

# The Biggest and Most Controversial Reality Show on Television

Those hurricanes provided “bifurcated images” of African Americans?

By John Arnold

**A**s thousands of residents of Louisiana, Mississippi and Texas were displaced during the storms of 2005, a coincidence occurred: these natural disasters developed at the beginning of America’s traditional television fall line-up schedule. For the last several years, television has been dominated by reality TV shows like *Survivor*, *Temptation Island*, *Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire*, *Big Brother*, *American Idol*, *So You Think You Can Dance*, *Wife Swap* and *The Apprentice*. In 2005, and in contrast to these simulacrum of American life, viewers in the U.S. and the world were glued to the television coverage of the 2005 Hurricane Season, making it arguably the biggest and most controversial reality show of them all. Just as Owen Hanley Lynch argued in a recent issue of *Television Quarterly*, presenting empirical findings that the depictions of African Americans were not by accident. The “framing” of news by FOX and CNN played a major role in forming public opinion for the larger viewing community.

In the immediate months after hurricanes Katrina and Rita pounded America’s Gulf Coast, two seminal theories grounded in race matters come to the forefront. The first theory is George Gerbner’s *Bifurcated Images* a derivative of his *Cultivation theory* where heavy viewers are repeatedly exposed to particular images of African Americans, which eventually results in desensitized viewers. Most often the images are exaggerated depictions of African Americans as healthier, more middle-class than characters in general; suggesting racial inequality problems are a thing of the past. Simultaneously, newscast depictions of African Americans are “twice as likely to show them in connection with crime, violence, drugs, with all the negative and vulnerable characteristics that television characters encounter.”

The second theory was put forth by civil-rights activist W.E.B. Dubois, the first African American to graduate with a Ph.D. from Harvard (in 1895) and one of the principal founders of the NAACP (in 1909). He defined the “Double Consciousness Theory” in his

1903 book, *The Souls of Black Folks*; wherein blacks suffer from a “two-ness,” a double-consciousness, “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Seldom do we realize the impact of images depicted in media on those persons who are marginalized, when the [African American] “simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.”

Media portrayal of the behaviors of African Americans during these devastating hurricanes presented a disjointed kaleidoscope of people struggling to survive against nature

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at any cost. Particularly with regard to Katrina, dramatic television news coverage subjectively and arbitrarily awarded certain victims of the storms with the title of “citizen” and others with that of “looter” and “refugee,” depending for the most part on the race of the victims.

Viewers watched the drama of Katrina as the wind movement reached unprecedented speeds, and the aftermath of the broken levees. For viewers, watching the consequences of the floods, the chaotic and disorganized mass migration of evacuees to the Super Dome, the 150-mile traffic jam with vehicles running out of fuel in Corpus Christi was

stunning, unreal and unscripted.

The portrayals by the owners of white media of the “Others” (blacks) were consistent with what social-identity theorists posit as marking cultural “others” as uncivilized and uncooperative as the blacks were attempting to “subsist” in a hostile weather environment, needing food, water, medical supplies, clothing, toiletries, etc. Many of these black people were portrayed as “looting.” Conversely, the chaotic images depicted of whites, on television and in newspapers, were that of “survivors.” Indeed Dr. Lynch noted in *Television Quarterly* that “CNN viewers were much more likely to recall the voices of residents and remember their comments than FOX viewers, who tended to recall images of ‘looters,’ all African Americans.”

The negative portrayal of blacks as looters for doing the exact same things as whites, in trying to endure nature when trapped by the storms, is a continuation of America’s perpetuation of the images depicted of blacks as uncivilized, uncooperative, uneducated, and animalistic by nature dating back to D.W. Griffith’s 1915 movie *Birth of a Nation*. Lynch’s study documents 22.2% of FOX coverage and 14.7% of CNN coverage, or 378 segments studied depicted images of both blacks and whites taking merchandise that did not belong to them. Notwithstanding the idea that children needed Pampers, everyone needed fresh water and food, and people with chronic illnesses needed their medications, the human need for these items was overshadowed by a few locals taking advantage of abandoned electronics stores casting a broad net on a whole race of people as “uncooperative.”

African Americans have always suffered from what W. E. B. Dubois referred to, in 1903, as a double-consciousness, that is, being black and living in white America. According to Dubois, the term was used to describe whites' stereotyping of blacks. For blacks, double consciousness is a state of confusion of one's self with that of how others perceives blacks, as having always to look at one's self through the eyes of others.

The image of the "uncivilized" African American is often perpetuated in contemporary media, notably when former president George Herbert Walker Bush's Secretary of Education William Bennett, also a Salem Radio Network talk-show host and CNN television news commentator, stated that America's crime rate would go down "if you wanted to reduce crime, you could—if that were your sole purpose—you could abort every black baby in this country, and your crime rate would go down." In response to Bennett's comments, only 64% of viewers and those participating in the October 2005, 14 question survey conducted by University of Cincinnati, in a Mister-poll, *Psychologists' Facts on Racism in Relation to Your Views*, found Bennett's comments "reprehensible." A more recent commentary on African American civility came from radio and TV host Don Imus, who called the Rutgers Women's Basketball team "nappy-headed hos," despite the fact they were all honor students. It stings just as badly, when Hip-Hop rappers negatively generalize and stereotype others.

Blacks left behind in New Orleans were chastised, degraded and made to

feel unworthy of rescue and recovery efforts, because they could not leave earlier. According to the U.S. Census Bureau updates, the Median Household Income in New Orleans in 2005 was \$29,500, and for renters the average income was \$18,800. New Orleans' population demographics were 28.5% white v. 67.25 black.

The typical New Orleans job, for blacks, was that as a housekeeper in the wealthy French Quarter, the tourist part of the city. Add to this problem, Lisa Myers of MSNBC reported that busses which could have taken people out of the city were kept docked by order of the mayor, September 6, 2005, (*What Went Wrong in New Orleans*, 2005). Ironically, in preparation for Hurricane Rita, many southeast Texans, mostly non-black, failed to leave their area—also an uncooperative act—however, they were quietly and unceremoniously rescued. According to Gainesville Southeast Texas City Data, the demographic populations were 71.7% white v. 21.5 black, with white household incomes of \$53,000.

Perhaps the most disturbing example of the power of media projections of framing of the lack of cooperative behavior by minorities during Hurricane Katrina had to do with the actions of Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco. In response to media reports of looting in the city, according to ABC News, Blanco said, "[Troops are] under my orders to restore order in the streets...They have M-16s and they are locked and loaded...These troops know how to shoot and kill and they are more than willing to do so if necessary and I expect they will."

For African Americans, imagery of the issues depicted aery of the issues depicted in media is complicated.

African Americans own less than 6% of all radio and television stations in America and none of the broadcast networks. Sociologists point to the exaggerated images of blacks on television (comedies), or extreme images as uncooperative, uneducated, and uncivilized people on TV news programs, where black images are overwhelmingly presented in stories concerning violence, crime and drugs.

**F**urther, mass media present confusing images of blacks not only to the white population, but to other blacks as well.

In 1997 George Gerbner, the former Dean of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, referred to this confusing way of presenting images of African Americans to African Americans as *bifurcated images*.

Unfortunately, Bennett's ignorant remarks in 2005 may trickle down to other conservatives and then become incorporated into American culture. After all, Mr. Bennett trained a whole generation of workers in drug enforcement as the Director of the Office of National Drug Policy (1989-1991) and as the United States Secretary of Education (1985-1988), and those same trainees are now the experts that talk-show hosts and newscasters access most often for opinions on social issues. Is there any wonder why all American viewers may be confused about their fellow African Americans?

One notable media exception to fragmented images was *NBC Nightly News*, hosted by Brian Williams, who from the outset made a point of providing compassionate coverage of African Americans in New Orleans.

Williams received his fifth Emmy, his Fourth Edward R. Murrow award, and the prestigious George Foster Peabody award. Most were given for his work in New Orleans while covering Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. It was only after NBC took the lead that other networks shifted their coverage.

When it comes to "fair and balanced" media coverage of African Americans and other minorities, much work remains to be done. Or, maybe America should rethink its affirmative-action program of only allowing non-minority males to own and operate licensed broadcast facilities to deliver news and information. The U.S. Surgeon General's 1971 Report argued that if minorities also owned licensed facilities, at parity with demographics of census populations, images of minorities would mirror the real America rather than stereotypes. As a result of more realistic depictions of minorities, possibly more minorities would participate in the democratic process in this indirect republic. After all, what American wants to be referred to as a "refugee" in a time of crisis or disaster, on a news program or on reality TV?

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