

Entertainment

Impact of Television News Coverage on Current Events Explored in "Race Against Prime Time"

In May 1980, a six-man, all-white jury in Miami, Florida, acquitted four white policemen charged with beating to death Arthur McDuffie, a black insurance man. Soon after that decision, riots erupted in the ghetto of Liberty City near Miami. National network news showed extensive footage of the burning businesses, looting crowds, and running battles of the conflict. After the smoke cleared, many questioned how network news

organizations covered the event. Did the news teams tell the complete story, or did they focus only on the dramatic scenes of violence? What impact did the coverage have on the resolution of the conflict? How much did the riot images reveal about Miami, and how much about television news itself?

RACE AGAINST PRIME TIME airing December 28 at 10 p.m. over Channel KTNV-10, explores these questions and examines the

policies, practices, and pressures that shape television news coverage of current events by focusing on the 1980 news coverage of a racial conflict.

Along with examining the news reports of the riots, RACE AGAINST PRIME TIME interviews the people who were there--news directors, assignment editors, members of black print and broadcast media, and Liberty City residents. Network newsroom personnel state that the physical danger to



RACE AGAINST PRIME TIME examines the impact of the media on current events. Using the 1980 racial riots in Liberty City, Florida, (pictured) as a case study, the one-hour documentary focuses on the policies, practices, and pressures that shape television news coverage. Photo:UPI/Seitmann Newsphotos (12/28/86, 10:00 p.m. ET, one hour)

reporting crews by the rioters dictated the extent of coverage. Members of Miami's black media bring up related incidents that were ignored in the national news that increased racial

tensions leading up to and during the riots, and community residents point to racial biases in the news coverage.

RACE AGAINST PRIME TIME also juxtaposes

television's use of dramatic images in news reporting with the media's responsibility to its community. One Liberty City resident claims "I could bring every camera in the world right here. All I have to do is strike a match and start shooting...but if I go down in peace, nothing's going to happen." The documentary notes that the local television stations realized their potential impact on the Liberty City incident, and took an unusually active role in news reporting. The anchorman news director of the CBS affiliate WTVJ-TV in Miami states "(we) tried to use the influence of television to bring about some order in our town."

Adding an important historical dimension, RACE AGAINST PRIME TIME SHOWS NEWS BROADCASTS OF RACIAL CONFLICTS IN THE 1960S WHEN STREET VIOLENCE was considered one of the biggest domestic crises since the Civil War. The documentary follows

President Johnson's initiative to investigate the problem and examine the influence of television news on the turbulence. A presidential commission, Congress, and the U.S. Department of Justice studied the role of the media in reporting racial problems and recommended that networks develop a set of guidelines for covering volatile situations.

Although the networks resisted government interference with newsroom operations, most drew up a set of guidelines for their reporting staffs. RACE AGAINST PRIME TIME looks at the status of these guidelines and questions whether they were followed in the coverage of the 1980 Liberty City riots.

RACE AGAINST PRIME TIME is produced by News Decade Productions. Producer/director: David Shulman. The program is funded by the Downtown Community TV Center, the New York State Council on the Arts, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and the United Methodist Church, Women's Division. RACE AGAINST PRIME TIME is distributed to public television stations by the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

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