

## The National Press and the University of Mississippi: Forty Years After Desegregation

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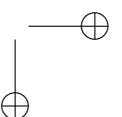
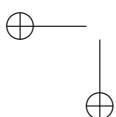
### Desegregation

ON October 1, 2002, the University of Mississippi launched a year-long celebration titled “Open Doors” commemorating 40 years of desegregation. Three major national newspapers in the United States – *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* – published articles on the event. *The New York Times*’ 1,575-word article appeared on page one of section A. *The Washington Post* published a 6,275-word feature story that appeared on page one of the style section, and *USA Today* published the shortest story, 463 words, that was featured in the Life section on page two. The three national news networks, *ABC*, *CBS*, and *NBC* also covered the event. Colleges and universities throughout the United States hold celebrations for a variety of events that do not receive this kind of coverage. So what made this event so spectacular to be worthy of receiving national media coverage?

William Doyle, author of *An American Insurrection: The Battle of Oxford, Mississippi, 1962*, penned an article for *The New York Times* posted on September 28, 2002. The article stated:

On Tuesday, Oct. 1, Oxford, Miss, will be coming to terms with one of the major events of its past. Forty years ago on that day, in the early morning, a force of nearly 30,000 American combat troops raced toward Oxford in a colossal armada of helicopters, transport planes, Jeeps and Army trucks. Their mission was to save Oxford, the University of Mississippi and a small force of federal marshals from being destroyed by over 2,000 white civilians who were rioting after James Meredith, a black Air Force veteran, arrived to integrate the school (Doyle, 2002, p. 1).

Over forty years ago, the University of Mississippi was in a heated battle involving not only the university, but also former Governor of Mississippi,



Ross Barnett, former United States Attorney, Robert Kennedy, and former United States President, John Kennedy. An NBC report described the scene as “a shameful and bloody night that left a deep scar on the town and the school” (Teague, 2002, p.1).

This article is a case study which analyzes the national media coverage of the University of Mississippi from 10 months prior to the Open Doors celebration to 14 months after the celebration. In it, I examine the salient features of the articles that were published in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *The Washington Post* during 2002 and 2003 concerning the University of Mississippi. All news reports published by these news producers referring to the University of Mississippi during these two years were included in the sample.

## Reporting Education

Over the past 79 years, education has gained slow but increasing attention in news coverage. In his dissertation concerning image changing in higher education, Hassan (1989) wrote, “Brown University Vice President for University Relations Robert A. Riechley notes that the media plays an important role in distinguishing among various institutions” (p. 3).

*Time* magazine began covering issues regarding education in 1923. Within 15 years, *Newsweek* and *The New York Times* followed suit. In 1947, educational journalists organized the Education Writers Association (Gerbner, 1967; Henderson, 1993). Gerbner stated that there was an increase in media coverage of education after Russia launched Sputnik in 1957. The Associated Press hired a full-time education writer in January 1958 thereby giving education a presence in one of the wire services.

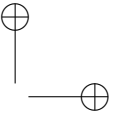
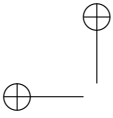
Research regarding early coverage of education found that although some newspapers did assign reporters to cover educational issues, there was little success in publishing material that dealt with the more serious issues the educational community was facing (Henderson, 1993). Hynds (1989) criticized newspapers for being “inconsistent and inadequate” (p. 692). In 1983, the results of a study conducted by the National Commission on Excellence in Education were released in a report titled *A Nation at Risk*. The report was highly critical of primary, secondary, and higher public education in the United States. Henderson generalized that overall, due to the lack of educational

coverage in the news media, the majority of adults were taken by surprise when *A Nation At Risk* was released. Hynds stated that *A Nation at Risk* had an enormous impact on the coverage of education. “The reform movement that has made education a major national issue in the 1980s may also be responsible in part for the improved coverage of education and the improved status of the education beat” (Hynds, p. 780).

Henderson (1993) argued that, in this case, the media was a powerful influence in shaping public opinion. In turn, public opinion helped influence policy makers and legislators regarding grants and other sources of funding for education (Landrum, Turrisi, & Harless, 1998). In 1963, the President of the University of New Mexico, Tom Popejoy, told a group of state university presidents, “I doubt if many of you have realized that the image of your university has for the most part been formed by the news media in your community and in your state on the basis of controversies, contests, contentions, and conflicts ...” (as cited in Gerbner, 1967, p. 212).

Hilton (1996) claimed that the media is a powerful source in communicating ideas about institutions of higher education that impacts feelings and how people act towards specific colleges or universities. One of the more widely researched theories regarding audience, effects, and news coverage is Agenda-Setting Theory. In a classic study concerning voters in Chapel Hill, North Carolina during the 1968 presidential campaign, McCombs and Shaw (1972) quoted Cohen as stating “the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (p. 177). This landmark study found that the media had an impact “on voters’ judgment of what they consider the major issues of the campaign” (p. 180). In addition, regardless of the ideal of objectivity as a goal, reporters did have a point of view. The reporter or the editor decided which topics were reported and what content was included in the report.

Fico and Freedman (2001) stated, “Agenda-Setting research has established that news media attention to issues subsequently influences the public’s assessment of the importance of those issues” (p. 437). Most of the research conducted on Agenda-Setting Theory involved political coverage as opposed to educational coverage. Regarding higher education, Hilton (1996) claimed that “agenda setting theory would suggest that what kinds of higher education issues that people discuss, think about and worry about are powerfully shaped by what the news media choose to publicize” (p. 3).



Kim, Scheufele, and Shanahan (2002) compared agenda setting with attribute agenda setting. Whereas agenda setting reinforces the importance of issues in the public mind, attribute agenda setting consists of repeating specific attributes, and thus, the specific attributes become prominent in the public mind.

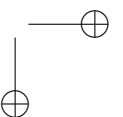
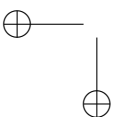
Agenda Setting Theory and Attribute Agenda Setting Theory are important in regards to the type of coverage received by colleges and universities. Some institutions may receive more coverage than others and some institutions may only receive coverage on a single topic such as sports. Clendinen (as cited in Hassan, 1989) wrote in *The New York Times*, “what football is to Alabama, or academic success is to Harvard, curriculum is to Brown” (p. 84). Public perception of an institution of higher education is greatly influenced by the topics the news media chooses to present.

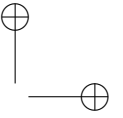
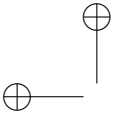
Journalists are charged with gathering information and composing that information in a way that represents truth. While editors have the control of which stories get published, editors and reporters share the responsibility of the words and phrases that are chosen to depict the actual event. The word and phrase choices that editors and journalists make impact how the reader interprets or visualizes a story. Gunter stated,

News is a representation in the sense of construction; it is not a value free reflection of ‘fruits’ ... each particular form of linguistic expression in a text – wording, syntactic option, etc. – has its reason. There are always different ways of saying the same thing, and they are not random, accidental alternatives (Gunter, 2000, p. 88).

## Background

The desegregation of the University of Mississippi, an event that occurred 40 years prior to the time frame of this study captured the attention of the national press. In 1961, an African American student named James Meredith began seeking admission to the then, all white, University of Mississippi. After being denied admission to the university twice, Meredith filed a complaint with the courts stating that he was being denied admission due to his race. The case was finally decided on September 10, 1962, when the Supreme Court of the United States found in favour of the plaintiff and ordered the university to ad-





mit James Meredith. Former Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett ignored the court order and blocked Meredith from enrolling. In a personal telephone call to Barnett, President Kennedy ordered Barnett to allow Meredith to register and attend classes at the university. On September 30, 1962, U.S. Marshals escorted Meredith to the university, where he could enroll for classes the following morning. Riots ensued and Attorney General Robert Kennedy ordered approximately 30,000 National Guard to the Oxford community to protect the university as well as the town. Two men were killed, well over 100 injured and many arrested.

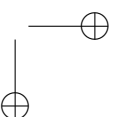
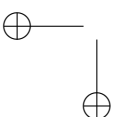
French news reporter Paul Guihard [was] shot between the shoulder blades by an unknown assassin, and Ray Gunter, a maintenance man felled by a stray bullet. Among those injured were 166 marshals and 40 soldiers; 200 individuals ... had been arrested (Cohodas, 1997, p. 86).

James Meredith enrolled at the university on October 1, 1962, flanked by U.S. Marshals and his struggle to attain admission to the university reached the national media. Forty years later, the story still captured the attention of the media.

## Findings

The newspapers in this study published 179 articles that mentioned or featured the University of Mississippi during the two-year period. *The Washington Post* published the most articles that included reference or featured the University of Mississippi with a total of 79 articles. *The New York Times* published 59 articles, while *USA Today* published 41 articles.

The national press referred to the University of Mississippi through eight themes: 1) Students, 2) Faculty/Staff/Administration, 3) Events, 4) Funding, 5) Tuition, 6) Collection/Exhibitions, 7) Policies/Law, and 8) Symbols (Stone, 2005). Eighty-six percent of the newspaper articles that made reference to the University of Mississippi were limited to the themes of Students, Faculty/Staff/Administration and Events. The public relations practitioners at the University of Mississippi identified “Southern culture” items as being the hook to attract national media. In keeping with Tuchman’s (1978) analysis, the stories the national media published that featured the University of Mississippi were often entertaining and tended to be driven by events more than

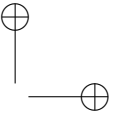
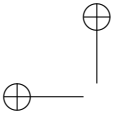


by issues. Above all, the national press directly assigned one attribute to the University of Mississippi. Out of 179 articles or transcripts, 79 of the articles (43%) that featured the University of Mississippi, directly tied the university to racial issues including the violence that occurred in 1962 when James Meredith enrolled in classes. An additional eight percent, or 17 articles, indirectly tied the university to racial issues or the events of October 1, 1962. It is these articles that I examine for the remainder of this article. There were no articles or transcripts in the categories of Gifts/Fundings, Collections/Exhibitions, or Tuition that tied the University of Mississippi to race, and hence these themes play no part in the analysis below. Three articles in the category of Policy/Law, (total of five articles), were concerned with affirmative action. One of the articles labeled the university as being “historically white” (Nation in brief, 2003, p. 9).

## Symbols

*The Washington Post* published three articles that mentioned the University of Mississippi through the theme of symbols. Two of the articles were concerned with university mascots. The University of Mississippi is one of 12 universities that are in the Southeastern Conference (SEC). Traditions and symbols, including tailgating, mascots, songs, and chants are a part of the culture of the university. However, some of these symbols are problematic to the national media. For instance, although the university “disassociated itself from the Confederate flag in 1983” (Supreme Court declines to hear, 2001, p.7), small Confederate flags were carried by students and fans to athletic events until sticks-carrying-flags were banned in 1997. Similarly, the university band plays “Dixie” during the various ball games; a monument of a Confederate soldier remains on the university grounds; and the mascot for the university was an older southern gentleman, Colonel Reb, who resembled a plantation owner. In 2003, the university administration and athletic department campaigned against the school mascot, claiming that Colonel Reb was outdated. In a short feature article of *The Washington Post*, an unknown writer wrote on the most recent controversy involving Colonel Reb.

A certain reverence for the past might seem like a given at the University of Mississippi. After all, the school is best known as Ole Miss. But every



few years, it seems, something happens to distance the school from years gone by (Ole Miss considers a colonel's retirement, 2003, p. 2, 3, 4).

The article mentioned some of the changes that had taken place at the university over the years, and claimed that Athletic Director Pete Boone did not think Ole Miss should be "represented by a symbol from the 19<sup>th</sup> century" (Ole Miss considers a colonel's retirement, 2003, p. 8). University of Mississippi professor, Charles Ross was quoted as stating, "As an African American and as an African American historian I find those symbols are extremely problematic. To ask me to embrace those kinds of symbols is unacceptable" (Ole Miss considers a colonel's retirement, 2003 p. 10). Although Colonel Reb is no longer the official mascot, a new mascot has not been chosen.

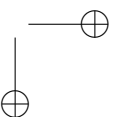
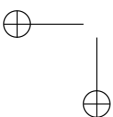
### Faculty and Students

The national media presented the University of Mississippi through the category of Faculty/Staff/Administration in 50 articles. Faculty represented the university as an expert source in forty-five articles and five articles featured faculty sources on some issue of race. However, the issue of race was a dominant theme through the category of students. Of the 73 stories, over 54% or 40 stories linked the university to racial issues. The sub-themes in which race was an issue include obituaries, book reviews, James Meredith, race relations in general, and politicians.

One of the obituaries was a feature on Albin Joseph Krebs. Krebs was a journalist and wrote "obituaries of prominent artists, performers and politicians" (Martin, 2002, p. 1) for *The New York Times*.

Albin Krebs, graduated from the University of Mississippi, where he was the editor of the student newspaper, *The Mississippian*. After Mr. Krebs wrote editorials in 1952 advocating that black students be admitted to Ole Miss, a cross was burned outside his window. Later he reported for *Newsweek* on the 1962 admission of James Meredith, the university's first black student (Martin, 2002, p. 4).

Two book reviews featured non-fiction books, each included racial problems that occurred during earlier years at the university. Former student Handy Campbell was featured in a *Washington Post* review of the book entitled *Confederacy of Silence*. The author of this book, Richard Rubin, was a



journalist who covered Greenwood, Mississippi, high school sports in the late 1980s. During his tenure, a black high school student named Handy Campbell led the Greenwood team to a state championship. Campbell received a scholarship to play football at the University of Mississippi, but ended up dropping out due to an injured shoulder. Campbell was later charged with murder. Rubin's interest in Campbell drove Rubin to investigate what happened to such a promising athlete.

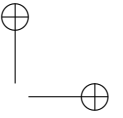
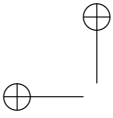
[Rubin] suspected, though he could not prove, that Ole Miss had signed Campbell to a football "scholarship" merely to keep him from playing for its rivals and had never intended to start a black quarterback (It would have been a first.) (Yoder, 2002, p. 4).

The second book review was an autobiography written by Ralph Eubanks. In the book, Eubanks described his experience of growing up in Mississippi. The author of the review stated:

Were Eubanks inclined toward bitterness, he'd have plenty of excuses – his parents' listing by the Sovereignty Commission, the violent confrontations over civil rights that took place throughout the South during his boyhood, the slights and discrimination he suffered at Mount Olive School and then at the University of Mississippi – but he declines bitterness at every turn (Yardley, 2003, p. 6).

*The New York Times* also published two articles that dealt with students at the University of Mississippi and race relations. One article discussed the efforts of historically Black Alcorn State University to recruit white students from overseas. In an interview with a former white Russian student who played tennis for and graduated from Alcorn State, the student claimed that while racism was not evident at Alcorn State, the University of Mississippi painted a different picture. (Halbfinger, 2003, p. 23). A second article in *The New York Times* dealt with the issue of interracial dating. The author had visited the University of Mississippi and described what he observed: "Whites and Blacks can be found strolling together as couples even at the University of Mississippi, once the symbol of racial confrontation" (Kristof, 2002, p. 1, 2). The author continued the article quoting University of Mississippi student C.J. Rhodes,





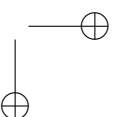
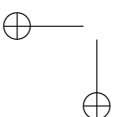
“I will say that they are always given a second glance,” acknowledges C. J. Rhodes, a black student at Ole Miss. He adds that there are still misgivings about interracial dating, particularly among black women and a formidable number of “white Southerners who view this race-mixing as abnormal, frozen by fear to see Sara Beth bring home a brotha ” (Kristof, 2002, p. 3).

In an article on an affirmative action issue in New York City, *The New York Times* referred to James Meredith and the integration of the University of Mississippi.

Go back to 1966, the air charged with racial discord and protest. James Meredith, who caused riots when he enrolled as the first black student at the University of Mississippi is shot by a sniper during a civil rights march (Archibold, 2002, p. 6).

In 2002, President George W. Bush nominated Mississippi Judge Charles W. Pickering to the federal appeals court. According to the newspapers, while Pickering was a student at the university law school in 1959, he wrote a paper that pointed out the discrepancies in Mississippi’s anti-miscegenation law - the law that prohibited marriages between black and whites. In the paper, Pickering showed how the law was unsound and would not stand up in a court trial. The publication of his paper resulted in changing the law in Mississippi. *USA Today* quoted a source who claimed that Pickering currently served on the “board of directors of the University of Mississippi’s Institute for Racial Reconciliation” (Biskupic, 2002, p. 20). Despite the 43 years that had passed, the newspapers deemed the nomination controversial due to Pickering’s past views on race.

Two months following the inauguration of the Open Doors Celebration, Strom Thurmond celebrated his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday which Senate Majority Leader, and former University of Mississippi student, Trent Lott attended. As a tribute to Thurmond, Lott said the following: “I want to say this about my state. When Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We’re proud of it. And if the rest of the country had followed our lead, we wouldn’t have had all these problems over all these years.” Following Lott’s comment, the newspapers published 26 articles that referenced his student days at the university. The press dredged up events which occurred shortly after the riots in 1962 that had never been reported. As president of Sigma Nu fraternity,



Lott helped to keep his fraternity brothers away from the violence. As a member of the inter-fraternity council, Lott worked to keep his fraternity, on a national level, all white. *The New York Times* published an editorial entitled “Dunces of Confederacy,” in which the author stated that Lott was a “coddler of racists” (Dowd, 2002, p. 6).

*USA Today* founder, Al Neuharth, wrote an editorial on the impact of the Trent Lott-Strom Thurmond debacle:

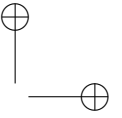
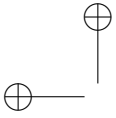
The winner of what has become the Trent Lott lottery may not be known until Senate Republicans meet behind closed doors on January 6, but these, regretfully, already are the losers: 1. University of Mississippi, Ole Miss. Lott’s alma mater ... by and large, the public and public officials have accepted or embraced racial integration as the right way of life. That’s certainly true at Ole Miss, where white supremacy reigned during Lott’s student days. Now under the steady and resolute leadership of university Chancellor Robert C. Khayat, that campus has become a stellar example of integrated civility and respect. Twice in recent years an African-American has been elected student body president. The integrated faculty includes a black vice chancellor and head basketball coach. It is unfortunate and unfair that the Lott legacy is recasting the shadow of desegregation on places where the sun actually shines (Neuharth, 2002, p. 1, 2, 7, 8).

A University of Mississippi public relations practitioner responded,

I think that the Trent Lott thing probably wrecked half of what we had accomplished with the good PR on the Open Doors. And Open Doors was huge. But that business with Trent Lott probably hurt us, probably cut us in half. It may have been worse than that. You’d like to think it wasn’t that bad, but it was pretty bad. It was as bad as it could get (Personal communication, December 2004).

## Events

Of the 38 articles that mentioned the university through the category of events, 31 of the articles, or just over 81%, mentioned the integration of the University of Mississippi. Eleven of these 31 articles were obituaries published in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. The integration of the university was frequently related to the positive contributions made by certain prominent individuals. Journalist Ed Turner was remembered for receiving “accolades



for his coverage of the violent integration of the University of Mississippi ... The War at Oxford” (Bernstein, 2002, p. 17). *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* and *USA Today* published a variety of articles which referred to the integration of the University of Mississippi in various contexts. In a feature on the life of Ramsey Clark, a *Washington Post* story stated, “Impressed with Clark’s guts, his bosses dispatched him to the scenes of the great civil rights battles of the era – Ole Miss, Birmingham, Selma” (Carlson, 2002, p. 20). All three papers published reviews of *Sons of Mississippi*, a book concerned with the events that surrounded a photograph that was taken just prior to the integration of the University of Mississippi.

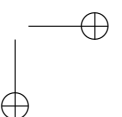
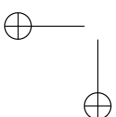
So tied is the issue of racial problems to the University that the topic comes up in most unexpected places. *The New York Times* mentioned the integration of the University of Mississippi in an article concerned with desegregation in the North.

Americans who have memories of the white riots following public school integration in Little Rock and at the University of Mississippi commonly believe that opposition to desegregation was centered in the South. The most stubborn resistance was in the North, where recalcitrant districts sometimes even declined to furnish statistics that would allow the government to make judgments about racial policies (Staples, 2002, p. 5).

In the middle of a 1,429-word article on the Southern Foodways Alliance Annual Conference, which featured variations on barbeque and was held at the University, the author wrote:

Oxford still stands mostly for racial strife. There are still a few reminders of those dark days, including the Mississippi state flag, prominently displayed at the symposium, which incorporated part of the Confederate flag. But Robert C. Khayat, the university’s chancellor since 1995 has worked hard to promote racial harmony, and Mr. Meredith returned to Oxford for an anniversary commemoration earlier this month, along with many of the federal marshals who protected him in 1962. An oral history project is under way, and a civil rights monument will be dedicated in April at a prominent site on campus. (Apple, 2002, p. 22, 23, 24).

All of the newspapers covered the Open Doors event that took place on October 1, 2002. *The Washington Post* published a 6,275-word feature story that appeared on page one of the style section of the paper.



There is so much Mississippi in Mississippi. So much of yesterday that chases today ... For so many reasons, the place- its cities, country towns, its Delta, even its nighttime darkness – claims a huge swath of the American imagination. The blood here is no redder than anywhere else, but the stain seems deeper, has survived longer (Haygood, 2002, p. 1).

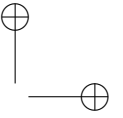
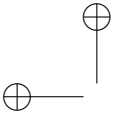
The article told the story of the integration of the University of Mississippi, as well as the celebration, from a variety of angles. The story began by describing occurrences of racist acts that had taken place in Mississippi prior to the integration of the university. The author gave a brief description of James Meredith 40 years later and then began telling the story of the night Meredith arrived on the campus. The author told about what occurred at the governor's mansion through the memories of Ouida Barnett Atkins, daughter of former governor Ross Barnett. The story continued with a description of what took place on campus. The author included interviews with the memories of soldiers sent to protect Meredith, the university, and the town of Oxford. The author continued by reinforcing the racial atrocities that took place in Mississippi after the integration of the university and identified the turning point in racial acceptance as the 1998 football game between Ole Miss and Vanderbilt when Chucky Mullins, a Black, defensive back, was seriously injured in the game. White and black fans donated \$300,000 to Mullins for his recovery. Haygood noted that in 1999, students voted in favour of a black student body president.

Following all of the positive events, the author mentioned an incident that occurred the previous year at one of the fraternity houses.

So all the wounds are healed. Except: last year some fraternity members of Alpha Tau Omega did a skit, one of its members in blackface being menaced by another frat member dressed as a police officer and holding a gun. "And boom! Soon as that happened," says Khayat, "Alpha Tau Omega was shut down." Of course the snake is dead. Has been dead a long time. But every horrific incident is like a drop of venom from the past. And venom is venom (Haygood, 2002, p. 97).

The author also credited the chancellor with his efforts to increase minority attendance at the university.

The main article published by *The New York Times* appeared on page one of section A. "University officials want America to appreciate that this is a



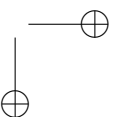
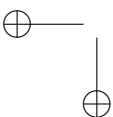
very different campus now” (Halbfinger, 2002, p. 3). The author pointed to Meredith’s son who earned a doctorate in the spring, the number of Black students enrolled at the university, and the leadership positions that were held by Blacks at the university. The author quoted Chancellor Robert Khayat, claiming that Khayat believed that “Ole Miss, in effect, has earned emancipation from its historical burden. ‘Forty years ago, the nation wanted us to treat everyone the same way. Now we just want to be treated the same way everyone else is treated’” (Halbfinger, 2002, p. 4). The author defined Khayat as having “struggled since 1995 to make the university more hospitable to minorities” (Halbfinger, 2002, p. 5).

The author then pointed out the symbols that were still apparent on the university campus such as the Rebel flag “on the handkerchief that a young man waves after the Rebels score a touchdown, on the cover of a cellphone clipped to a middle-aged alumnus’ belt” (Halbfinger, 2002, p. 6). The author also referred to the playing of “*Dixie*” during football games. The article continued by describing the importance of the 1962 riot as part of the civil rights movement.

Even as Ole Miss relives the 1962 riots, a debate is continuing – involving current students and teachers and people who were here then – about how much more the university must do to put its ghosts to rest (Halbfinger, 2002, p. 17).

In an interview with university historian, David Sansing, the author asked how long it might be before the university hired a black man or woman as chancellor. “David G. Sansing, the university’s historian, quickly said, ‘Oh, that’ll never’ before catching himself and reconsidering. State politics, he said, would make it very hard for the foreseeable future” (Halbfinger, 2002, p. 21). Charles Reagan Wilson, Director of the Center for the Study of Southern Culture, was asked the same question and responded by saying:

More is expected of the university because of its history. But that can be an incentive to make the university a leader in race relations. That is the next stage: to take that special burden of the past and make it a responsibility, to be a place where race is discussed and initiatives are begun that can make a difference (Halbfinger, 2002, p. 22, 23).



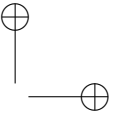
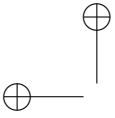
## Discussion and Conclusion

This article has examined news reports the tie the University of Mississippi to issues of race and racism – links that are the result of intentional choices made by the journalists and editors. McCombs defined a second level of agenda setting as “the transmission of attribute salience” (McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, & Fey, 1999, p. 5). Whereas agenda setting research theorized that the press set the agenda for what people talked about rather than directly influenced their opinions or beliefs, concerning the second level of agenda setting, McCombs asked, “Could the consequences of this be that the media do tell us what to think” (McCombs, et. al., 1999, p. 5). It is evident that the national newspapers in this study ascribe issues of race to the University of Mississippi. However, there are several factors at work reinforcing that relationship.

Closely related to the agenda setting function of the press is agenda building. Gandy (1982) questioned the value of agenda setting and suggested that research was needed to pursue the role of the sources, or what Gandy labeled “information subsidies” (p. 8). “The notion of information subsidies is based on a recognition that the price of information may be reduced selectively by interested parties in order to increase the consumption of preferred information” (p. 30). Gandy was concerned with who gets to be the source and why. He suggested that entitlement to the press increased power and helped to shape values.

Gans (1979) identified the group of people that helped supply ideas for stories as “story suggesters” (p. 90). These individuals could be a part of the news organization or belonging to another organization. Public Relations practitioners are among this group of people. Gans stated, “The relationship between sources and journalists resembles a dance, for sources seek access to journalists, and journalists seek access to sources” (p. 116). However, Gans claimed that in order for a public relations practitioner to impart their ideas for a story, the practitioner must have access. Gans claimed that story suggesters outside of the organization who do not have power can gain access only if the event is unusual or extraordinary.

The “Open Doors” celebration was a staged public relations event. A public relations practitioner at the university described the event as “huge.”



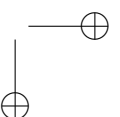
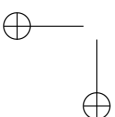
The attention of the national press is vital to the university for lots of different reasons ... people draw their opinions from the national media. A good story in *The New York Time* is worth millions of dollars.

Forty years later, the story of desegregation remains “extraordinary” and the “dance” between the “story suggesters” and the media remains the same:

There is a cache or aura, good or bad, about Mississippi that national publications will bite into a story a lot quicker than if it were coming out of Iowa. Race, culture, food, writing ... all the things that Ole Miss does well, and hasn't done so well. The national media just never get enough of those kinds of stories. People in the rest of the country and around the world are fascinated by the phenomenon of the south, the lost cause; all the things that emanate from the South. Selling the South is easy because it's a good story in so many different ways. It is mysterious. They love to hear how people down here talk, how they think. Yeah, it's mystery to them.

This research did not include viewing the news releases or press kits that were distributed for the “Open Doors” celebration however, it is very unlikely that the information contained reference to more current racial incidents or symbols of racism that still existed on the university campus. In selling stories that identify the university with the culture of the South, the university had no control over what was written, the angle of the story, nor did they have an impact or voice two months later when the Trent Lott debacle followed the celebration. And yet, the selling of Southern culture is what the practitioners at the university were promoting – repeatedly identifying the university with the same stereotypical values of the South - which includes racial strife. Journalism chair, Samir Husni, trademarked “Mr. Magazine,” is internationally renowned for his work with the magazine industry. The national media began contacting Husni as a source for stories in 1986 after he published his first book, *Samir Husni's Guide to the New Magazine*. In an interview with Husni, he stated:

One of the editors of a leading newsletter in our business told me at one stage, “Samir,” and he's been reporting on my activities since 1986, and he said, “Samir, it's so amazing that now when the topic of Mississippi comes in any discussion in the media circles among us reporters, the first thing now we think about is magazines as opposed to racial relationships that we used to always recall and remember in Mississippi. I don't want to



tell you that you single handedly changed the discussion, direction, but you did when it comes to Mississippi.” (Personal communication, December 2004).

Husni was the most widely quoted faculty source from the university. The public relations department should take note, change the tune, and dance another dance.

A second factor that reinforces the relationship between the university and race is the news industry. Tuchman (1978) questioned whether news provided a window to view the world. She defined news organizations as “social institutions” (p. 5), which publish articles that do not mirror reality. Tuchman asserted that the focus of news gathering and reporting was “on events, not issues” (p. 34). Additionally, Tuchman claimed that editors tended to enjoy stories that depicted that plight and, in turn, protected the underdog. The chosen stories, selection of sources, and angle of the stories helped to reinforce societal values, identifying behaviours that were acceptable as well as those behaviours that were unacceptable or forbidden.

Gans (1979) defined two types of values that were not obvious, but nonetheless, underscored most news stories. Topical values were those that dealt with certain individuals or activities that are currently in the news. Enduring values

are values which can be found in many different types of news stories over a long period of time; often, they affect what events become news ... Enduring values are not timeless, and they may change somewhat over the years; moreover, they also help to shape opinions ... (Gans, 1979, p. 40).

The story of desegregation is a good story. It contains all of the elements that are listed in beginning journalism texts defining a news story. There are heroes, villains, blood, gore, and - extremely unacceptable behaviours. The press had an opportunity to expound on the American virtues of equality. Additionally, the story has been repeatedly told in news reports as well as books. It is a part of American history to which at least two generations can relate. It is also a story into which journalists do not have to put much effort. The story exists. The remnants of the story, the way they have been told by journalists in this research, are relatively easy to flesh out. Pointing to artifacts, such as the civil war monument, are surface examples of existing racism. Halfinger



(2002) criticized the university for playing “*Dixie*” at ballgames. The first time I sat in the stands and heard the band begin to play “*Dixie*,” the crowd rose as I remained seated and felt like crawling under my seat. However, the group of African Americans seated to my right, stood up and began to clap their hands and stomp their feet to the rhythm of the music. More difficult to probe are the underlying feelings and thoughts of all races that attend, teach, and administer at the university. Christie (2008) quotes author of “The Race Beat,” Gene Roberts: “Such dogged, skeptical reporting, so common in the civil rights era, is what’s missing from racial reportage today” (p. 5).

A third factor that strengthens the relationship between the university and race is simply the location of the university. The state of Mississippi is well known for racial strife. At least two movies, “Ghosts of Mississippi” and “Mississippi Burning,” have justifiably taken the state to task for the crimes committed against African Americans and civil rights workers during the civil rights era. Interestingly, forty years after the crimes, African American actor, Morgan Freeman penned the introduction to a book titled, “Proud to Call Mississippi Home:”

I wanted to leave Mississippi and never return ... Funny how things turn out ... Back in Mississippi, a person knew where he stood: racism was out in the open, an ‘in-your-face’ strain of segregation and denied civil rights. What I encountered upon leaving the state, however, was a more deceptive form ... In the North, I encountered racism that was insidious and painful. I wanted to think I was freer there, but I was not. (Herrington, Perkins, Kirkpatrick, Freeman, 2006, p. 13, 14).

The fourth factor is concerned with how the press covers race. Schudson (2003) claims that covering racial issues in this day and time is difficult. Prior to, and during the civil rights movement, racism was visible. Today, racism is not so easily defined or outwardly portrayed. Arlene Morgan, Director of the “Let’s Do It Better! Workshop On Journalism, Race and Ethnicity,” wrote, “Race remains our most enduring dilemma” (<http://www.journalism.columbia.edu/cs/ContentServer/jrn/1165270107643/page/1165270107624/simplepage.htm>). Shah and Nah (2004) conducted a study to determine how U.S. newspapers “constructed and conveyed the idea of racial oppression” (p. 259). The researchers searched U.S. newspapers that had been published over a 10-year period and found that the majority of articles focused on racial oppression in South

Africa. The articles that were concerned with racial oppression in the U.S. were primarily either based on past events or focused on symbols of racism.

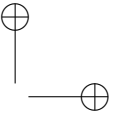
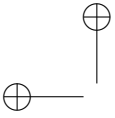
In August 2006, three white students at a high school in Jena, Louisiana hung nooses from a tree in the front schoolyard after a group of black students went to sit under the shade of a tree that was traditionally seating for white students. While disciplined, the three students were not expelled and racial tensions began to mount. During the next two months, a white student beat up a black student at a party and another white student threatened at least two black students with a shotgun. On December 4, a fight broke out at the high school and one white male was beaten unconscious by black males. The white male was taken to the hospital, but released. Six black males were charged with attempted second-degree murder. Although the Associated Press covered the story and distributed the story throughout the state, regionally, and nationally, the national press did not pick up the story until May 2007. Roberts stated:

Race is still an issue in society, but it's difficult for newspapers to get handles on it. These usually aren't the kinds of events that lead to sort of inverted-pyramid, hard news kinds of stories. They're more ooze and seep racial stories. And it requires a lot of time and attention to do them with the nuance they deserve. And a lot of papers, in an era of cutbacks and short staffs, are shortchanging the race story (as cited in Chrisie, 2008, p. 15).

Director of Diversity Programs at Poynter Institute, Keith Woods, heavily criticized the media for not stepping up and covering this story from the day the nooses were hung.

There is a huge story here – of uneven justice, racial estrangement, unexamined suspicion and unabated bigotry. It is the story of our everyday lives. If it's complex, then it's inherently more interesting. If it's confusing, then the media should do what they're there to do: help us figure it out (Woods, 2007, p. 18).

As stated previously, the integration of the University of Mississippi is an easy story to tell. Retelling the story provides journalists the appearance of covering racism without having to look too deep or spend too many resources. In the 1960s and 1970s, reporters were assigned to a "Race Beat." Today, few

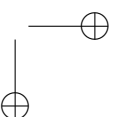
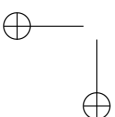


newspapers continue that line (Christie, 2008). The current coverage of racial relationships in the U.S. is relatively superficial or focused on immigration.

Journalists are in the business of gathering information. Their reports are intended to give an objective view of the world, a representation of truth. In this case study, the truths to be found are partial truths. They present a very specific portion of the picture. The university, however, presents a form of that same picture to the national press. In this case study, it is apparent that the national media continues to attribute issues of race and racism to the University of Mississippi – a truth of the past. From a Jeffersonian perspective, the press is responsible to be a watch-dog over the government. It is a good thing when the press can affect positive change. Since 1998, Columbia University has hosted “Let’s Do It Better! Workshop On Journalism, Race and Ethnicity.” Broadcast and print news organizations from throughout the U.S. submit their best work concerning race relations in the U.S. Keith Woods was asked to write a report on the quality and content of the entries.

With the significant exception of the New York Times’ summer 2000 series, “How Race is Lived in America,” there was not enough imagination or depth brought to bear on the issue of race relations. Though the stories of racial profiling, school inequities and environmental racism got a lot of appropriate coverage, the daily realities that define race relations – brought to life in many of the Times’ stories – got short shrift (Woods, 2001, p. 7).

The various issues of racial relations in the U.S. are compelling stories that must to be told with compassion and with depth. The stories need to be investigated and developed into meaningful articles that can serve as a basis for understanding and discussion. When racism exists, it should never be relegated to past events past or discussed in terms of symbols that the writer might not fully understand. The University of Mississippi is owning up to its past. The university is slowly divesting of the symbols that connect it with racism. Because of past sins and a history so mired in racism, the university has an obligation and responsibility to participate and lead discussions on racial reconciliation - discussions that have the potential of making an impact on how citizens in the U.S. talk about and understand race. Based on history, the national press would pay attention.



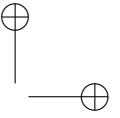
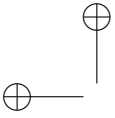
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