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# The Civil Rights Movement: The Power of Television

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# The Civil Rights Movement: The Power of Television

## **Abstract**

**Overview:** “I am not a nigger” (Thomas). These five words seared through American television screens in May of 1963. James Baldwin, a preacher and novelist, declared his freedom from the chains of discrimination in an interview with Kenneth Clark and forever changed the conscience of black and white television owners. When asked if he was optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the nation, Baldwin made one thing clear: the fate of America lies within the ability to answer the question, why was the ‘nigger’ created? Born in Harlem in 1924, Baldwin grew up following in his father’s footsteps as a preacher, then went on to work on a railroad in New Jersey and eventually became a freelance writer and moved to Europe. Despite spending the majority of his adult life in Paris, Baldwin demonstrated the power of media by never ceasing to tell the story of his life as black man living in America, the influence of brotherhood, and the power of voice (Reference.com).

Moments similar to Baldwin’s interview validate the reign of television and the impact of media on the Civil Rights Movement. During the interview, all the personal challenges that James Baldwin faced become apparent in his mannerisms, his gestures, and in every one of those five words. Baldwin’s unique and articulate comments, combined with access to the majority of American citizens via television media, left an impression that would span across states and decades. Commonly heard legal and moral arguments on injustices such as segregation and discrimination paled in comparison to Baldwin’s interview. It must be noted that the impact media had on the Civil Rights Movement was not unintentional by organizational leaders. For that reason, this paper will examine the use of television as a means to build momentum towards change, the implications of peaceful demonstrations on public consciences, the Church and its role in sustaining the movement via media, and the ability of unbiased television to shatter stereotypes. Despite the prominence of racially biased television and media during the Civil Rights Movement, coverage of demonstrations and interviews of protestors sparked national interest and quickened the pace towards racial equality. By employing understanding I have gained from documentaries, footage of demonstrations, online encyclopedias, journal articles, essays, and personal perspectives given by journalists who themselves covered the Civil Rights Movement, I intend to inform my reader about the implications of media coverage during the Civil Rights Movement.

## **Keywords**

Writing

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## **The Civil Rights Movement: The Power of Television**

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## Television Creates Movement

So what exactly will we consider 'media' as it relates to the topic of study? For this discussion, I would like to focus on television and, more specifically, news and talk shows or interviews.

These facets of television covered the Civil Rights Movement from a press and political perspective while including both segregationists along with desegregationist's arguments. Also, news stations covered the majority of demonstrations led by civil rights organizations and broadcast interviews featuring African Americans, Caucasians, and city government officials.

The first working television set was introduced to the United States in 1928 by Philo Farnsworth and was employed mainly for commercial purposes (Stephens). What is considered the 'television revolution' did not occur until the 1950s and 60s around the same time the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum and then peaked in 1964 with the passage of the Voting Rights Act. During this period of time, politicians noticed the power television had over the public and thus used the medium to their advantage. Doherty argues that, for example, Richard M. Nixon's "Checkers" speech, given on September 23, 1952, was broadcasted in an attempt to set the record straight on several controversial accusations against Nixon. On the other hand, televised airings of the Army-McCarthy hearings, broadcasted live on ABC, ultimately led to McCarthy's loss of popularity and censure from the Senate in December of 1954. Both of these dramatic political broadcasts reflected the power of the media in directing public opinion. Broadcasting of the "Checkers" speech and the Army-McCarthy hearings both served as television milestones not only because of the significance of the events but also because of television's role in the meaning and unfolding of the events. Beginning in the 1950s, television stations began broadcasting political conventions, inaugurations and hearings with millions of Americans tuning in. The immediacy and intimacy of at home viewing allowed the viewer to feel as though they were live with political leaders and created demand for vivid visual stimulation. Soon enough, producers and organizations were looking for "good television" and found it hard to ignore the ground breaking demand for and the appeal of the civil rights struggle (Thomas).

Debates heated up across the United States over the issue of desegregation and integration in Southern schools. According to the digital history expert William Thomas, after the 1957 Bill of Civil Rights passed, congressmen put more pressure on television stations to ensure that the Southern point of view was heard. Shows such as The Citizen's Council Forum stimulated the growth of Citizen's Councils, which campaigned to maintain segregation and lend support to

biased television shows all over the South. Thomas argues that in the nineteenth century, the United States Southern white conservatives claimed that national television news programming “instigated African American protests and poisoned race relations in the South.” Anyone familiar with national television news programming should agree that it is hard to ignore the facts especially in the case of segregation and discrimination. For example, in an interview with three white students at White Lane High School in Virginia, covered by WDBJ Television, when asked, “Does it matter to you whether the school might be integrated when you go back?” The young man sitting in the middle answered, “No.” By expressing their somewhat liberal opinion about whether or not schools should be integrated, the three students angered and surprised many Southerners tuning in. Broadcasts of violence against peaceful demonstrators became hard to ignore. When human beings become aware of atrocities against other human beings, the media becomes the educator. This discovery would prove to have significant applications in multiplying organization membership and thus fundamentally changing society. By broadcasting debates and interviewing government officials on the issue, news stations were educating blacks in the south and encouraging them to fight for what was right.

In Kathryn Stockett’s book, *The Help*, there were multiple instances in which the upper class white women would shield their domestic workers from watching television networks such as American Broadcasting Company, National Broadcasting Company and Columbia Broadcasting System in fear that the help would join the movement. The demand for race related news resulted in network executives and producers feeding the public more and more coverage of the events. Thomas writes that in 1958 Georgia Police officers polled a group of African American students on whether or not they owned a television and noted what kind of shows they were watching. They found that seventy percent of all the students owned a television and a mere five percent did not have access to a radio or television. If Kathryn Stockett’s depiction is accurate, as I believe it is, then we need to reassess the popular assumption that people alone create movement. The truth is that without media providing information and creating a means for tangible and direct political change, the most fundamental aspect of our democracy vanishes and is replaced by ignorance.

In the first chapter of their book *The Race Beat*, Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff cite Gunnar Myrdal, a highly respected race relations researcher. Myrdal asserts that there was but one barrier “between the white Northerner’s ignorance and his sense of outrage that the [American] creed

was being poisoned. That barrier was knowledge, . . . information that was strong enough, graphic enough, and constant enough to overcome ‘the opportunistic desire of the whites for ignorance’” (6). Prior to this statement, Myrdal also discusses the American creed which he believes sets the United States apart from all other nations. This idea conceded that nearly all Americans believed in the legitimacy of the First Amendment and that everyone has a right to their own opinion. Myrdal’s theory of the American creed is extremely useful because it sheds light on the difficult problem of respecting opposing viewpoints. This becomes especially significant with regards to the Civil Rights Movement because unlike today, people of diverse cultures with opposing viewpoints could not live together in peace. Because the media helps shape public opinion, it directly affects the laws that govern our democracy. During the Civil Rights Movement the media gave people the information which shaped the public’s opinion and thus caused them to push for change. The heart of democracy lies in the ability to change. And what would we be without democracy? We would not be the United States of America.

### **Media and Sustainability**

While grassroots movement can be commonly attributed to the creation of civil rights organizations and the support of the church, the movement itself would not have reached timely, pivotal moments, such as the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1964, without media. Television broadcasting of atrocities in the South increased the number of pro-desegregation activists and civil rights organization membership nationwide. According to Everet, broadcasts of the Supreme Court case, *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, and vast coverage of Emmett Till’s murder, became the crucial instigators of early anger and discontent with the social norms of the South. On September 24th 1955, J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant were acquitted by an all-white jury of murdering 15 year old Emmett Till. Unprecedented media coverage of the event led African American weeklies to threaten economic and political pressure for a fair trial. Metress argues that when the two men were acquitted of all accusations, prominent African American media outlets coupled with northern white press and liberal political organizations to demand for national protests and boycotts.

Adding to Mr. Metress’ argument, I would point out that the media coverage of Emmett Till’s trial also brought up a very important problem within the Southern judicial system. What angered the public the most was that the judiciary system had failed to render Emmett Till justice altogether. Consequently, people began to question whether African Americans would ever

receive a fair trial without federal mediation. Before the Till trial, northern press either ignored black issues in the South altogether, or gave them mere minutes of air time. The Till trial marked a significant journalistic milestone, according to Roberts and Klibanoff, authors of *The Race Beat*. Not only did the Till trial bring “Negro reporters into the heart of the white man’s kingdom-the courtroom- but he brought white reporters into the deep south in unprecedented numbers to cover a racial story” (86). But who really cares? Who besides me and a handful of recent researchers has a stake in these claims? At the very least, the researchers who previously believed that the murder of Emmett Till was simply a sad story of injustice should care. Though I concede that Emmett Till’s murder is a story of injustice, I still insist that it had far greater implications on the desegregation movement both in front of, and behind the camera. Black and white reporters worked in the same room on the same trial and, according to Roberts and Klibanoff, shared photos and conducted the same interviews, all while having the same amount of access and opportunity (86).

In addition to the murder of Emmett Till, dramatic coverage surrounding the federal court case, *Brown vs. the Board of Education* also contributed to what marked the beginning of what is commonly recognized as the Civil Rights Movement. In contrast, Roberts and Klibanoff argue that coverage of the *Brown v. the Board of Education* angered Southern white conservatives more than it enlightened Americans nationally. Yet is it necessarily true that “the South was too far down the road of opposition to see the decision for what it really was” (72)? I am of two minds about Roberts’ and Klibanoff’s claim. On the one hand, there is substantial evidence to show that most Southerners were in disagreement with the verdict. For example, James J. Kilpatrick, editor of the *Richmond News Letter*, stated that “We accept [the verdict] because we have to, and we accept it in the profound and prayerful hope that the Court, . . . will exercise vision and forbearance in drafting a mandate that will preserve good race relations” (64). On the other hand, I do not believe that the authors are taking into account the repercussions of white conservative anger. After the *Brown* case came the rise of Citizens’ Councils. With the intention of mobilizing white extremists, Citizens’ Councils aired extremely racist and pro-segregationist views which were broadcast across the nation. I believe that this actually worked in favor of the Civil Rights Movement because the irrationality of the men caused Americans all over the country to question the current social system. Because both of these cases dealt with issues that could be addressed at both the state and federal levels, interest spanned over regions and ultimately led to a swell in organization membership as well as white supremacy violence.

Despite the quick and too often violent retaliations by southern white conservatives, as Everet claims, television broadcasts of these events almost always had the effect of “broadening support for civil rights.”

The sustainability of momentum to fight for civil rights may not have been maintained were it not for local and national television broadcasts of demonstrations. For example, the Montgomery Bus Boycotts in 1955 not only made a statement about the injustices among public facility segregation but also strained the economy. According to an article special to The New York Times, after only two months of the boycott, “the bus company cited losses averaging 22 cents per mile.” Statistics such as these, along with television broadcasts of images of numerous deserted busses, resulted in many Southern citizens questioning whether systematic segregation was really beneficial to society. Undoubtedly, when one race faced discrimination and injustices, economic consequences would invariably affect the other. Similarly, in several attempts by civil rights organizers to encourage white liberals to join the marches to attract cameras and the nation, they would often become targets for hate crimes. Everet shows that when two white men, Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, were murdered for their involvement in the movement, a sudden stir among the white population all over the nation caused them to realize that, “the Civil Rights Movement did concern them as well.” Both the Montgomery Bus Boycott and white liberal organization membership had negative effects on the white race. With fear of what could happen to their own race because of segregation, members of the white community began to lend more attention to the movement and consequently, many joined organizations.

One of the pivotal organizations involved in the Civil Rights Movement that contributed to much of its success was the black Church. While it is true that churches provided the backbone for grassroots movement, I would like to add that the church intentionally aimed to attract the media. First and foremost, the black churches served as the foundation for organization and discussion. Members of the church were able to express their concerns about the injustices that they faced on a daily basis in a non-threatening environment. For many, the black church provided a sanctuary and a place where hope for equality became less of a dream and more of a tangible reality. In addition, the church had the ability to connect with masses of people through phone trees. Although the medium through which protestors were rallied was simplistic, they had catastrophic effects. In many situations, the church members included leaders of civil rights organizations who could contact liberal political leaders. Aside from acting as a place of worship, the church

also served as a sort of demonstration bulletin board for protests organized by the church. Black churches often served as a link between the black and white worlds. As the church relates to media, by contacting mass numbers of people, the church was able to create substantial demonstrations that attracted media attention and made for good television. Power is derived from access to masses of people and language. Many times church members would sing songs with powerful language to uplift the spirits of the protestors and to keep them going. Finally, the church gave sustainability to the Civil Rights Movement by continually creating the movements that made for good television. Without the church, organization may not have occurred as frequently and as consistently as it did. The church was aware of the power that they held over the media and knew that they could manipulate television to work in their favor.

### **Awareness**

Despite popular belief, similar to the churches, civil rights organizers were extremely aware of the possibilities that were opened up by television. Access to millions of people across the nation, they knew, would quicken the pace towards change on both a local and national level. As Horton writes, one of the most prominent organizations that manipulated television in favor of desegregation was the Highlander Folk School. Led and organized by Myles Horton, Highlander Folk School was established with the intention of training and educating African Americans in leadership roles to fight for social justice. Beginning in 1932, Highlander Folk School began as a school “where young men and women [would] have close contact with teachers, [and] will learn how to take their place intelligently in a changing world” (Horton 56). When reading this, we notice that Myles Horton did not specify black or white students. During this time leaving out such details would have raised many issues for Southern White conservatives. The Highlander Folk School represented an immense threat to the traditional status quo which many southerners were struggling to conserve. Horton trained famous civil rights leaders such as Rosa Parks, members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Septima Clark, and John Lewis. Often there would be television station and newspaper reporters along with their cameras invited to the school to tape training for lunch counter sit-ins. As shown in the news television archive at the University of Virginia, during the summer of 1963, WDBJ television, out of Roanoke Virginia, captured the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee practicing for demonstrations as a part of the lunch counter sit-in movement. The broadcast included instruction on how to protect supporters during a beating by having one person simulate the role

of police officers who often used nightsticks and hit and kicked protestors. In the video the man who was simulating the role of the demonstrator would immediately fall into the fetal position as soon as the police officer or pro-segregationist began to beat them. Sometimes they would even line up one person behind the other in a fetal position to leave as little flesh exposed to beatings as possible. One of the keys to success in airing these types of images was finding a way to appeal to the emotions of the viewers and to stimulate their conscience. By slipping into the fetal position, viewers almost immediately associate this with innocent children and their vulnerability.

According to Myles Horton, “you have to work with those people who can multiply what you do” in order to change society (57). Those unfamiliar with this school of thought may be interested to know that it basically boils down to gaining power through access to masses of people. Without the masses, you cannot have movement; without media you cannot reach the masses. Myles Horton and teachers at The Citizenship Schools allowed cameras and reporters to view the classes and air images nationally and locally. Taping in the Highlander Folk School shattered stereotypes that black men and women were uneducated and violent by broadcasting images of highly educated, peaceful people training for methodically, non-violent demonstrations. When “people see that other people not so different from themselves do things that they thought could never be done”, leadership multiplies and once they step into the water, they are far more reluctant to get out (Horton 114). Because Horton and other Civil Rights leaders were aware of the power of the masses, they were never hesitant to take advantage of an opportunity to reach them.

## **Implications**

At the heart of the impact of media on the Civil Rights Movement was the coverage of demonstrations and brutality. When showing peaceful demonstrators being beaten by police forces or other authority figures, the media could not skew inhumanity. Categorized by David E. Sumner, the second and most effective phase of media coverage occurred from the beginning of the lunch counter sit-in movements to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. During this period of time, Sumner explains that the media was an imperative ally of the civil rights organizations and demonstrators. Consider one of the most influential demonstrations broadcast known today as, “Bloody Sunday.” On Sunday March 7th, 1965, 600 civil rights demonstrators marched across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama as a part of the voting rights

campaign. Governor George Wallace ordered state troopers “to use whatever measures are necessary to prevent a march” (Roberts and Klibanoff 384). Rows upon rows of Alabama state troopers, reportedly, as many as the marchers themselves stood ground. On this dreadful day, all 600 of these men, women and children were brutally beaten with clubs and fogged with tear gas. According to Roy Reed of the New York Times, “there were several seconds of unobstructed view. Fifteen or twenty nightsticks could be seen through the gas, flailing at the heads of the marchers” (qtd. in Roberts and Klibanoff 386). Viewers marveled at the mayhem which was broadcast on the three largest television networks: NBC, CBS, and ABC. While all three depictions were gripping, ABC had been running its Sunday night movie, Judgment at Nuremberg, about Nazi Germany, when it was interrupted by the segregationist footage straight out of Alabama. The contrast between the two programs, “struck like psychological lightning in American homes” (386). Roberts and Klibanoff are surely right about the profound impact the images at Selma had on the viewer at home because, as the authors may not be aware, articles in the New York Times gave firsthand accounts of the events of ‘Bloody Sunday’. One reporter writes, “Telegrams were sent to President Johnson and other Government officials by civic, legal, and religious organizations asking Federal prosecution of the Alabama police and greater protection of Selma’s Negroes” (Times 23). Activism as a result of media broadcasting further proves that not only did the images coming across television screens anger the viewers; they also moved them to do something about it. In addition, according to another article special to The New York Times, thousands of citizens in Detroit and across the nation joined marches in sympathy with African Americans. Without the reporters and their camera men there to capture the demonstration and its unfolding, not nearly as many Americans would have joined the movement in the South, let alone have been aware of what was going on.

## Conclusion

It would be an understatement to say that the Civil Rights Movement was responsible for one of the most, if not the most, powerful movements towards social justice change ever made in America. But where does power stem from? Power is derived from access and language. Why did James Baldwin’s five words sear the hearts of thousands of Americans? Because he had access and because he knew how to use language. One is vital to the other. Had Baldwin not had television as means of reaching thousands of Americans across the nation, he wouldn’t have

made such an impact. And had Baldwin not understood that he needed to grab the attention of the viewer using language, he would not have made such an impact.

Television sped up the movement towards the biggest social change America has ever seen. Through interviews, coverage of demonstrations, and broadcasts on the complexities of the movement, media became the educator. Television was pivotal in multiplying organization membership and thus fundamentally changing society. News stations were, in effect, encouraging all races across all states to fight for what was right. As Roberts and Klibanoff simply stated, "In a sense, television and the civil rights movement had come of age together" (377).

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