerous routes to the east. The program increased enforcement on the once-porous border in San Diego, through more fences, lighting and doubling the number of patrol agents in San Diego . . .

Stating that the crosses were intended “as an indictment of US Immigration and Naturalization Service policies that have made the border an increasingly deadly place,” the article noted that increased militarization of the border had proven ineffective in reducing illegal immigration and suggested that improved economic conditions would be a more effective solution. The director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, was quoted in the article: “If we had improved labor conditions and wages on both sides of the border, my God, you would not see this kind of situation. We’re just not dealing with this as a nation.” The article closed by indicating the need to “do something about the employer magnet,” referring to corporate America’s preference for low-wage immigrant labor over higher paid jobs for US citizens. This story was picked up by the Associated Press (AP) and published in newspapers across the United States, with added INS statistics indicating that, “an average of at least one person every day died last fiscal year on the American side of the Mexican border while crossing.” The AP version also noted that Day of the Dead events were planned around the United States to draw attention to the growing number of migrant deaths along the border.⁴¹

The second most prominent political issue discussed in Day of the Dead coverage was violence, including the categories of anti-immigrant violence, gang violence, domestic violence, and gun violence. A 1995 *Times* article explained how an “ancient ceremony took a decidedly modern and mournful turn,” when the Long Beach Community Hispanic Association focused their Day of the Dead celebration on “youngsters who lost their lives to violence.”⁴² The president of the Community Association, one of three people quoted in the article, explained that the Mexican tradition of dedicating November 1 to the memory of deceased babies and small children was being carried out in Long Beach to honor youth killed by violence. The second source quoted was a Salvadoran mother whose 19-year-old daughter had recently been killed by a bullet to the head. The third source was a local Latino man who founded a group called “Teens on Target,” to warn youth about firearms. In another example, a 2005 *Chronicle* article discussed a Day of the Dead exhibit meant to “raise awareness about the rising violence in Oakland.” After noting exorbitant violent death rates in East Oakland in its lead, the article described an exhibit created to remember the deceased and draw attention to the problem. The principal source quoted was a native of Oakland, where the homicide rate had risen despite a decrease in the national rate. Noting that 88 people were murdered in Oakland that year, the altar-maker discussed how her city, largely comprised of people of color, “has a long history of neglect . . . What we’re getting now is the result of people being thrown away for generations. If someone said there was a terrorist bomb in Oakland that had killed 88

people all at once, everyone would look. The way it is now, there are a few people getting picked off every day."⁴³ Both of these articles simultaneously described colorful Day of the Dead traditions and underscored the disproportionate levels of violence, poverty, and death affecting Latino communities.

Other stories covered Day of the Dead exhibits that drew attention to the pesticide poisoning of Latino farm workers in the United States and other unsafe working conditions that affect the lives and health of low-income Latino immigrants. Many honored the United Farm Workers' Union founder, Cesar Chavez, drawing attention to past and ongoing struggles for workers' rights. Another category of events drew attention to the unattractive underbelly of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), particularly the situation in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, where some 400 female factory workers employed by US and other foreign-owned factories operating just across the border from El Paso, Texas, have been raped, mutilated, and murdered on their commute to or from work.⁴⁴ A 2003 *Times* article on the front page of the Style & Culture section described a Day of the Dead forum called "The Maquiladora Murders, or Who is Killing the Women of Juarez?" held at UCLA and co-sponsored by Amnesty International.⁴⁵ Noting that neither the US nor Mexican government has addressed the gendered violence that is a daily reality of the border factory industry lauded by NAFTA proponents, the article encouraged readers to get involved, informing them of upcoming demonstrations and letter-writing campaigns. Each year, Day of the Dead exhibits and articles on this topic represent some of the highest profile public attention the epidemic of murders in Juarez receives annually. While factory owners and the Mexican government have done little to investigate these crimes, articles that discuss altars created "in memory of the hundreds of young women slain in Juarez, Mexico"⁴⁶ graphically place the topic in the public eye.

Conclusions

Are Day of the Dead and MLK Day articles unique examples of multicultural celebration news coverage bringing political issues into the headlines? While more research would need to be done on this, newspaper coverage of other ethnic celebrations suggests they are not. The annual St. Patrick's Day Parade in South Boston, the largest annual parade in the city, has been a riveting site for gay and lesbian marchers of Irish descent to demand public recognition and acceptance. Columbus Day, which began as a day to commemorate the "discovery" of America, has made headlines as a day of mourning and protest by some Native Americans and Latinos who commemorate the genocide and suffering which the Italian explorer's arrival portended for America's original inhabitants. A recent Three King's Day celebration⁴⁷ observed by Boston's Latino community (covered in the *Boston Globe* via two articles and three photos) drew attention to the mistreatment, rejection, and violence faced by undocumented immigrants.⁴⁸

That multicultural celebration news stories can stimulate political reflections and debate among readers is suggested by letters to the editor written in response to both Day of the Dead and MLK articles. For example, a 1998 *Times* article about a Day of the Dead tribute to dead migrants inspired a letter to the editor criticizing Operation Gatekeeper and the lax enforcement of US labor laws:

There is no chance of sealing off the border with Mexico. And there is no nice way of controlling the flow. But we should not do it by funneling migrants into such punishing corridors. Meanwhile, we are in no hurry to crack down on employers who want cheap,

throwaway workers. In San Diego and Imperial counties, it has been years since we prosecuted a single employer who uses undocumented labor.⁴⁹

Conversely, a Day of the Dead article in the same paper a year later elicited a response from a proponent of Operation Gatekeeper:

Such critics conveniently forget to mention that thousands of Mexicans cross the border to the US without incident, and that the US accepts more legal Mexican immigrants than any other country does. They also forget to mention that Mexican migratory law is stricter than American law, and that thousands of Central American illegal immigrants are tossed out of Mexico each year without fanfare . . . I doubt that any country, including Mexico, would not have moved to control the unrestricted flow of illegal immigrants.⁵⁰

Similarly, a 2004 article in the *Times* about the booing of President Bush during his MLK Day visit to Martin Luther King Jr.'s tomb drew letters to the editor expressing divergent political views, such as this one from a writer who agreed with the booing crowd:

I understand why protesters booed Bush when, uninvited, he laid a wreath at King's tombstone in Atlanta. King understood that a spirit of militarism, materialism and racism impeded mankind's maturity and spiritual growth.⁵¹

Another letter in the same section expressed an opposite opinion:

Bush paid public tribute to a man who passionately lived his life to save African Americans from cruelty and injustice. What does he get in return? A slap in the face from those who would brazenly deny him the right to share in the celebration of King's glorious legacy. Who owns King's dream of racial equality and emancipation from oppression? Nobody. We are all free to share it and to treasure it.⁵²

This study does not claim that all multicultural celebration news stories convey political messages about racial injustice. Rather, it points out that such articles can be spaces for the discussion of serious issues facing racial minorities, and that the genre as a whole does not necessarily reinforce stereotypes, embody enlightened racism, or support the status quo system. While celebration stories can contain stereotypical portrayals of minorities, some go beyond the tropes in search of more "newsworthy" frames. As a *San Francisco Chronicle* journalist noted: "My story was about Day of the Dead sculptures commemorating those who had just died in the 9/11 attacks of 2001 . . . I heard about the artwork from artists and I thought it would be a fresh and topical way to cover what's become a routine festival story."⁵³

Compared with earlier analyses of MLK coverage done by Entman (1990) and Campbell (1995) that examined holiday coverage during one particular year, this study's analysis of two distinct holiday celebrations in two separate cities over 10-year periods illuminates some unrecognized aspects of multicultural celebration coverage.⁵⁴ First, the festive themes in these stories do not perforce whitewash the existence of racism in the United States with portrayals of interracial harmony. In their headlines, leads, and other text, numerous stories in the samples discussed racism and related social justice issues, pointing to structural reasons for racial inequality and contradicting dominant ideologies of liberal individualism and assimilation. A number of articles discussed government policies affecting people of color, implying that racism has institutional causes and is more than simply a matter of personal attitude. In the case of MLK coverage, several articles

discussed Dr. King's political philosophies and policy objectives and pointed out that his goal of racial equality has yet to be achieved. Similarly, various Day of the Dead articles drew attention to ongoing social, economic, and political issues affecting Latinos, illustrating the human cost of US domestic and foreign policies—a toll treated with such distanced “objectivity” in most hard news that the consequences are often reduced to dry statistics.

Second, with the exception of the occasional well-known public figure, most of the sources quoted in these stories were “everyday” people—parents, grandparents, teens, grassroots activists, the unemployed, and the undocumented—non-elite sources who have typically been absent or marginalized in official political reporting (Gans, 1979; Soloski, 1989; Tuchman, 1978). These sources conveyed non-establishment perspectives on political issues such as Operation Gatekeeper, Affirmative Action, gun violence, labor abuses, and war, which would normally fall within “sphere of deviance” frames in hard news. In contrast to the trivialization, polarization, marginalization, emphasis on dissention, and other delegitimizing treatments that oppositional perspectives often receive in hard news (Gitlin, 1980, p. 27), the non-controversial “sphere of consensus” status of these multicultural events allowed reporters to present oppositional perspectives without being required to journalistically “balance” them with competing views.

News coverage of ethnic celebrations exemplifies the increasingly porous line between “hard” and “soft” news (Brants, 1998; Fine, 2004; Sparks and Tulloch, 2000). Because politics, war, economics, and crime are considered the distinct realm of hard news, while arts and lifestyle stories (that place greater emphasis on personal anecdotes than thematic analysis) are considered the realm of soft news, the growing popularity of the latter is often touted as the impending demise of an informed public. This study's findings instead concur with those who argue that because soft news stories are among the most widely read articles nationally, they should be taken seriously for their potential to raise important civic concerns outside of the formal political domain (Baum, 2003; Prior, 2003; Schudson, 2003). If we dismiss multicultural celebration news stories as merely “stereotypical,” we overlook opportunities they can provide readers, particularly those who may not normally consume hard news, to gain exposure to political viewpoints that criticize system supportive narratives. If these stories can be clichéd, they can also, at times, contradict the assumptions of racial equality and peaceful coexistence associated with multicultural celebrations.

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NOTES

1. Numerous ethnic celebrations began to emerge in the public realm in the 1970s and 1980s as expressions of cultural pride that accompanied the civil rights movements of historically oppressed minorities.

2. The Kerner Commission's *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* condemned historical trends whereby the US press excluded and negatively portrayed people of color in the news.
3. MLK Day is more widely celebrated by both the African American and mainstream US population than is Kwanza. Day of the Dead is more widely celebrated across the United States by diverse Latino populations and non-Latinos, than is Cinco de Mayo.
4. These dailies are the papers of record, respectively, for northern and southern California and are read not only in their cities of publication but also throughout each geographical region.
5. Open coding of the articles was done to mark sections of text that suggested possible political categories, followed by axial coding to create definitive categories. For MLK Day, the largest categories were Persistence of Racism; Dream Unfulfilled (including discussions of "backsliding" of Civil Rights gains, insufficient progress, unfinished work); Structural reasons for poverty (including discussions of lack of adequate funding for quality education, housing, healthcare, youth programs, job training, and unequal treatment in the justice system); Opposition to the War (articles since 2003); Affirmative Action. For Day of the Dead, the largest categories were Migrant Deaths (including critiques of Operation Gatekeeper); Violence (including handgun violence/lack of gun control legislation, domestic violence, gang violence (including discussions of lack of funding for youth programs, education, and job training); Labor Issues (discussions of unsafe, exploitative work conditions, pesticide poisoning, Bracero Program, critiques of NAFTA); Women of Juarez (Because of the geographic specificity of these work-related, gender-specific murders and the relatively high number of Day of the Dead exhibits and vigils dedicated to this issue, it was classified separately, rather than as a subcategory of "Violence" or "Labor"); Anti-war, and "Other" (details in Table 2).
6. Day of the Dead coverage was analyzed for the years 1994–2004. The sample consisted of 71 articles in the *Chronicle* and 74 in the *Times*. MLK Day coverage was analyzed for the years 1996–2006. The sample consisted of 20 articles in the *Chronicle* and 60 in the *Times*.
7. Articles that mentioned Martin Luther King only tangentially and were not about MLK Day celebrations were eliminated from the sample. MLK Day captions that contained mere lists of bank, school, and business closings or event listings (time and place only) were also excluded, so that only articles published in the month of January and specifically about MLK Day festivities (marches, parades, speeches, performances, etc.) were used. The same criterion was used for Day of the Dead celebrations.
8. Campbell (1995) and Entman and Rojecki (2000) provided only brief discussions of MLK Day news as part of larger studies dealing with the representation of race in the media.
9. Rubenstein, Steve (1998) "S.F.'s King Holiday Parade Draws Thousands", *SF Chronicle*, 20 January, News, p. A9.
10. Anderson, Nick (1998) "A Call for Action on King Day; Remembrance; Lone black elected official in O.C. says there is need for broader representation", *LA Times*, 20 January, p. B4.
11. Braun, Stephan (2000) "Bradley's Hit-and-miss Crusade on Race Issues", *LA Times*, 17 January, p. A1.
12. *LA Times* (2000) "With King in Mind, 46,000 Protest Confederate Flag in S. Carolina", 18 January, News, p. A11.
13. Fulwood III, Sam (1996) "Clinton Leads Martin Luther King Salute", *LA Times*, 16 January, p. A14.

14. Muñoz, Lorenza and Endo, Emi (1996) "The Message Goes Out on King Day", *LA Times*, 21 January, Metro, p. B1.
15. Wilson, Tracy (2003) "Marchers Recall King Amid Specter of War", *LA Times*, 21 January, p. B3.
16. Rubenstein, Steve (1998) "S.F.'s King Holiday Parade Draws Thousands", *SF Chronicle*, 20 January, News, p. A9.
17. *LA Times* (1996) "Rekindling King's Vision of a Beloved Community", 13 January, Religion, p. B4.
18. Johnson, Jason (2005) "King Fete Draws People of Many Colors...", 18 January, *SF Chronicle*, p. B1.
19. Merl, Jean and Texeira, Erin (1996) "Riordan Is Castigated at Ceremony; State senator Diane Watson gets standing ovation during tribute to Martin Luther King Jr. as she criticizes mayor's record on issues affecting blacks", *Chronicle*, 15 January, p. B1.
20. Leshner, Dave (1997) "Reverend King's Son to Lead Civil Rights Group", *LA Times*, 18 January, p. A3.
21. Moore, Solomon (1997) "A Dream Unrealized on King Boulevard", *LA Times*, 20 January, p. A1.
22. Peterson, Jonathan (1998) "Stricter Enforcement of Civil Rights Laws Sought", *LA Times*, 18 January, p. A1.
23. Hendrix, Anastasia (2003) "Who Will Keep the Dream Alive?" *SF Chronicle*, 20 January, Bay Area, p. B1.
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25. Buchanan, Joy (2004) "Group King Started Would Rather Recruit Voters Than March; Southern Christian Leadership Conference will hold voter registration drive at today's parade", *LA Times*, 19 January, p. B8.
26. Schultz, Tom and Krikorian, Michael (1998) "King Holiday Marked with Parades, Prayers", *LA Times*, 20 January, p. B1.
27. Gerstenzang, James (2001) "King Dream Starts with Quality Schools, Bush Says", *LA Times*, 16 January, p. A10.
28. Herron Zamora, Jim (2005) "1,500 Honor King in Oakland, Schwarzenegger, Mayor Brown Among Speakers", *SF Chronicle*, 18 January, p. B3.
29. Decker, Twila (2001) "Political Undercurrent at Parade", *LA Times*, 16 January, p. B1.
30. Wagner, Venice and Sarkar, Pia (2001) "Not Yet Overcome: events of recent election add urgency to calls for social justice at King Day rallies", *SF Chronicle*, 16 January, News, p. A13.
31. Chavez, Stephanie (2003) "Saluting, Celebrating King and His Message", *LA Times*, 19 January, p. B3.
32. Epstein, Edward (2003) "Big Turnout Expected in DC", *SF Chronicle*, 16 January, News, p. A3.
33. Chen, Edwin (2004) "Bush on Southern Whirl; He raised \$2.3 million for reelection but was booed at the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s grave", *LA Times*, 16 January, p. A14.
34. Estrella, Cicero (2004) "King's Birthday Is Honored in Oakland/1967 anti-Vietnam speech still relevant, say event leaders", *SF Chronicle*, 17 January, p. A13.
35. The term "Chicano" began to be widely used in the 1970s to describe Americans of Mexican descent who were politically engaged in the struggle for liberation from Anglo

- racism and exploitation. In addition to political work, Chicano Movement activists engaged in a variety of cultural activities such as popular theater, poetry, mural painting, and ritual celebrations intended to celebrate Mexican culture and build a unified Mexican-American community across ethnic, class, and generational lines.
36. Day of the Dead is officially celebrated in Latin America on November 1 and 2, yet, the celebration period in the United States lasts two to three months, with ongoing exhibits and workshops in museums, galleries, shops and schools from early fall through November.
 37. Initiated in 1994, this program has greatly intensified Border Patrol surveillance along the heavily trafficked, urban areas of the US–Mexico border via the construction of additional border walls, hiring of thousands of new border patrol agents, and installation of infrared cameras and other nocturnal surveillance equipment.
 38. Causes of migrant death include dehydration and hypothermia (as desert temperatures can exceed 120 degrees by day and fall below freezing at night) as well as gun violence by bandits, human smugglers, vigilante groups, and national security forces.
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 49. *LA Times* (1998) Letter to the Editor, 9 November, Metro, p. 9.
 50. *LA Times* (1999) Letter to the Editor, 20 February, Metro, p. 7.
 51. *LA Times* (2004) Letter to the Editor, 21 January, p. B12.
 52. *LA Times* (2004) Letter to the Editor, 21 January, p. B12.
 53. Personal communication with *SF Chronical* journalist Meredith May, June 20, 2005.

54. Both San Francisco and Los Angeles are racially diverse cities with large politically liberal constituencies and it is possible that analysis of newspaper coverage in less diverse or politically conservative areas would yield different results.

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