
How the American News Media Address the n-Word

by Frank Harris III

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Abstract

This study surveyed American newspapers, television and radio stations on how they address the word “nigger” or “nigga” in today’s news stories. It found the overwhelming majority has encountered the words in some part of the news process. While most do not have a formal policy for addressing the words, they nearly all apply euphemistic words, phrases and editorial approaches to keep the explicit words from being seen, read or heard by the public.

Keywords: United States, news media, newspapers, television, radio, racial slur, nigger, nigga, n-word, blacks, African-Americans, whites, Hispanics

Introduction

When video of University of Oklahoma fraternity members chanting their strong feelings against blacks went viral in March 2015, it became the latest in a series of high-profile news stories with the word “nigger” at its core. The incident involving Sigma Alpha Epsilon members included the suggestion of lynching, along with the explicit, venomous use of the word “nigger.”

America’s news media, when presenting the video and the corresponding news coverage, addressed the pejorative word in a number of ways – sometimes in the same newscast.

CNN, for instance, aired the video with the word “nigger” deleted. In the text graphics presented with the video, the word was presented with asterisks as (“n*****”). However, host Don Lemon, after using the term “n-word” in his segment to describe what the frat members chanted, quickly abandoned that term saying: “They didn’t say ‘n-word.’ They said ‘nigger.’” He continued to use the actual word they said throughout the broadcast.

America’s First Amendment gives anyone and everyone the right to use this word. No one gets thrown in jail for its use. However, there are social constraints today that did not exist in America’s past. These constraints make the word a major faux pas that can bring the offending party up to public ridicule and shame, as well as derail a career and lead to a

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host of other negative results up to and including economic sanctions and status as a social outcast.

The word's usage is an issue not just for high-profile stories such as this or Paula Deen, Riley Cooper, Laura Schlessinger and a host of others, but for the many instances when journalists encounter this word during the course of their everyday coverage when used by people of all races, ethnicities and social status.

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This leads to the other element of the word. Should those who receive media scrutiny regarding this word's usage be determined by the race of the person saying it? That is, should there be a double standard between blacks and nonblacks who use the word "nigger" or "nigga"?

Whether it is a national or local beat, a general story or a political story, a sports/entertainment or crime story, journalists have or will encounter the word "nigger" or "nigga" at some point in their news coverage. How do they address this word that on the one hand has been described in terms both hateful and endearing? Do they use the actual word that is said, or do they use the euphemistic "n-word." Do they use asterisks or underlines or some other creative way of describing the word? Is there a policy that news organizations have to address the word? How should they address it?

Historical overview of the n-word in America's news media.

When Public Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick published its one and only edition in 1690 making it America's first newspaper, there was not a word printed about America's blacks, most of whom were slaves. They were then referred to by a variety of names ranging from "slave," "African," "black," "Negro" and "nigger." While no one can say for sure when the word "nigger" was first uttered in America, the earliest newspaper

Excerpt from poem "The Poor Time of Wilmington"

Your trade ha' dwindled ane awa',
Na produce comes to town ava,
Except a bit canoe or twa
Does sometimes come
Wi' sweet potatoes and rice straw
To swap for rum.

Whiles at the nuik of Market street,
Whare many a nigger nizzy meet,
Wi' ginger cakes both brown, and sweet,
An' apples bonny ;
But whare there are sae few to eat,
They'll no sell mony.

The shap keeper are a' sae slack,
Wi' baeth their hands behynd their back,
They dander up and down and crack,
Or lounge on benches :

Source: Cape-Fear (Wilmington, N.C.) Record, July 31, 1819

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reference uncovered in this study was in the July 31, 1819 edition of Cape-Fear Recorder of Wilmington, N.C. The reference came in the form of a poem titled “The Poor Times of Wilmington.” That is not to say that the word was not being used before this, as evident by the paper’s introduction to the poem that indicated it was written by an Andrew Clarke in 1794, who was deceased at the time of its publication. But even 200 years before this, in 1582 according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word was used. Citing a Spanish colonial source and written as “niger,” the word was described as “post-classical Latin” for a black person. This was 37 years before the first black Africans were brought to America as slaves. The Oxford English Dictionary also pointed out “the word was initially a neutral term, and only began to acquire a derogatory connotation in the mid-18th (century) onward.”

This still does not fully explain why the word was absent from American newspapers until the 1800s, including America’s oldest continuously published newspaper, the Hartford Courant, whose earliest reference was July 28, 1834 in what was then called the Connecticut Courant. That reference was a reprint from the New York Daily Advertiser and was part of a regular satirical feature written in a folksy style reminiscent of Mark Twain.

The trend of newspapers publishing poems, songs, satirical columns, short stories and novels containing the word “nigger” continued throughout the 1800s and the early 1900s. There would also be comic strips and cartoons featuring the word in newspapers. Early on, news editors and publishers tended to place quotes around the word to cite others’ use of the word. As the slavery debate kicked in during the 1840s on to the Civil War, editors provided their own voices to the word in headlines and in the stories themselves.

It should be noted that the word “nigger” was a common and openly accepted term throughout much of America’s existence. It was a word spoken by whites of all classes, including presidents and presidential candidates. Though he was speaking against slavery, presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln said the word “nigger” on several occasions during a campaign stop in Hartford, Conn. His words were captured in the March 6, 1860 Hartford Daily Courant. Said Lincoln: “They say that between the nigger and the crocodile they go for the nigger. The proportion therefore is that as the crocodile to the nigger so is the nigger to the white man.”

The words, printed as is, did not cause a stir as they would if such a high-profile public figure were to say the word today. It was also not uncommon for blacks to use the word toward each other as numerous articles reveal. The word when used by blacks even 200

Excerpt from Abraham Lincoln’s 1860 Presidential Campaign Speech in Hartford, Conn., where he used the word ‘nigger’

‘The proposition that there is a struggle between the white man and the negro contains a falsehood. There is no struggle between them. It assumes that unless the white man enslaves the negro, the negro will enslave the white man. In that case, I think I would go for enslaving the black man, in preference to being enslaved myself. As the learned Judge of a certain Court is said to have decided—“When a ship is wrecked at sea, and two men seize upon one plank which is capable of sustaining but one of them, either of them can rightfully push the other off!” There is, however, no such controversy here. They say that between the nigger and the crocodile they go for the nigger. The proportion, therefore, is, that as the crocodile to the nigger so is the nigger to the white man.

Source: Hartford Daily Courant, March 6, 1860

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years ago was regarded as “neutral or affectionate”¹ (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013) while at the same time was “used by people who are not black as a hostile term of abuse or contempt”² (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013). However, the word has been used in all kinds of ways and not all blacks who used the word then did so with affection or neutrality. Some said it with similar contempt as whites or in a “depreciatory” way (Oxford English Dictionary, 2013).³

Excerpt from the ‘nigger hanging,’ South Carolina, 1848

Great indeed was the excitement manifested by all classes, more particularly the non-slaveholders, between the trial and day of execution, to see these negroes hung, and the expected ‘nigger hanging’ was much talked about as a circus would have been, in the days of Pineville memory. Nothing could be said nor done, but what the ‘nigger hanging,’ in some shape or another, was brought upon the tapis, and every body was going, and even seemed to anticipate much pleasure in the sight.

‘How ar you to day Bob?’

‘I’m well, how is it yourself, I give you thanks?’

‘O, sorter so. so. You gwine to the nigger hangin’ Bob?’

‘O yes, I would’nt miss it for a quarter.’

‘Nor I nuther, I’d d’ruther see it than to see the circus!’

Even the old women seemed delighted at the idea of having an opportunity, to see these poor devils suffer.

‘Yes I intend to go,’ says one, ‘I know I can look at ’em hang as onconsarned as I could at an old sheep killin’ dog, or a suck nig son of a hound.’ The speaker growing more angry, the more she talked about it, until she seemed mad enough to kill every dog on the plantation, for fear they might turn out to sucking her eggs.

Source: The Sumter (S.C.) March 29, 1848.

But the words spoken by blacks did not lead to the same type of horror as it did with whites who followed such pejoratives with action. Many articles when not poking fun with jokes and poems and songs, captured the pure hate and violence associated with the word, as in a March 29, 1848 story from the Sumter (S.C.) Banner about a “nigger hanging” in which a reporter describes the scene.

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The word nigger was never the most frequent reference to Americans of black African descent for any decade since being brought to America from Africa. The words “Negro” and “Black” hold that distinction. Still, the word has proven to be resilient and fraught with power rooted in hate.

A look at newspapers’ trend (in presenting the word “nigger” over the past 320 years gives some indication of its re-

1 1848 G. Lippard Paul Ardenheim ii. i. 225 For sixteen—seventeen year, dis nigga watch his time.

2 1818 H. B. Fearon Sketches Amer. 46 The bad conduct and inferior nature of niggars (negroes).

3 1952 J. Lait & L. Mortimer U.S.A. Confidential i. viii. 61 They are outcasts, unwanted even by other Negroes who came before them. These citified blacks resent the new influx and call them ‘niggers.’

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lation to the mood and events of the time. This can be seen, for instance, in the spike in usage in the period before and during the Civil War, as well as in the period of Reconstruction in the 1870s followed by the official government sanctioning of racism in the 1890s followed again with the rise in lynchings at the turn of the century during the “Red Summers” and again the turmoil of the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement.

Newspapers of the past provided a major outlet for the use of the word “nigger” before the word lost its luster in the 1950s.

As for radio and television, neither lent themselves to the type of archival research as newspapers. However, when radio first aired in 1920, overt racism was still the norm. Accordingly the airwaves were filled with bigotry in the form of music containing the word “nigger,” as well as radio shows and undoubtedly the news as spoken by radio broadcasters and/or their sources during interviews. When television came along in the 1950s, the word “nigger” was arguably not as strong a presence as it had been with newspapers and radio.

Kenn Venit, a former television news reporter, producer (personal communication, March 31, 2015), in the 1960s through the early 1980s said he has no recollection of ever hearing the word “nigger”

Most Frequent Name Reference for Americans of African Descent by Decade 1730-2008

Decade	Most Frequent Racial Reference
1730-1739*	Black
1740-1749*	Negro
1750-1759*	Negro
1760-1769	Negro
1770-1779	Negro
1780-1789	Negro
1790-1799	Negro
1800-1809	Negro
1810-1819	Negro
1820-1829	Slave
1830-1839	Negro
1840-1849	Slave
1850-1859	Slave
1860-1869	Negro
1870-1879	Colored
1880-1889	Negro
1890-1899	Colored
1900-1909	Negro
1910-1919	Negro
1920-1929	Negro
1930-1939	Negro
1940-1949	Negro
1950-1959	Negro
1960-1969	Negro
1970-1979	Black
1980-1989	Black
1995-1999	Black ‡
2000-2008	Black ‡

Source: * Pennsylvania Gazette, first three decades.

All else: Connecticut Courant, Hartford Daily Courant, Hartford Courant.

‡ African American was a close second.

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broadcast during that time.

“In the newsrooms I worked in going back to the Sixties and Seventies,” said Venit, “‘hell’ and ‘damn’ were prohibited. The language in journalism was extremely conservative.

For example, when the Black Panther rally happened on the New Haven green, I actually made a request – which years later I realized was inappropriate – but I asked some of the speakers like Jerry Rubin ‘Could you limit the use of the F-word?’ because our film, you couldn’t use it and we weren’t allowed to bleep.

If you could read lips, we weren’t allowed to put that language on the air even bleeped. It’s the equivalent of the newspaper when they put n----- etc. Again, in our television so many words were not acceptable. Then you couldn’t say ‘pissed off.’ It was ‘ticked off.’

I think we were much more careful about language and operating in the public interest, convenience and necessity etc. and in the later years the liberalization of the language had led to given certain circumstances you can say the n-word and I might be quoting someone else or perhaps using it in a more educational or contextual way but in the early days that wouldn’t have been allowed.

We would not have broadcast that word (‘nigger’). I would have to say under any circumstances we would not be broadcasting that word. I don’t remember covering anything where the word was actually used. So it may have been that people that dealt with the media in those days did not have an expectation that the word would be used. I think today there would be great consideration of that word whether it would be broadcast or print, but I started where it was absolutely prohibited.”

Previous Studies

There are numerous news stories about the n-word and a few on the news media’s use of the word, such as Nadrea Kareem Nittle’s “The Media and the N-Word” posted on the website of the Maynard Institution of Journalism Education in July 18, 2012. However, there have been no studies noted to date featuring a survey of the news media on how they address the words “nigger” or “nigga.” The closest would be a survey by journalist Richard Prince, also in 2012 and also for the Maynard Institute, in his capacity as a columnist on diversity issues in the media. His survey featured the responses of nine news organizations that were asked their “policies about using epithets for race, ethnicity and sexual orientation.”

Methodology

This study involved three methods of gathering information:

Newspaper Archives

First, there was research of America’s first newspaper, Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick (1690). There was also a database search that involved the archives of the Hartford Courant, America’s oldest continuously published newspaper beginning in 1764 – 2009. There was also a search of the 3,354 newspapers of Newspapers.com, an online subscription-based service featuring newspapers from 1688 -2009. These databas-

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es yielded news stories featuring the word “nigger,” but more importantly, provided information that led to a plotting of the trend of newspapers’ use of the word “nigger” in news stories over the past 320+ years.

Interviews

There were recorded interviews with over 100 people across America about their experience with the word “nigger” or “nigga.” These interviews were conducted primarily in person from February 2014 to March 31, 2015. The people interviewed were of all races, ages, and genders and economic backgrounds. Some were famous people; most were everyday Americans.

Survey

The heart of this study centered on survey responses of 184 American newspapers, television news and radio news journalists from Jan. 14, 2015 to March 11, 2015. All were selected from the Mondo Times, a news media guide that provided the names of news organizations for each of the 50 states, along with the name of the contact person. For newspapers, that person was typically the managing editor; for television, it was the news director; for radio it was the news director or program director. With the names provided, a visit to the website produced, in most cases, the email addresses and phone numbers. In the vast majority of instances, the names were accurate. From there, email letters were sent to the contact person describing the research and asking the person to click the Snap Survey link in the letter to complete the online survey.

Understanding the sensitivity of the word and the topic meant finding a way to introduce the survey in a way that would not offend those seeing it, while at the same time ensuring that the email grabbed the attention of the recipients

Email Letter Sent to News Media

Good morning, (Name):

The word “nigger” and “nigga” are words that most news organizations have encountered or will encounter in some element of their news coverage.

I am rolling out a **BRIEF** survey of (news media) across America on how they address this word in their news stories.

I am asking for your station’s participation.

Please click this link

<https://www.snapsurveys.com/wh/s.asp?k=141935387973> and complete the survey.

I promise you it is **Brief**. Just eight questions. Seven when counting just identifying your news organization. It will be a big help to my research and I will be more than happy to share with you the results.

Thanking you in advance.

Regards,

(My name and contact info)

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from the countless other emails they undoubtedly receive each day. If it is not seen and noticed right away, it gets pushed farther into the queue where it can be lost if not forgotten. Recognizing the subject box was the first thing recipients see, emails were sent individually with the recipient's first name in the subject box followed by the question of how the recipient's news organization – also identified by name -- addresses the n-word? For example: Jim – How does WXWW address the n-word? When recipients open the email, they are again addressed by name, with the letter describing the research and asking them to click the link — which led them to the following survey:

The Survey

**How American News Organizations
Address the n-Word in Today's Stories**



What is your organization's name?

Does your news organization have a written policy on publishing/broadcasting the word "nigger" or "nigga" in news stories?

yes
 no

If yes, please describe your policy:

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Three Mediums

Newspapers

Surveys were sent via email with a link embedded to the editors of 450 American newspapers in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Included were the top 100 circulation dailies, as well as small town dailies, weeklies, Spanish-language and African-American papers. Fifteen of the email letters bounced back and were undelivered. The total receiving the survey was 435, of which 84 responded for a 19 percent response rate.

Television

Surveys were sent via email with a link embedded to the news directors and program directors of 668 television stations in major markets, as well as smaller markets in all 50 states. Sixty-five emails were undelivered. The total receiving the survey was 603, of which 53 responded for a 9 percent response rate.

Radio

Surveys were sent via email with a link embedded to the news directors and program directors of 494 radio stations in the 50 states. Thirty-were undelivered. The total receiving the survey was 462, of which 47 responded for a 10 percent response rate.

Survey Responses

As a group, 1,500 newspaper editors, and television and radio news editors/program directors received the survey, with 184 responding for a response rate of 12 percent. The list of news media respondents are listed in their respective categories on the three pages that follow.

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Newspaper Respondents

Albany (N.Y.) Times Union	Denver Post	LEO (Louisville) Weekly	Rockford (Ill.) Register Star
Albuquerque Weekly Alibi	Detroit Free Press	Lewiston (Maine) Sun-Journal	Salt Lake Tribune*
Annapolis (Md.) Capital Gazette	Devils Lake (N.D.) Journal	Long Beach Press-Telegram (LANG)	San Francisco Chronicle
Arkansas (Little Rock) Democrat-Gazette	Durham (N.C.) INDY week (Independent Weekly)	Los Angeles Daily News (Los Angeles News Group)	Scottsbluff (Neb.) Star-Herald Publishing
Arkansas Times	Ellsworth (Maine) American	Lowell (Mass.) Sun	South Carolina (Columbia) State
Aurora (Colo.) Sentinel/Aurora Media Group	Evansville (Ind.) Courier & Press	Macomb (Clinton Township, Mich.) Daily	South Florida (Ft. Lauderdale) Sun Sentinel
Bangor (Maine) Daily News	Everett (Wash.) Daily Herald	Mat-Su (Alaska) Valley Frontiersman	St. George (Utah) Spectrum & Daily News
Bay Area News Group – San Jose Mercury News, Contra Costa Times, Oakland Tribune	Fayetteville (N.C.) Observer	Medford (Ore.) Mail Tribune	St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Billings (Mont.) Gazette	Florida Times-Union (Jacksonville, Fla.)	Milwaukee Community Journal	Statesman Journal (Salem, Ore.) Media
Biloxi-Gulfport (Miss) Sun Herald	Fort Wayne Journal Gazette	Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	USA Today
Brattleboro (Vermont) Reformer	Frederick (Md.) News-Post	Monroe (La.) News- Star	Valencia County (N.M.) News-Bulletin
Brightside (Kennesaw, Ga.)*	Gambit Weekly (New Orleans)	Mundo Hispanico Atlanta	Valley Breeze (Lincoln, R.I.)
Caledonian –Record Publishing Co. (St. Johnsbury, Vermont)	Gardnerville, (Nev.) Record-Courier	N'DIGO Magapaper (Chicago)	Viva Colorado
Canton Repository/Gatehouse Media Ohio	Hagerstown (Md.) Herald-Mail	NJN Publishing/Union County Suburban News (N.J.)	Washington Post
Charleston (West Va.) Gazette	Hoy Los Angeles	Northwest Arkansas Democrat-Gazette	Waterbury (Conn.) Republican-American
Charleston (West Virginia) Daily Mail	Jackson (Miss.) Clarion-Ledger	Ogden (Utah) Standard-Examiner	Westerly (R.I.) Sun
Charlotte Observer	Jamestown (N.D.) Sun	Peoria (Ill.) Journal Star	Wisconsin (Madison) State Journal
Clarion Herald (New Orleans)	Kansas City Pitch	Philadelphia Daily News	Wyoming (Cheyenne) Tribune Eagle
Coeur d'Alene (Idaho) Press	Kingsport (Tenn.) Times-News	Philadelphia Inquirer	
Connecticut Post (Hearst Conn. Media - Stamford Advocate, Greenwich Times, Danbury News-times and several weeklies)	Knoxville News Sentinel	Providence Journal	
Creative Loafing Charlotte (N.C)	Las Cruces (N.M.) Sun-News	Provo (Utah) Daily Herald Media	
Dallas Morning News	Lawrence (Kansas) Journal World	Riverside Reader/Riverside Media Group (Port Allen, La.)	

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Television News Station Respondents

KAKE 10, Wichita - Kan.	KSBY, San Luis Obispo, Calif.	WABI 5 - Bangor, Maine	WLTZ - Columbus, Ga.
KCRG 9 - Cedar Rapids, Iowa	KSNT 27, KTKA, KTMJ -Topeka, Kan.	WAFF - Hunstville, Ala.	WPDE 15 - Florence, S.C.
KENV 10 - Elko, Nev.	KTEN 10 - Denison, Texas	WAFF - Hunstville, Ala.	WQOW 18 -Eau Claire, Wisc.
KEPR 19 - Pasco and KIMA 29 - Yakima, Wash.	KTTC 10 – Rochester, Minn.	WANE 15 - Fort Wayne, Ind.	WTOL 13 and WUPW 36 - Toledo, Ohio
KLKN 8, Lincoln, Neb.	KTVA - Anchorage, Alaska	WBAL 11 - Baltimore, Md.	WTVO/WQRF 39 - Rockford, Ill.
KMEG 14 - Sioux City, Iowa	KTVA -Anchorage, Alaska	WBOY 12 - Clarksburg, W. Va.	WVVA 6 - Bluefield, W. Va.
KMPH Fox 26 Fresno, Calif. and KPTM Fox 42 - Omaha, Neb.	KTVE - Monroe, La.	WBTV 3 - Charlotte, N.C.	WYOU 22 - Scranton and WBRE 28 - Wilkes-Barre, Pa.
KMSB and KOLD - Tucson, Ariz.	KTVN 2, Reno, Nevada	WCBI 4 -Columbus, Miss.	Anonymous
KOB 4 - Albuquerque and KOBF - Farmington, N.M.	KVHP Fox 29 - Lake Charles, La.	WCIA 3 - Champaign, Ill.	Anonymous
KODE 12 and KSNF 16 - Joplin, Mo.	KVVU 5 (FOX 5 VEGAS) - Henderson, Nev.	WECT 6 and WSFX 26 - Wilmington, N.C.	Anonymous
KOLO 8 - Reno, Nevada	KWCH 12, KBSD 6 - Dodge City, KBSH - Hays, KBSL Goodland, Kan.	WETM 18 - Elmira, N.Y.	Anonymous
KRIS 6 and KZTV 10 - Corpus Christi, Texas	News Channel WTVF 5 - Nashville, Tenn.	WFXV 33, WUTR 20, Eyewitness News - WPNY 11, Utica, N.Y.	
KRTV 3 - Great Falls and KXLH 25 Helena, Mont.	North Metro - Blaine, Minn.	WIFR 23 - Rockford, Ill.	
KSAT 12 - San Antonio, Texas	Time Warner Cable News, Rochester, N.Y.	WJBF 6 - Augusta, Ga.	

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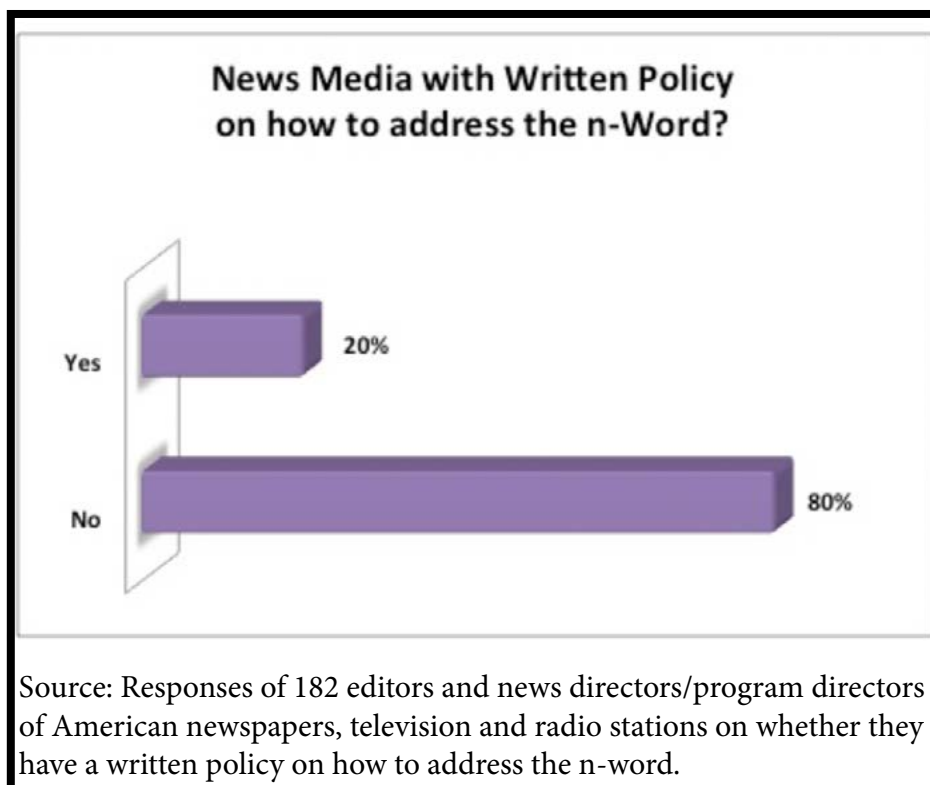
Radio News Station Respondents

Hawaii Public Radio - Hilo, Hawaii	KOKC AM 1520 - Oklahoma City	WBAA FM 101 Public Radio - West Lafayette, Ind.	WNIS AM 790 - Norfolk, Va.
KARN-FM 102.9 - Little Rock, Ark.	KOZY AM 1320 (Lamke Broadcasting) - Grand Rapids, Minn.	WBBM AM 780 - Chicago	WOCA AM 1370 - Ocala, Fla.
KAZM Radio 780 - Sedona, Ariz.	KPCW FM 91.9 NPR - Salt Lake City	WBT AM 1110 radio - Charlotte, N.C.	WSJM AM 1400 Midwest Family Broadcasting Group - Saint Joseph, Mich.
KDAQ FM 89.9 Red River Radio - Shreveport, La.	KSFC FM 91.1 Spokane Public Radio - Spokane, Wash.	WCHL AM 1360 CBS - Chapel Hill, N.C.	WSPD AM 1370 - Toledo, Ohio
KDWA AM 1460 - Hastings, Minn.	KUNM FM - Albuquerque, N.M.	WDEL AM 1150 - Wilmington, Del.	WUNC - Chapel Hill, N.C.
KFBK 1530 AM - Sacramento, Calif.	KWQW FM 98.3 the Torch - Des Moines, Iowa (Urbandale)	WDET FM NPR - Detroit	WVLK AM 590 - Lexington, Ky.
KGMI AM 790 - Bellingham, Wash.	KZIM AM 960 - Cape Girardeau, Mo.	WESA FM 90.5 NPR - Pittsburgh	WWNO FM - New Orleans
KKDV FM 92.1 - Pleasanton, Calif.	Michigan Radio (WUOM, WFUM, WVGR) - Ann Arbor, Mich.	WGN Radio AM 720 - Chicago	Anonymous
KKWK FM and KMRN AM - St. Joseph, Mo.	Midwest Communications - Terre Haute, Ind. Cluster	WHQR FM 91.3 Public Radio - Wilmington, N.C.	Anonymous
KKXT AM 1360 - Corpus Christi, Texas	News Radio KFBK - Sacramento, Calif.	WINC 92.5 FM - Winchester, Va.	
KLBJ AM 590 - Austin, Texas	Sportsradio 610 - Houston	WINS 1010 AM - New York	
KLIV AM 1590 - San Jose, Calif.	WAKR-AM 1590 WONE-FM WQMX-FM Rubber City Radio Group - Akron, Ohio	WISN AM 1130 - Milwaukee	
KNBA 90.3 FM Anchorage, Alaska	WAOK-AM 1380 - Atlanta	WLKF AM 1430 - Lakeland, Fla.	

Results

Written policy on the n-Word

Overall, just 37 (20%) of the 182 total respondents to the question indicated their news organization had a written policy; 145 (80%) said they had no written policy. Of the 37 that have a written policy, 23 (62%) of these were newspapers, seven (18%) were television stations, and seven (18%) were radio stations. In describing their policy, 14 of the respondents said their policy was to treat the words “nigger” or “nigga” as they would any other profane, obscene or vulgar word. Ten said they treated the word as they would any other derogatory racial or ethnic slur. Other respondents simply said they do not publish or air the word in their news stories, or if it is used, there must be a compelling reason that is approved by the highest editor or news director on duty. Several others said their policy was to follow the Associated Press⁴ or National Public Radio’s guidelines.⁵ It is important to note that most of those who had a written policy said their



they do not publish or air the word in their news stories, or if it is used, there must be a compelling reason that is approved by the highest editor or news director on duty. Several others said their policy was to follow the Associated Press⁴ or National Public Radio’s guidelines.⁵ It is important to note that most of those who had a written policy said their

4 The Associated Press’ guidelines for the 2013 edition do not directly reference the word “nigger” or “nigga.” It states under “nationalities and guidelines”: “Use derogatory terms online in direct quotes when essential to the story and flag the contents in an editor’s note.” Also under “obscenities, profanities, vulgarities,” it states: “Do not use them in stories unless they are part of direct quotations and there is a compelling reason for them. Try to find a way to give the reader a sense of what was said without using the specific word or phrase. If a profanity, obscenity, or vulgarity must be used, flag the story. Confine the offending language, in quotation marks, to a separate paragraph that can be deleted easily by editors who do not want to use it.”

5 While some news organizations indicate that they treat the word “nigger” or “nigga” the same way as they do any other profanity, National Public Radio noted in its guidelines on the use of potentially offensive language that according to the Federal Communications Commission policy against profanity that “profanity does not include religious or racial epithets, such as the word ‘nigger.’” However, the NPR Guidelines also noted that while the FCC does not prohibit racial epithets, “editorial considerations must separately bear on whether to use terms that may be offensive to segments of the public. Accordingly, NPR’s position is that use of racial or religious epithets should be avoided unless the use is essential to the piece, the piece has significant news or other value, and the appropriate internal NPR consultation has taken place.”

How the American News Media Address the n-Word

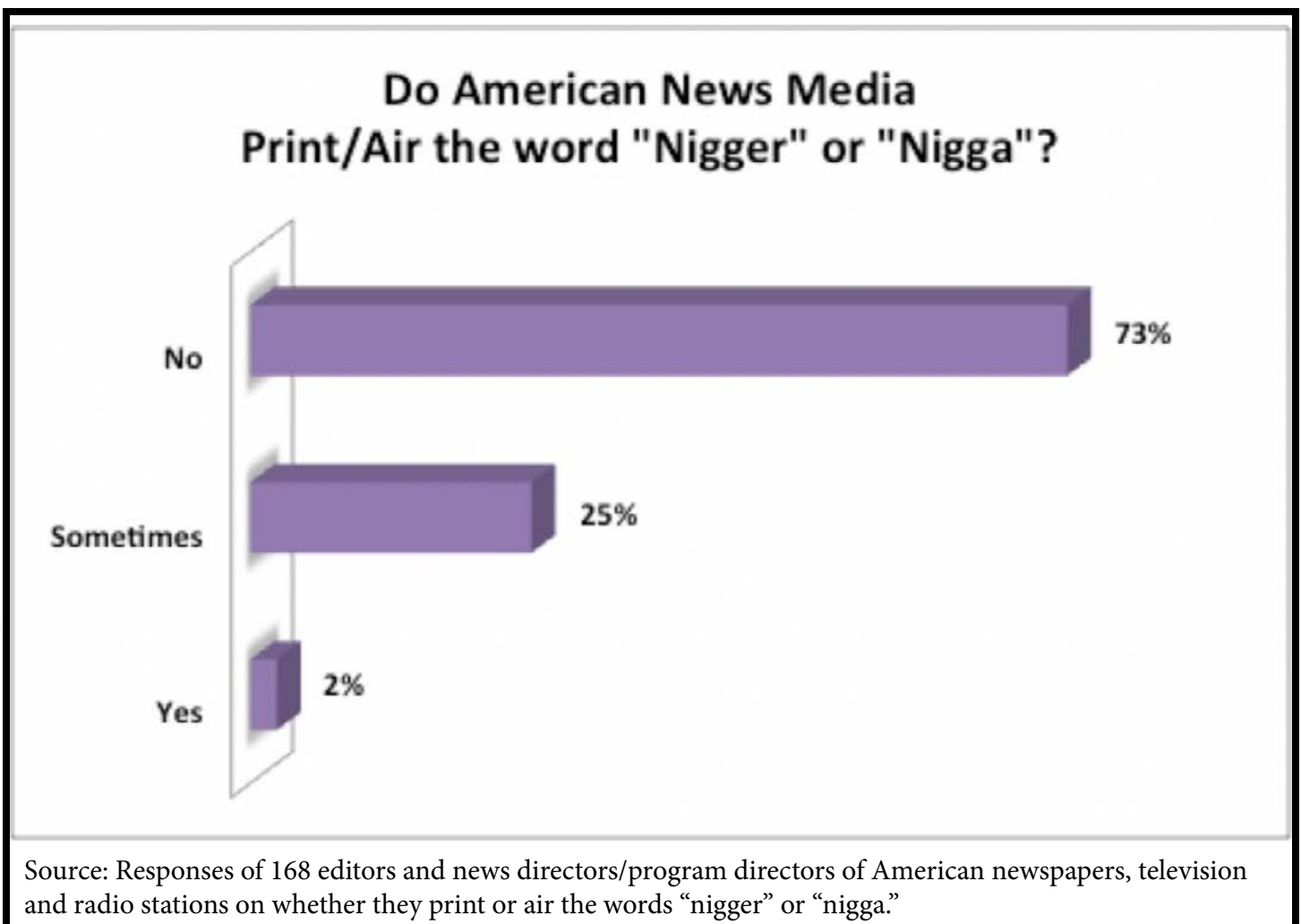
policy is not to use the word, though many of them qualified this by saying that its use or nonuse depends on the context. Some examples provided included if a prominent figure said it or if there are overriding circumstances where the word is critical to the story. They also said they use a sanitized version of the word.

Treat the word differently based on the race of the person saying it

Across the board, nearly all of the 170 respondents (95%) to this question said they don't treat the word differently when it is spoken by a black/African-American than when it is spoken by someone white/nonblack. Of the eight respondents (5%) who said they do treat the word differently, six of these were newspapers, while two were from radio.

Printing/Airing the actual word "nigger" or "nigga"

The overwhelming majority (80%) of the American media surveyed indicated they did not print or air the actual word "nigger" or "nigga" in their news stories. (See Figure 15, p. 42) Of the 20 percent who did indicate they aired or published the actual words, most of them said they "sometimes" did so.



The words and phrases news organizations use in place of “nigger” or “nigga”

For newspapers, television news and radio news stations combined, the “n-word” was the word most often used to replace the actual word “nigger” or “nigga.” Of the 139 journalists providing word choices within the three media, the n-word accounted for more than half (52%) of all words used. “Racial slur” or “racial epithet” followed a distant second at 25 percent; the first letter followed by a series of dashes⁶ (what one editor referred to as the “Wheel of Fortune”) at 18 percent; bleeping or editing it out at 13 percent. Other choices and phrases abounded and it should be noted that not all editors and directors used one word or phrase exclusive of all others. A number said they might vary their word or phrase of choice based on the context and circumstance. Among the three media⁷ that used the n-word as the word replacement, radio (66%) and television (65%) had the greatest percentage of its media using the term “n-word.”

While a look at the group overall is revealing, a closer look within each media provides more detail in how they address the word.

Analysis by Media

Newspapers

Newspapers’ written policy on the n-word

While all three media had few of their number with written policies on the n-word, newspapers (28%) had the highest percentage of its group who said they had written policies. The vast majority had policies that echoed that of the Associated Press’, with three explicitly stating that they followed the AP’s guideline. Only one paper surveyed, a 100,000+ circulation Northeastern daily, indicated it had a policy geared specifically to address the words in question. Said the paper’s managing editor: “Nigger or nigga: DO NOT USE unless there is a compelling reason to do so, and either the editor or an assistant managing editor has signed off on it.”

The managing editor of a 50,000+ Midwestern daily said his paper’s policy is to publish the word “Only when necessary and presented as n-----.”

The editor of a 500,000+ Western daily said his paper’s policy “falls under the portion of not using derogatory names.”

The editor of an 80,000+ circulation Southeastern daily said, as did many editors, that his paper treated the word like any other offensive word:

6 The use of generic terms “racial slur” or “racial epithet” and the use of initial letter followed by hyphens indicate the particular news organization is following the Associated Press’ Stylebook under “obscenities, profanities, vulgarities”: “... replace the letters of the offensive word with hyphens, using only an initial letter. In some stories or scripts, it may be better to replace the offensive word with a generic descriptive in parentheses...”

7 The use of the words “media” or “three media” refers to newspapers, television and radio. For this study, it also should be inferred that the same policy that these media have in how they address the n-word also applies to their news stories when posted on their Internet websites.

How the American News Media Address the n-Word

If it is necessary to indicate what the word is in a quotation, we use ‘n-----.’ However, in one special report last year, we used the word in its entirety in stories about a historical racial incident because the narrative style of the package made the context more appropriate.

While only 1 in 4 indicated they had a written policy, all newspapers responding said their staff had some understanding

The staff ‘adheres to the belief that the ‘N-word’ is not appropriate.’

of how they address the word. For instance, the editor of a black Midwestern twice-a-week 40,000+ newspaper said her paper has an unwritten policy in which the staff “adheres to the belief that the ‘N-word’ is not appropriate;” that it is offensive and racist in its connotations.”

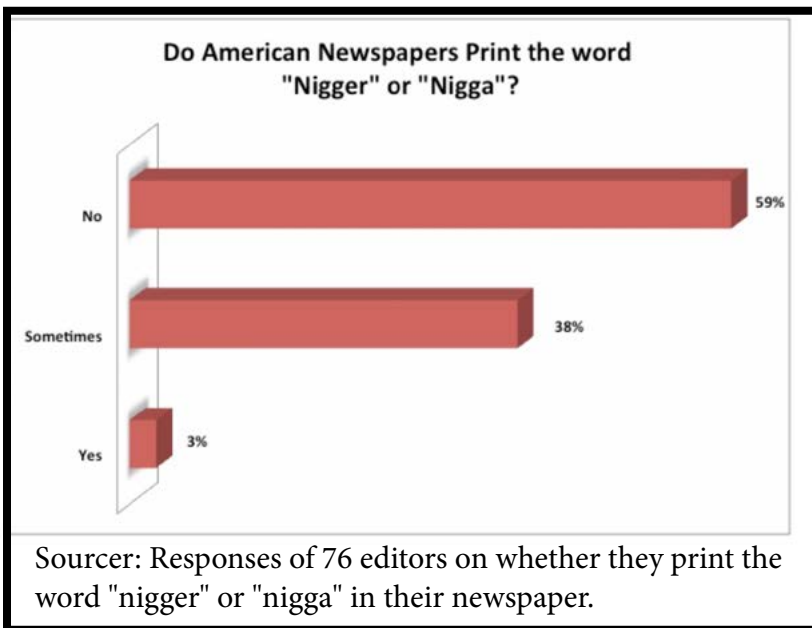
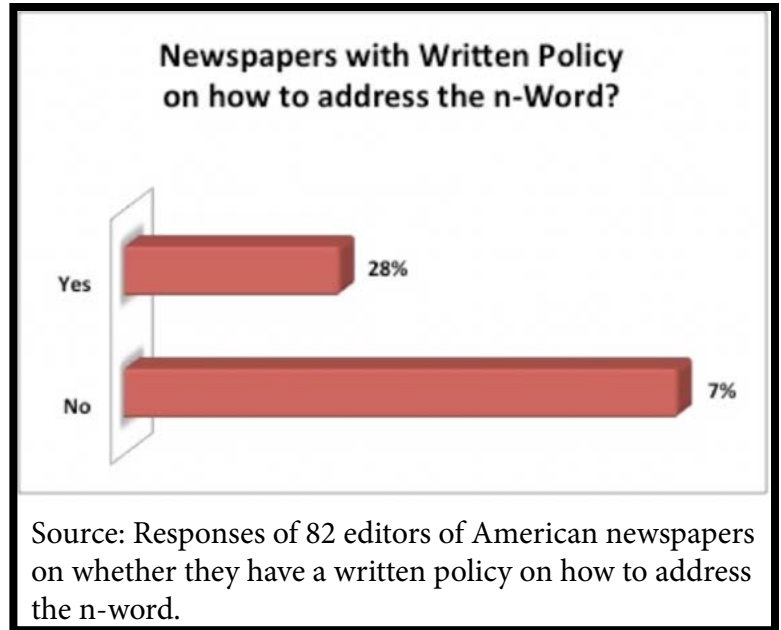
Likewise, the editor-in-chief of a 180,000+ Midwestern daily said his paper does not have a “word-by-word policy, but a broad policy that says we generally do not publish foul language, including obscenity, profanity and racial/ethnic slurs. He noted exceptions are made if the language is critical to the story, but this is done only after consultations with the highest editors.

The editor of a Southeastern major circulation daily said his paper “doesn’t have a policy that singles out the term ‘nigger’ or ‘nigga’” but addresses the words as they do other vulgar or profane words. The decision to use the word, he said, is made on a case-by-case

basis with the managing editor deciding whether the word should be fully spelled out or use the first letter followed by a series of hyphens.

Newspapers printing the actual word “nigger” or “nigga”

Among the media that used the actual word in their news stories, 4 of 10 newspaper respondents (41%) said they print the actual word “nigger” or “nigga,” with most who publish the word noting they did so “sometimes.” Just under six of 10 (59%) indicated they did not publish the actual words.



How the American News Media Address the n-Word

The words and phrases Newspapers use in place of “nigger” or “nigga”

Of the 72 newspapers editors who responded to the question of what word or phrase they use in place of the words “nigger” or “nigga,” it was a toss-up between the “n-word” (35%) and the use of dashes, asterisks or ellipses in place of the missing letters (33%) as the way newspapers address the word without actually saying it. The phrase “racial slur” or “racial epithet” (24%) was the third choice of newspapers.

There were also a number of other choices such as the word “expletive,” and such phrases as “an offensive term for a black person,” or “a derogatory or socially offensive word to describe a minority person.”

The replacement description choice for some also depended on the circumstance.

“If it’s in a quote,” said managing editor of a 7,000+ Northeastern paper, “(use ‘n-----’ otherwise you refer to it as ‘a racial pejorative.’”

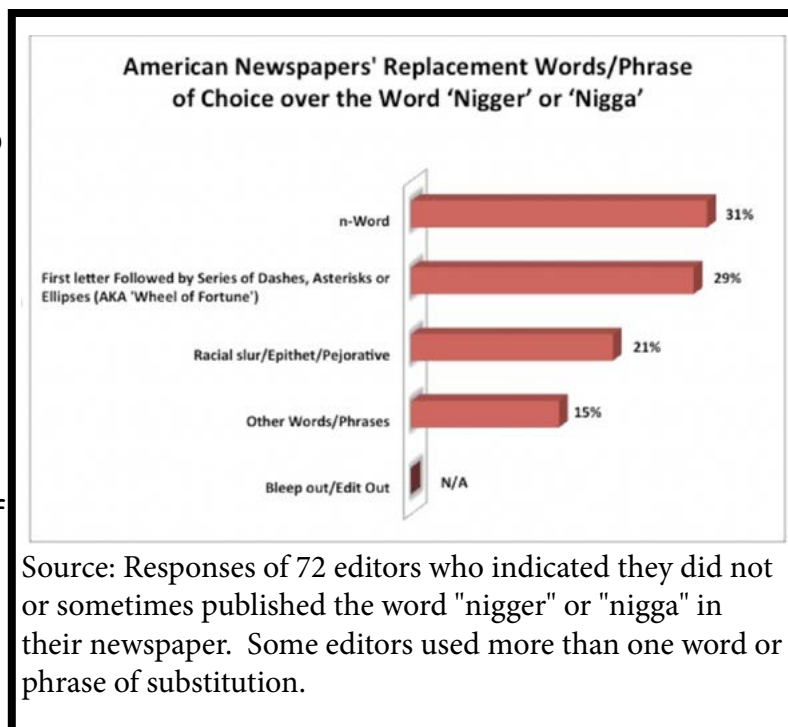
The managing editor of a 17,000+ Southeastern daily said her paper refers to it as a “racial slur or epithet.” “We avoid the term ‘n-word,’” she said. “In direct quotes, we use the first letter and dashes.”

The managing editor of a 7,000+ Western paper, noting the absence of blacks in its newsroom and circulation area said: “We are mostly white folks here. However, if someone’s skin color is part of the storyline, we ask them how they identify. If someone uses that word in a quote, we don’t use the quote. We paraphrase the info, if we need it.”

Some Spanish-language newspapers in the survey had an entirely different word choice. The editor of a 140,000+ Spanish Language weekly in the West said his paper uses “Afroamericano” or “Afromexicano” depending upon what country the person of black African descent hails from. He also suggested that it uses the word “negro.”

“We understand the meaning in United States of the word ‘nigger’ or ‘nigga,’” he said, “however, in Latinamerican countries we use negro as a regular word, with no connotation like in (the) United States.”

The editor of a 50,000+ Spanish Language weekly in the West somewhat echoed this understanding relating to the word “negro,” which in Spanish means the color black, but has a negative connotation today in the United States.⁸



Source: Responses of 72 editors who indicated they did not or sometimes published the word "nigger" or "nigga" in their newspaper. Some editors used more than one word or phrase of substitution.

⁸ Indeed, years ago, some students sent to research old newspapers on how they addressed race, came back exclaiming how they kept running across the word “Negro.” These students were viewing the word as they would the other n-word. It had to be explained that “Negro” was once the preferred and respectable word of reference for Americans of black African descent until the late 1960s.

How the American News Media Address the n-Word

He said his paper faces this issue every week when picking news wire from The Associated Press Spanish service based out of Mexico.

“For ‘negro,’ constantly seen in the (A.P. Spanish wire service) we change it to ‘afroestadounidense’ or ‘afroamericano.’ But the word ‘negro’ isn’t necessarily used to refer to ‘nigger.’ Instead it is the common word to refer to African-Americans or blacks.”

The managing editor of a 70,000+ Spanish Language weekly in the Southeast said if her paper had to write a quote on a story, it would translate it as “Negro.”

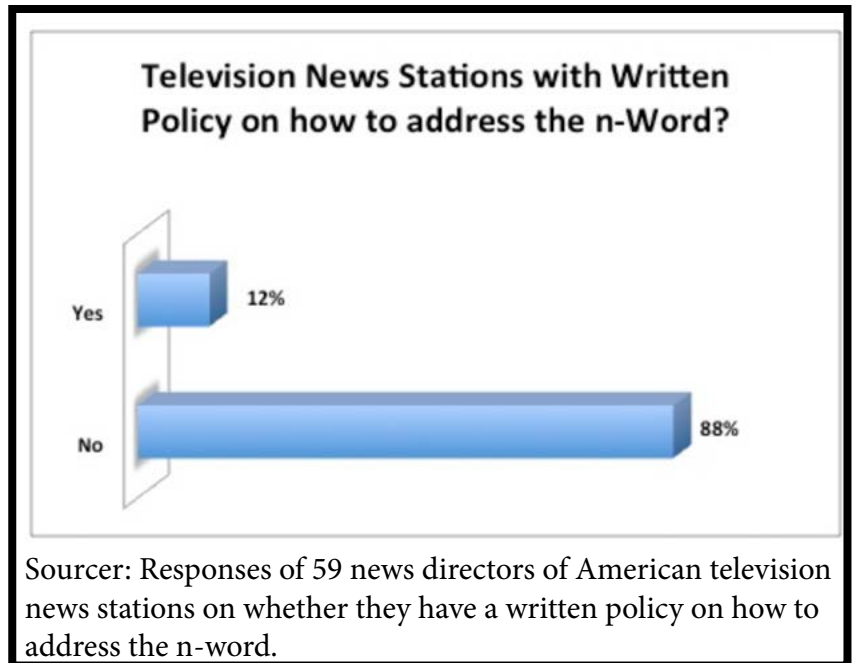
Television

Television news’ written policy on the n-word.

Just 12 percent of television news stations surveyed said they had a written policy on addressing the n-word. There was no distinction between those who had a written policy and those that didn’t as to whether they would air the explicit word – most overwhelming said they would not. Also, many stations indicated they address the words as they would a profane or obscene word.

Said the news director of a South-eastern TV news station that has a written policy: “We are professional journalists who do not tolerate vulgarity on-air.”

A Midwestern news director whose station also has a written policy, said his station “will not broadcast offensive language unless absolutely necessary to the telling of the story. When it arises,” he said, “(we) will bleep the audio for that word.”



Sourcer: Responses of 59 news directors of American television news stations on whether they have a written policy on how to address the n-word.

A Southwestern news director whose station does not have a written policy said her

‘Our policy would be to not air it if it’s on tape and to leave the live shot immediately it if happens live.’

station does not use the word or any form of the word in its newscasts, websites or its social media posts.

A Western news director whose station also does not have a written policy said his station

does not allow the word airtime.

“Obviously we don’t delay live broadcasts,” he said, “but our policy would be to not air it if it’s on tape and to leave the live shot immediately if it happens live.”

Some, however, said their decision to use or not use the explicit word depends on the context. The general manager of three Northeastern television news stations said his stations would sometimes use the word if, for instance, quoting a prominent figure or if the word is “a major factor in the progression of the story.”

How the American News Media Address the n-Word

Television news stations airing the actual word “nigger” or “nigga”

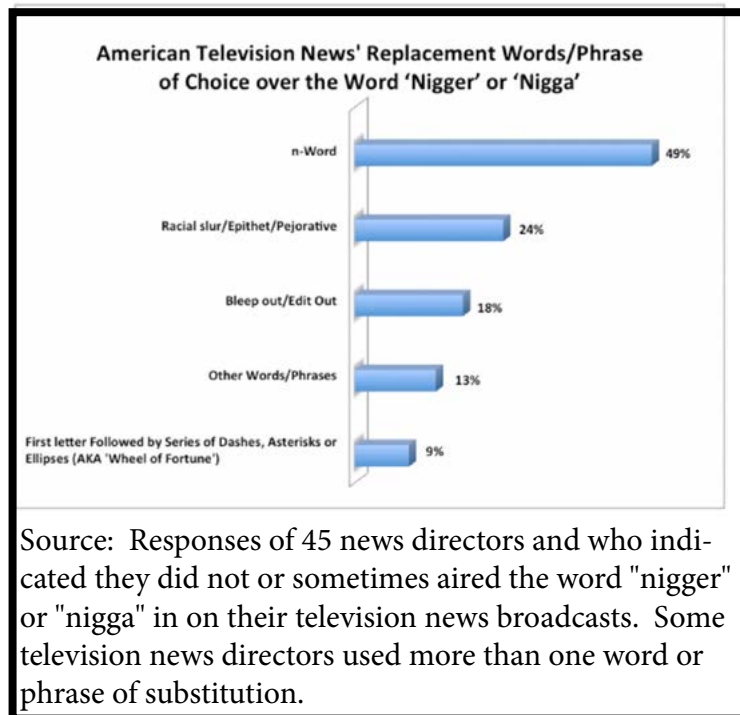
Among television news stations, 1 of 10 (10%) said they air the actual words, most of these saying they did so sometimes.

The words and phrases Television News uses in place of “nigger” or “nigga”

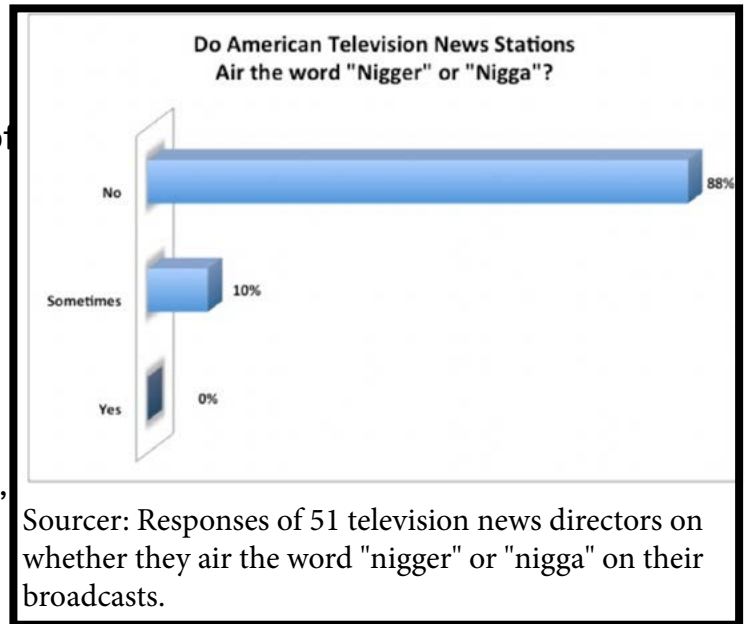
For television news stations, “n-word” is by far the word of choice, outdistancing “racial slur” or “racial epithet” and other references such as bleeping or editing it out, as well as using the first letter followed by dashes or ellipses.

The news director at two Southwestern television stations described her stations’ policy of not saying the word “nigger” or “nigga” and the way it addresses the word in its coverage.

“If it is in a full screen,” she said, “we either completely redact or publish first letter and blur the rest. If someone on air in an interview says the word, we bleep out.”



Source: Responses of 45 news directors and who indicated they did not or sometimes aired the word “nigger” or “nigga” in on their television news broadcasts. Some television news directors used more than one word or phrase of substitution.



Sourcer: Responses of 51 television news directors on whether they air the word “nigger” or “nigga” on their broadcasts.

The news director at a Midwestern television station said his anchors are not to say it and “we bleep it” if an interview(ee) says it.

The news director of two Northeastern stations said: “We will write the copy stating a racially insensitive word. We will bleep sound bites that include the word. We will make every effort not to show the word as video when shooting graffiti.”

The news director of two Midwestern television stations who spoke about substituting for the actual word on a case-by-case basis had this to say:

This happens very rarely, and typically, the word can be bleeped without distorting what is being said because of the context of its use. In situations where we are covering a controversy over the use of the word, ‘n-word’ works fine. I think it is im-

portant to note that we don’t use racially or ethnically charged language of any type. For example, we recently interviewed (an) Hispanic anchor who used the term ‘wetback’ in the title of his book. He was angry we refused to use the term, but just because he was Hispanic and felt the word was appropriate was not justification enough for us to feel it was appropriate for us to use it on a television broadcast.”

How the American News Media Address the n-Word

Radio news' written policy on the n-word

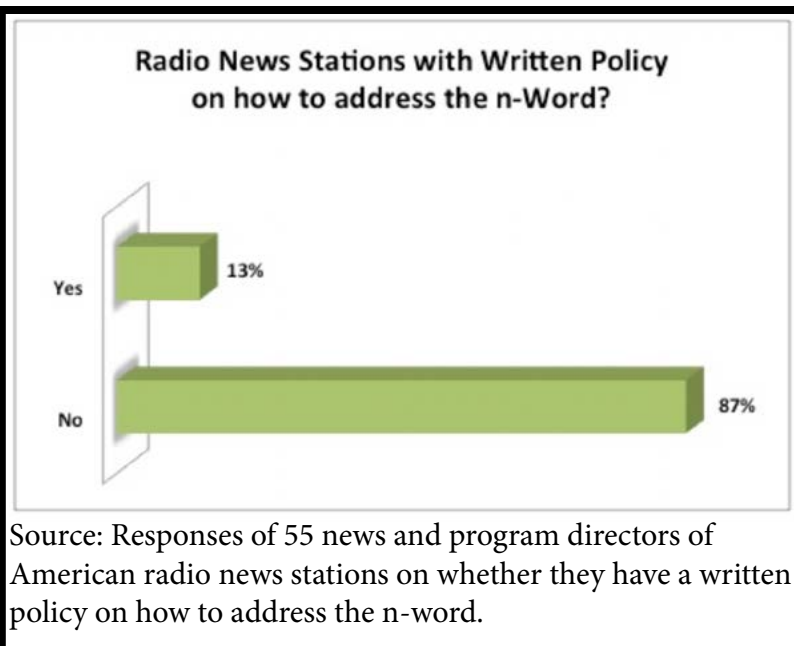
Just seven (13%) of the radio news stations covered indicated they had a written policy that addresses the n-word. The vast majority of those with and without a written policy indicated their station does not air the explicit word. It should also be noted that the few

who did have a policy had one that was not geared specifically to the n-word, but was under the auspices of strong language that was either derogatory, profane or vulgar.

The news director of a Midwestern radio station that has a written policy said his station's policy was that "strong language should be considered in the news context and should be reviewed by a news manager."

A Northeastern radio station news director that has a written policy said his station does not use either word unless there is an "overriding set of circumstances" critical to the story.

The news director at a Southwestern radio station with a written policy said "the word is not allowed to be



used on air or off air in this news room."

One Midwestern news director stressed that both words cannot be used on the air in any form by either the radio news staff or the newsmaker.

Another Midwestern news director that did not have a written policy said that since it was an NPR affiliate, the station often gets NPR advisories before a story airs to let it know if there are potentially objectionable words in the piece. He added:

If we were to air a piece with the N-word in it, we'd let people know ahead of time and we'd also make sure it was integral to the story (i.e. the story would be worse for not including the word).

One Western station's news director that does not have a written policy said its announcers do not use the word in a quote, but "we may consider including in an actuality depending on the context" though he cannot recall having ever done so.

A Southeastern news director said her station does not include the word if a source says it during an exclusive interview with the station.

"If a prominent source says it," she said, "we would bleep it out."

Said a Midwestern news director whose station did not have a written policy:

It is understood by editors to very carefully consider the context of these words and to be able to justify why we would consider using such a word in our stories. There are times when allowing a source to use the word may do more to show the character of that individual than any description we could provide. There are also times when the word itself is being discussed, and stating the word is appropriate. The use of the word in our news coverage, however, is extremely rare.

How the American News Media Address the n-Word

Radio news stations printing the actual word “nigger” or “nigga.”

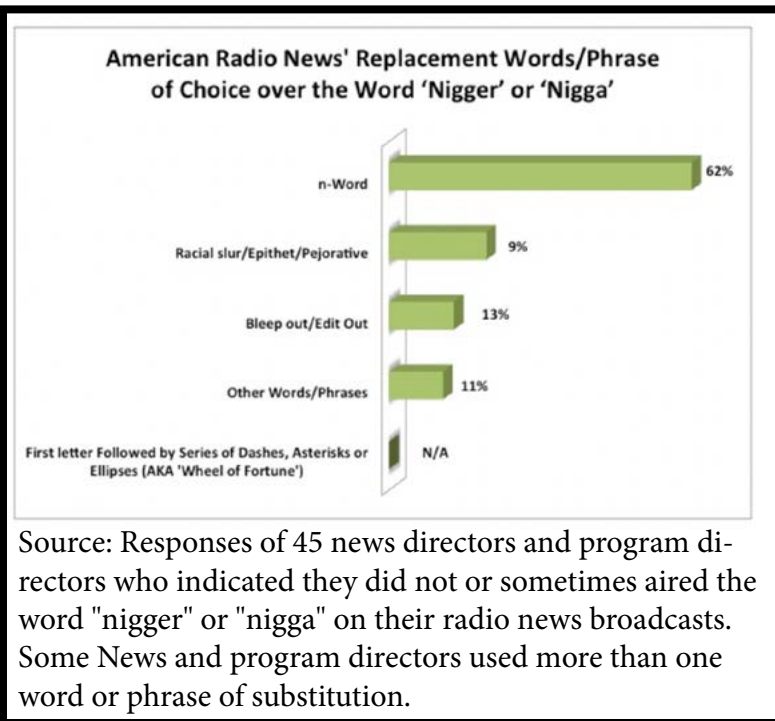
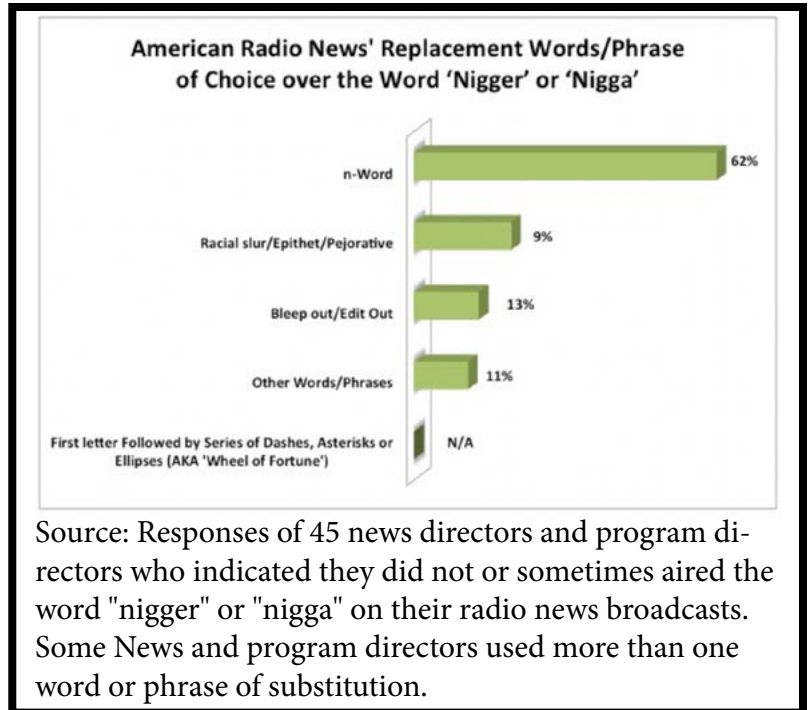
Of the 42 radio news stations, 1 of 3, (32%) said they aired the actual words.

The words and phrases radio news uses in place of “nigger” or “nigga”

For news radio stations, the “n-word” was by far the word of preference over any other word when addressing the word “nigger” or “nigga” in their news stories.

“If absolutely necessary, we refer to it as “the N-word,” said the news director at a Northeastern radio station.

For the program director at a Mid-western radio station, the decision might



rest on whether the word was used by one of the sources interviewed. “If it is a direct quote, in news context, we would use the hyphenated ‘N-word’ substitute,” she said. “If it is not a

‘We edit the word out — or beep over it. The listener will not hear it. There is no other word to replace that word.’

direct quote, we would rephrase the sentence to avoid using either.” The news director at a Southwestern radio station said he believes in a complete ban of the actual word – not only on air, but off the air in the newsroom: “We edit the word out—or ‘beep’ over it. The listener will not hear it. There is no other word to replace that word.”

The news director at a Southeastern radio station that sometimes uses the word said his station addresses it on a case-by-case basis.

“Often,” he said, “we ‘bleep’ it out like a curse word.”

Discussion

While this study featured the perspectives of 184 individuals representing three different medias, there are inherent limitations in projecting their views (12% of those surveyed) to the entire country of journalists. However, given the sensitivity of the topic and the broad geographic responses from all across the country, including Alaska and Hawaii, along with the diversity of circulation and market size it is believed that these responses provide some value in assessing how America's news media address the n-word today.

It is important to note that of the 184 respondents to this survey, only 14 (five newspapers, five television, four radio) said they had never encountered this issue of how to address the word "nigger" or "nigga" in their news coverage. However, for the vast majority of news organizations, this issue is something they have encountered and continue to encounter to varying degrees.

It is remarkable how far the American news media has come in seeking to avoid the publication and broadcast of the explicit word.

Given the past history of how this word once freely populated America's newspapers beginning in the 1830s and on into the 20th century with radio following suit (television was left out of much of the usage of this word), it is remarkable how far the American news media has come in seeking to avoid the publication and broadcast of the explicit words. It can be said the news media is united in their opposition to printing or airing the word, and even those who do opt to print or broadcast the actual word are mindful of how they do it. It is a notable change from America's past when the news media reflected the social views of the day, and in some instances helped to spark those views. But has the pendulum swung to an extreme?

There are times when editors and news and program directors have ventured to an extreme when taking the position that the explicit word should be censored under all circumstances.

While this author has no love for the explicit reference of the word, there are times when editors and news and program directors have ventured to an extreme when taking the position that the explicit word should be censored under all circumstances. Even discussing the word has become a challenge with the word being unspeakable in some quarters. One person responding to this survey questionnaire emailed back to say he was offended by the survey letter's explicit reference of the word. But in conducting this research, it was certainly necessary to explicitly refer to the word being examined.

There are instances where the word has to be used for historical accuracy as well as to ensure everyone is clear on what was said. For instance, Charlayne Hunter-Gault (personal communication, Feb. 5, 2013), who before becoming a respected journalist, gained distinction as one of the first blacks to integrate the University of Georgia in 1961 said she has issues when people sometimes hide behind the euphemistic term "n-word." Said Hunter-Gault:

When I was at the University of Georgia, people weren't calling me the n-word. They were calling me 'nigger.' And when I read and talk to students today, I can't say they called me the n-word. They called me 'nigger.' And when you put it in context, it is perfectly ac-

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ceptable to use the term. But it has to be in context.

Margaret Sullivan, (personal communication, Feb. 28, 2014), media columnist for the Washington Post and former public editor of the New York Times who is white, described her discussion with a black journalist who wrote a piece for the Times' viewpoint section describing two experiences with the word "nigger" as a young girl and as a young woman. Said Sullivan:

It was very personal, and it's a great piece and I edited it myself and we had many interesting discussions about it and she really wanted to use the word – spell it out – and I opted to use a shortened version of it (n----r). I understand the reasons for it but I also thought it could take away the impact of the story. So that's a decision we ended up making.

There are many viewpoints on this and during the course of interviewing a variety of Americans about their experience with the word "nigger" or "nigga," I was at first taken aback when many whites, young and old, would avoid repeating the word in what some-

There has been a clear distinction in how the word is treated when a black says it as compared to a nonblack.

times took on comical proportions. For instance when they or someone else said the explicit word, they used "n-word" or some other

word in describing it. For example, "He said n-word come here."

It has been said that the word should be treated like any other profane word. It is agreed it is a word that should not be overused and in some cases should be softened with the euphemistic term n-word, or quieted with the missing letters in print or silenced with the edited space of air in broadcast. But there are times when it should be seen and times when it should be heard.

One of the interesting findings was that of the news media saying they report the word's use in the same way, regardless of the race of who is saying it. Throughout much of society, there has been a clear distinction in how the word is treated when a black says it as compared to a nonblack. There are numerous anecdotal stories, for instance, of black athletes and entertainers saying the word freely and it not becoming news. Yet, when a white person says it, it becomes news – as when the Philadelphia Eagles wide receiver Riley Cooper said it but other black player are not called on it when they say it on the field or the locker room.

What the news media has done in not printing and airing the word is in many ways bucking the way it was done in the past when they mirrored society as well as reinforced its views.

The same can be said in the entertainment field.

As the question did not focus on sports or entertainment per se, it would be interesting to hear what reporters covering those areas would say. Certainly while it is notable that America's news media has sought to prevent giving the explicit word the light of air and print space, addressing everyone the same when it is used – regardless of race -- would go a long way toward eliminating the need for replacement words and phrases.

Conclusion

Today, the word "nigger" and "nigga" has taken a dizzying turn. On the one hand there are those who abhor the word; while on the other hand there are people of all races, led dubiously by many blacks, who embrace the word. It is a word said by all groups, yet still retaining the hate that was on display among those University of Oklahoma students who

How the American News Media Address the n-Word

chanted it in correlation with lynching.

Durrell James, a 46-year old black in Atlanta, spoke about his use of the word “nigga”: You know, in my generation we call each other niggas. You know what I’m saying. We say ‘My nigga.’ And that’s not hate. That’s really saying you are accepted. That you are original...Even when a guy calls me a nigger and he means it and the energy behind it is bad, I mean, it just don’t bug me at all. But if it (the word nigger or nigga) became acceptable (as a new official reference for blacks), I mean, it would be the world catching up with what it really already is.

What the news media is doing in not printing and airing the word is in many ways bucking the way it was done in the past when they mirrored society as well as reinforced its views. It is this author’s hope that the news media will continue to steer clear of giving the explicit words legitimacy and normalcy.

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