

**When the Blank Slate is a White One: White Normative Isomorphism and the Foundation
of National Public Radio**


By
Laura Garbes

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Abstract of When the Blank Slate is a White One: White Normative Isomorphism and the Foundation of National Public Radio
By Laura Garbes, Degree A.M., Brown University
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Recent literature on race in organizations analyzes how racial inequalities are embedded in organizational structure, but it lacks a corresponding account of how the racialized practices of the field are reproduced when new organizations form. I develop a new concept, white normative isomorphism, to understand how racialized practices are adopted at the foundation of new organizations. I demonstrate the concept's utility using the case of National Public Radio (NPR), a non-profit media organization. The legacy of racial segregation in the radio field shaped NPR's standards on hiring, technology, and programming. NPR's founders adopted these white normative standards as they strove to gain legitimacy and visibility within the radio field. Though at their surface race-neutral, these standards served as mechanisms that inhibited the inclusion of Black voices into NPR's workforce, station membership, and programming during its first ten years of operation.

Introduction

Over two decades ago, Stella Nkomo called on organizational scholars to rewrite their conceptions of race in organizations. At the time of her publication, research on organizations had tended to ignore the issue of race when the organization of study was predominantly white. In the research that did consider race, it was often a demographic approach that reified whiteness as the default category among racial categories. She urged a shift to instead look at how race as a cultural construct is embedded within larger structures (Nkomo 1992).

While this shift is far from fully realized across the subdiscipline, there is a burgeoning literature that develops an analytical framework wherein race is conceived as a cultural construct and organizations are seen as “raced.” (Wooten 2006; Park and Kehal 2017; Ray forthcoming). Furthermore, researchers have conducted empirical studies on racial inequality as the outcome of historically constructed processes that become institutionalized through organizational practice: in the court system, the public-school system, and in hiring across the labor market, to name a few (Gonzalez Van Cleve 2017; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Beggs 1995; Moss and Tilley 2003).

I build upon this research of racialized organizational forms to examine how racially exclusionary practices are adopted during the foundation of a new organization. How are mechanisms of racial exclusion adapted to new organizational forms within existing organizational fields? I consider this process in the founding years of National Public Radio (NPR), a nonprofit media organization established in 1970 under the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, as a response to the National Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. As President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the act into law, he remarked on its significance to the nation. “It announces to the world that our nation wants more than just material wealth; our nation wants more than a ‘chicken in every pot.’ We in America have an appetite for excellence, too. While we work every day to produce new goods and to create new wealth, we want most of all to enrich man's spirit. That is the purpose of this act.”

In light of this commitment to enriching programming behind the legislation, what was the path forward? Who would the audience of these proposed broadcasts be, and who would be the arbiters of what noncommercial media would be deemed enriching? These questions were to be resolved at the organizational level. As Johnson noted in his speech, “most importantly, we’ve created a new institution.” The act established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which carried the role of expanding noncommercial media on both local and national levels. National Public Radio (NPR), founded by CPB, was created to serve the American public with nonpartisan radio programming through two components: (1) original national-level NPR programming, and (2) a membership system for existing noncommercial radio outlets on the local level.

However, the American public served in the first ten years was a disproportionately white one; the organization formed policies that inhibited racial inclusivity in workforce composition, station membership, and program production. Reliance on the quantitative measurement of racial demographics in workforce or audience composition runs the risk of obscuring the need for deeper cultural change. Cultural approaches to organizational research call us to instead consider biases in our measures of racial inequality, and the construction of its meaning as a primarily quantifiable social problem (Berrey 2015). Acknowledging the limits of descriptive racial composition as a marker of progress towards racial justice, I identify disproportionate service to and employment of white Americans as a symptom and consequence of underlying white dominant culture which allows for the adoption of mechanisms that result in racial exclusion while maintaining a public position of commitment to racial pluralism.

As a media organization, the urgency to attend to inequality as a cultural construct is particularly salient. In organizations whose product is mass culture, the consequence of their cultural assumptions extends beyond shaping intraorganizational dynamics; sociologists have empirically demonstrated the influence of mass media in shaping public sentiment on racially charged issues (Byfield 2014). According to Feagin, “white-controlled media play a central role in making the dominant racial framing [from the white perspective] widespread and apparently ‘normal’” (Feagin 2010: 196). As a nationally distributed media outlet, NPR’s cultural assumptions have ideological implications as a national contributor actively shaping discourse in the United States.

I introduce a new concept- *white normative isomorphism*- to examine NPR’s adoption of racially exclusionary mechanisms. White normative isomorphic pressures are racialized norms that shape the professional norms adopted across organizations within a given field. The concept draws from two frequently cited literatures in sociological research on race and of organizations, in order to analyze the racial dimension of organizational formation in a white dominant field.

New institutional theory, a school of thought within organizational research, often asks why organizations are so similar or adopt similar practices. Scholars approaching this type of question examine the salience of the larger “field” in organizational formation as a way to account for features of organizational culture consistent across organizations within a given field. As Wooten and Hoffman define it, field is “a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field.” (Wooten and Hoffman 2008).

DiMaggio and Powell understand an organizational field as a site of diffusion, in which one’s training and specialization within an organizational field structure one’s normative ideals about organizational practice. Their work on institutional isomorphism theorizes that organizations are not only subject to competitive pressures from the organizations within the same industry, but also institutional pressures of the organizational field: coercive (e.g. federal regulations), mimetic (e.g. responses to ambiguity), and normative (e.g. professional associations). These isomorphic pressures, taken together, constitute “a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions” (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:149).

While the line of inquiry stemming from their theory of institutional isomorphism has been generative— as of 2005, DiMaggio and Powell’s 1983 piece had the highest citation count in American Sociological Review’s history (Jacobs 2005) – there has been an inattention within this literature to the racial dimension of organizational pressures to conform. I thus draw on Bonilla-Silva’s concept of a white habitus, a socialization process in white-dominant communities which informs the worldviews, values, and behaviors of subjects therein, to begin to contend with the racial dimension to isomorphic pressures of the organizational field. White normative isomorphism, as I explain throughout the paper, provides an analytical lens by which to view organizational fields as sites of normative diffusion with deeply embedded racialized norms.

The case of NPR provides an interesting analytical case. Situated within the narrower organizational subfield of U.S. radio, the organization’s foundation is shaped by its interactions with the larger fields of U.S. media and government. Despite its mission of public service, and its foundation coinciding with the implementation of Civil Rights legislation, NPR both employed and served a majority white, upper-middle class audience in its first ten years. Disproportionately white ownership and management of local stations created conditions in which the white racial

perspective was the default, exacerbated by the colorblind construction of technological and hiring standards for radio stations in constructing NPR membership, and perpetuated through an ignorance of the organization's white dominance.

The larger industry of radio was developed within the era of legally sanctioned racial segregation. In her theory of gendered organizations, Joan Acker (1990) pushes feminist scholars of organizations to understand that, rather than looking at an organization as a neutral site where male dominance occurs, the structure of an organization itself may be imbued with male dominance, or gendered. Recent research by Jane Ward extends Acker's theory to explore white dominant culture in an organization whose workforce is racially diverse (Ward 2008). The research examines white workplace culture that persists despite racial inclusion in order to reframe the "race problem" from one of racial exclusion to one of white dominant culture.

White Normative Isomorphism

Field theory has been influential in cultural perspectives on organizations and on race in recent decades. However, the two subdisciplines of organizations and race have adopted the concept of a field differently, obscuring the potential compatibility of these cultural perspectives.

In organizational research, new institutionalism broadly thinks through processes of diffusion of organizational practices by imitation of other organizations within the field. Within this larger theoretical framework, a field is technically defined as "a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field" (Scott 1995: 56).

Recall that DiMaggio and Powell say list four main isomorphic pressures that shape the adoption of fieldwide practices. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on one particular type—normative isomorphism—to understand how organizations adopt particular professional standards as a way of gaining or maintaining organizational legitimacy. Professionalism rests on two main elements, according to DiMaggio and Powell: formal training via educational specialization, and the extension of professional networks within a particular organizational field across which practices spread rapidly. Thus, the organizational standards adopted are driven by professional and educational norms within the existing organizational field.

In Du Bois's conception of race relations, social structure informs racial subjectivities, and these subjectivities inform social structures and the institutions they inhabit (Itzigsohn and Brown 2016). Studying race in organizations as a structural factor upheld by racial actors, rather than as a demographic variable, as called for by organizational scholars (Nkomo 1992; Acker 2006; Wooten 2006; Wooten and Couloute 2017), more precisely captures the mechanisms that reproduce racial inequality in an organization's foundation. It also links this meso-level analysis of the organization to micro and macro processes; the meso-level organization is shaped by both founders' racial ideologies and the racial dynamics of the larger organizational fields in which the organization is founded.

I merge the view of organizational fields as sites of normative diffusion with Bonilla-Silva's concept of a white habitus, a socialization process occurring in white-dominant communities which informs the worldviews and behaviors of subjects therein. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the habitus refers to the set of practices and beliefs acquired by social actors through internalization of dispositions valued within the social structures they occupy (1980). Bonilla-Silva et al. extend this concept to refer to a "white habitus." This shared socialization within a racialized field conditions a particular racial habitus, i.e, a shared value system of racial attitudes with practical implications. With the color line as a structure that cuts through U.S. history, there

is a historically constructed divide in the lived experience of social actors within the modern racialized social system.

This racial white habitus, reified through narratives that facilitate white ignorance regarding how their behaviors perpetuate racial inequality, instills a hegemonic narrative of whiteness (Hughey 2010). Ultimately, the white habitus of the racialized field reinforces white dominance in adoption of standards during a new organization's formation, in a process I call white normative isomorphism.

There is a crucial gap in both literatures that needs development. In organizational research, we must account for the racial dimension of normative isomorphism. In research on racial processes using Bourdieusian theory of the habitus, we must be more precise in defining the fields of action in which this social conditioning occurs. While Bonilla-Silva et al. use white habitus in their 2006 study to understand racial attitudes of whites, it is a partial adoption of the Bourdieusian concept in which the field is left ill-defined (Bonilla-Silva et al 2006). Furthermore, Bonilla-Silva's macro level theorization of racialized social systems (Bonilla-Silva 2006), while a useful analytical frame that captures the embeddedness of racial inequality within systems, moves away from an explicitly field-level analysis, pulling white habitus from its original Bourdieusian logic, which would have situated the white habitus in a more explicitly defined field of action.

The joining of white habitus and normative isomorphism- two concepts from separate subdisciplines- is a necessary bridge between the generally separated conversations of race and organizational scholarship (Nkomo 1992). Furthermore, the two concepts complement one another as compatible within field theory, heretofore analyzed in isolation from one another, yet often aligning. Bonilla-Silva approaches the field as a race scholar in observing hyper-segregated communities in the context of colorblind racism, finding that a white-dominant community, or residential field, conditions a particular white habitus that conditions and normalizes a white-dominant perspective. DiMaggio and Powell understand an organizational field as a site of professionalization, in which one's training and specialization within an organizational field structure one's normative ideals about organizational practice.

These two fields often align in the mainstream U.S. organizational context, particularly in historically white-dominant organizational fields. Thus, existing organizational fields, which had previously developed professional and technical norms based off the exclusionary set of well-educated white men, filters the options available to organizational actors in hiring and standardization for a new organization within the given field. Furthermore, if those organizational actors were raised in a white-dominant space, conditioning a white habitus, their normalization of a white-dominant space inhibits a recognition of the racially exclusionary outcomes of their organizational decisions.

Furthermore, NPR founders and employees from this era between 1967-1977 account for these policies and practices as nonracial decisions. Their collective discourse, documented in archival resources, in magazine interviews, and in published organizational memoirs, created a narrative of NPR that elides the mention of racial exclusion by starting the story of NPR as a blank slate being colored in as each decision is made. The dominant narrative theme of NPR as a blank slate arises in the discussions surrounding hiring, technology, and programming priorities. Thus, the organization unwittingly marks whiteness as the default, universal, and right mode of being (Ward 2008; Murray 1973).

Organizational Narratives

A burgeoning organizational literature explores the salience of narratives in constructing identity and creating blindspots within organizations (Brown 2006; Czarniawska 1997; Boje 1991). I define narratives here as “modes of reality construction” (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Geiger and Antonacopoulou 2009), to note that discourse, linked to the social position of the speaker, reinforces a frame, used to make meaning of the social actor’s context (Goffman 1974; Weick 1995; Keller 2005). As an underlying theme of the paper, I identify shared narratives across employees and founders. The blank slate narrative offers us a window into how organizational actors further limit the possibilities of transformative inclusion by underdiagnosing the problem of racial inequity through an ahistorical perspective on their own organization.

Across the paper’s findings, I highlight the narrative frame of NPR as a blank slate in NPR’s staff and board discourse as they discuss organizational practices. The perception arises in intraorganizational meeting minutes, internal and external correspondences, and retrospective interviews by decision-makers and original NPR employees. The discourse that supports a blank slate perspective rationalizes and makes sense of the policies and practices critiqued in the 1977 report. The shared discourse forms a narrative that creates organizational blindspots, which inhibit NPR to see the detrimental impact of its practices on hiring and serving racial minorities. In particular, the blank slate perspective accommodates a simultaneous inattention to white dominance and a narrow view of racial justice in organizational practice.

Overview

The paper proceeds in three parts. First, to contextualize the larger field in which NPR is situated, I provide a brief history of educational broadcasting and its legacy of racial exclusion, from World War II until its intersection with the Civil Rights Movement. This section establishes that noncommercial radio system inherited by NPR was already racially exclusive, white-controlled, and normed to a majority-white workforce. Second, I use a 1977 report commissioned by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to identify three mechanisms of racial exclusion adopted by NPR in its founding years: hiring practices, technological standards, and programming priorities. Third, I use the report’s findings to trace back and elaborate on these practices as responses to the isomorphic pressures of the racialized organizational field. I observe that many of the practices adopted at NPR mirror the practices of the organizational field of noncommercial radio in which it is situated. In analyzing these empirical examples, I discuss how NPR’s founding members adopted these seemingly neutral practices without a subsequent recognition of their racist outcomes, as the practices were in line with larger noncommercial radio field’s existing practices.

In viewing the organizational formation process through the lens of white normative isomorphism, the failure to serve the nonwhite public by 1977 becomes legible as a process: when an organization develops in a white dominant field, and the founders conditioned within the white-dominant norms of the field cannot see such racialization, racialized organizational practice is reinscribed and institutionalized. In the historical case of NPR, its hiring practices facilitated the creation of a white-dominant workforce; its technological standards, in implementing a high-quality station requirement, precluded many nonwhite community stations from membership; and its programming priorities, in deciding that NPR’s national team would only focus on “minority” programming if it were of interest to the whole nation, marked whiteness as the norm and minoritized communities as a special interest group somehow apart from the whole of the nation.

Furthermore, the adoption of these practices is read as race-neutral by the founders, due to their position within the field. Though the adoption of these standards may be reinterpreted by practitioners as neutral measures of radio quality, and their own position neutral through a stated commitment to pluralism, the practices themselves remain racially exclusionary.

Methodology

The National Public Broadcasting Act established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, which would in turn "establish and maintain a library and archives of non-commercial educational television and radio programs and related materials."¹ By 2003, NPR partnered with the Hornbake Library at University of Maryland, College Park to create a new depository accessible for researchers. Throughout the three sections, I use the National Public Broadcasting Archives (NPBA) as my principal source of data; the site contains official documents, collections of informal intraorganizational and interorganizational correspondences, oral history interviews by institutional leaders in public broadcasting, and donated papers of interest by former employees at NPR and CPB.²

In laying out a history of the larger racialized organizational field of radio broadcasting, I use the NPBA's John Macy Files to understand the field-wide studies that motivated the formation of NPR.³ To deepen the breadth and depth of the description of the organizational field, I draw on three historical books: (Savage 1999; Stoeber 2016; Barlow 1999). To understand conditions of racial minorities employed and served by public broadcasting by 1977, I use both political histories of NPR (McCauley 2005; Engelman 1996) and the Minority Task Force Report of 1977. To understand the founders' perspective on the narrative, I use: (Galenson 2012, Mitchell 2005; This is NPR Stamberg and Roberts); oral history project from NPBA

Institutional archives can often silence dissenting voices, foreclosing the possibility of alternate narratives (Trouillot 1995). However, the present research question—how racialized fieldwide practices get adopted in new organizations—particularly benefits from an examination of the institutional archives; these archives, in conjunction with histories and memoirs written by those connected to NPR, give a rich sense of both the logic of decisions to adopt certain practices in real time, and the stories they tell themselves about such decisions in retrospect.

Contextualizing the “Blank Slate”: The Emergence of the Noncommercial Radio Field

“I made no reply to your proposal concerning the Committee on Civic Education by Radio. I am in deepest sympathy with the general idea but my experience, so far, has been that anything connected with the radio in the United States is a part of widespread propaganda by the rich. In that, I'm naturally not interested.” W.E.B. Du Bois, 1932, in reply to an invitation to participate in government-sponsored radio

“No stations or individuals, as in television, stood ready to lead. No constituency demanded action. No expectations existed. The slate was blank.” Jack Mitchell, 2005, on the formation of NPR

Despite the appealing optimism of Mitchell's refrain, it was misleading to label NPR a blank slate, given the decades of government-endorsed noncommercial radio that preceded the

¹ “The National Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. <<https://current.org/1967/11/public-broadcasting-act-of-1967-2/>>

² NPBA

³ NPBA John Macy Files

organization's formation. In this section I provide a brief overview of this history of the field of noncommercial radio and its legacy of racial exclusion, in order to establish that upon the formation of NPR, it would have had to actively work to overcome the legacy of racial exclusion to achieve its stated goals of racial and ethnic pluralism.

The main institutional precursor to NPR was known as the National Association for Educational Broadcasters (NAEB). By 1938, NAEB had lobbied the FCC to reserve five channels for noncommercial radio purposes, which grew to 40 channels by 1945. As government involvement in the medium increased, nonwhite access to the airwaves was more formally excluded, ensuring solely white control of noncommercial stations (Savage 1999; Barlow 1999; Stoever 2016). The demographic makeup of noncommercial radio producers between World War II and the formation of the National Public Radio System was predominantly white and male. These stations reserved for noncommercial radio were primarily owned by white-dominant universities and were all managed by white men who drew from their predominantly white student body to recruit radio trainees.

As commercial radio reached its Golden Age in the years leading up to World War II, the government seized the opportunity to utilize radio as a political tool by funding programming through the U.S. Office of Education to be aired on noncommercial national stations. Some of this programming included the accomplishments of Black America in the voices of Black intellectuals, a step above the commercial stations at the time that were known for their use of sonic blackface- a white speaker posing on the air as a Black character through racially stereotyped modes of speech- to represent Black America as heard by white America (Barlow 1999). However, the government-funded programs operated on a system of contingent inclusion; that is, Black voices were included if they served the political ends of the Office of Education at the time.

For instance, the office produced an episode on the Negro in its larger series in 1938-1939, *Americans All, Immigrants All*, in order to define Blacks as Americans and drum up patriotism as the country prepared for the possibility of sending troops into combat during the Second World War. After the war, when there was palpable racial tension given the unfulfilled promises from the domestic part of the double V campaign- victory against Nazism abroad & victory against racial discrimination at home. The office produced *Freedom's People*, a program focusing on Black intellectual history to quell this racial unrest with symbolic appreciation for the contributions of the Negro (Savage 1999).

Meanwhile, despite advocacy by prominent Black scholars, including W.E.B. Du Bois, there were no Black-owned noncommercial stations on the air until 1949; in the meantime, Du Bois was widely sought after by these white-controlled stations in the 1920s and 1930s to provide a Black perspective for their specialized shows on the racial minority. While Du Bois was an initial proponent of radio for the acousmatic possibilities for Black discourse across space, he distanced himself from radio's efforts as government regulations of the airwaves delimit possibilities of Black-controlled discourse (Stoever 2011). On the whole, Black voices were relegated to the realms of entertainment in white-owned stations, excluded from general news broadcasts; furthermore, Black stations comprised only .002 percent of radio outlets (Barlowe 1999).

Meanwhile, in the years leading up to the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson commissioned a report by the Carnegie Commission on Educational Television. The fifteen-member committee, which met from 1964-1967 concluded that government investment in educational broadcasting was an opportunity to air "a civilized voice

in a civilized community.”⁴ The resulting Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 declared that a national system of public broadcasting would be implemented in the United States, thereby establishing the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) to implement the system. The CPB soon developed national public television and radio service networks to produce public programming: PBS and NPR, respectively. The CPB was in charge of overseeing the non-profit public media networks to ensure “diversity and excellence” in programming; the term diversity was not overtly associated with affirmative action by this point, but the tension would be a problem for the organization for years to come (Burke 1979; Mitchell 2005).

These historical snapshots of educational radio are illustrative of the racialized field in which a national public radio system was founded in 1970, by which time there had been an established pattern of exclusion of Black individuals from controlling the means of radio production. By the time NPR was founded, within the field of radio as a whole, only 16 radio outlets nationally, commercial and noncommercial, were owned by Black individuals; those owned by white individuals invariably hired white managers (Barlow 1999: 247).

Furthermore, this entire historical arc of noncommercial broadcasting occurs within a larger political field, which went through profound legislative and social changes between World War II and the Civil Rights Movement, coinciding with when the National Public Broadcasting Act is passed in 1967. Grassroots social movements led by radical activists fought for and achieved legislative victories for racial and gender justice. The end of the Civil Rights Movement is often marked symbolically with the death of Martin Luther King, Jr in 1968. However, the federal government institutionalized these legislative victories in the years following under the Nixon administration (Fligstein and McAdam 2012).

Actors situated within this field: the civically minded white habitus

“‘We have a blank canvas,’ I told the staff. There’ll be a lot of paint put on this canvas over the years, but the very first brush strokes are critical in terms of the color and the style that we establish for it.” -Bill Siemerling, First Program Manager of NPR

“By happenstance of birthplace (Michigan) and year (1941), I landed in the right place at the right time to play a part in launching public radio.” Jack Mitchell, first employee of NPR

Individuals instrumental in the formation of a national public radio system were professionalized within historically white universities, or within the formal organizational field of educational broadcasting – oftentimes both. NPR was founded in a time of dynamic change; after decades of legalized segregation in the era of Jim Crow, the racial status quo rapidly changed as Civil Rights victories were institutionalized. However, white professionals involved in the creation of public radio had been socialized on the white-dominant side of a legally segregated system throughout their entire lives. As communications scholar Michael McCauley notes, “NPR, in the most basic terms, is a network founded by well-educated baby boomers and targeted toward listeners with similar demographic and psychographic profiles” (McCauley 2005).

⁴ Carnegie I: Carnegie Commission on Educational Television, 1967 < <https://current.org/1967/01/carnegie-i/>>

Founding member and employee reflections reveal a blindness to their own social position with respect to the color line. Jack Mitchell, NPR's first employee, was hired by Don Quayle three weeks after Quayle's election. In reflecting on his role in public radio, he is humble, acknowledging the good fortune to be born in the place and time he was born (Mitchell 2005). However, he does not consider another advantage: his birth on the right side of the color line within Michigan. When he discusses his own values becoming the values of public radio, Mitchell understands these values as emphasis on expanded higher education and social progressiveness. Mitchell reflects on his own professionalization process in radio at BBC, University of Wisconsin, and University of Michigan as the sites in which he was immersed in the ideas of public service that guided him at NPR. He furthermore conceives of the audience to be like him. "Public radio has a symbiotic relationship with its listeners.. who are well-educated and societally conscious and who feel so connected to the medium that they are willing to support it financially" (Mitchell 2005: xii).

More generally, the neutrality of this ethic of public service has been questioned by critical race scholars that note the very formation of citizenship and public service has been built on anti-blackness, and blackness as a contradistinction to citizenship (Glenn 2014). In this case in particular, by 1971, educational and workforce desegregation was just beginning. Thus, these criteria for higher education and for financial stability were strongly racialized; however, the focus of affirmative remedies de-emphasized such racialization of the frame, because of the concentrated efforts on integrating nonwhite racialized subjects into the mainframe of society.

White Normative Isomorphism: adopting racialized policy and practice at NPR

National Public Radio was founded in 1970. In 1977, on the tenth anniversary of the 1967 National Public Broadcasting Act, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) commissioned a task force to examine how public media was faring on addressing the needs of minority publics. The task force was led by Professor Gloria L. Anderson, vice chairman of CPB at the time. The 28-person multi-ethnic coalition convened during a turbulent time for media, when antiracist journalists and activists were actively railing against the stalled progress of representation following civil-rights legislation. "A Formula for Change: The Report of the Task Force on Minorities in Public Broadcasting" is filled with critiques on public broadcasting's lack of racial diversity and included 70 recommendations for addressing the problem.

The report declared, "After 18 months of study and 11 years after the taxpayer subsidy began [with the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967], the Task Force must conclude that the public broadcast system is asleep at the transmitter." "A Formula for Change" links policy and practices formed in NPR's foundational years to adverse outcomes for minority audience that have manifested by 1977 in workforce composition, audience composition, and lack of programming by and/or for minority audiences.

Its line of investigation reveals organizational mechanisms that ultimately reinforced racial exclusion. In fact, Anderson and her fellow task force members called out NPR as a racially exclusive organization, whose mechanisms taken together formed "a vicious cycle designed to exclude minorities from public broadcasting." By purporting to serve an audience as broad as the American public, NPR sought to reach a diverse set of audiences, including racial minorities (McCauley 2005). As the first programming manager, Bill Siemerling made this goal explicit in the programming purposes he developed for the program team: "In order to provide minorities access to the medium, it is not only important to establish the identity of that group,

but essential if the total population is to understand and appreciate the interdependence of pluralism.”

How did white normative pressures from existing practices within the field limit this goal? I focus on three findings here-- the hiring practices, technological standards, and programming priorities at NPR between 1970 and 1977—as manifestations of white normative isomorphic pressures that reproduce white dominance in NPR’s organizational norms.

Hiring Networks

The recruitment process of NPR’s original executive board and employees reveals that the educational radio network- a decades-old, predominantly white organizational field- shaped the racially exclusionary formation of NPR’s workforce. Processes of recruitment for positions on the board, executive staff, and programming staff reveal the salience of governmental and educational radio networks in deciding who should be considered and hired for positions in public radio from 1968-1972. The organizational decision is a response to normative isomorphic pressures, as drawing from these homogenous and exclusionary social networks ensured legitimacy through experience in the organizational field. However, it inhibited workforce racial diversity at all levels at NPR, despite intentions to reflect the American public. In this section, I outline how NPR’s president, board of directors, and staff were chosen for their respective positions to highlight how hiring networks, drawn from white-dominant fields in order to foster legitimacy and efficiency, resulted in a white dominant workforce.

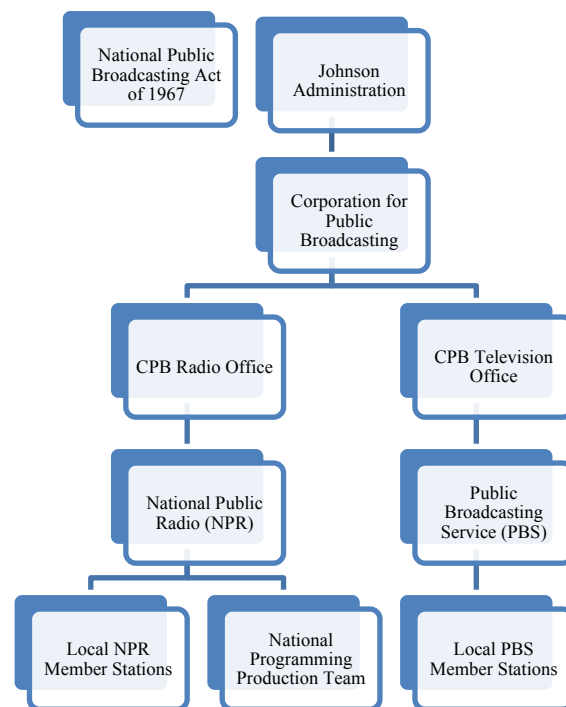


Figure 1: Public Broadcasting Organizational Flow Chart

Figure 1 is a simplified organizational chart that illuminates each organization’s relationship to the other. The National Public Broadcasting Act of 1967, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson, established the Corporation for Public Broadcasting as a nonprofit organization in the United States dedicated to providing funding for public radio and television. Johnson appointed his colleague Frank Pace, third U.S. Secretary of

the Army, as the first Chairman of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting by President Lyndon B. Johnson. He was concurrently the co-founder and president of the International Executive Service Corps,⁵ established to consult developing nations with neoliberal policies on private enterprise. The CPB was charged with establishing exactly *how* it would promote public broadcasting, which it did through the establishment of NPR and PBS.

By all accounts, radio was an afterthought in the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. The Carnegie Commission, which produced a report on the potential for public media, only conceptualized the role of television, considering radio irrelevant for the future of noncommercial broadcast. It was only through advocacy by educational radio producers that “and radio” was added to the bill’s language alongside every mention of television. In fact, the bill’s original title, the “Public Television Act,” was switched to broadcasting only by the time the bill reached a Senate vote.

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting’s principal priority, then, was to develop a system of educational television. By the time PBS, the television network disseminating public broadcasting, had been founded, CPB had not so much as hired employees to work on conceptualizing a comparable radio network. When it came time to create a radio division within CPB, the corporation’s executives sought expertise from existing educational radio networks, relying on past professional norms to garner legitimacy and a swift formulation of a path forward.

Don Quayle from CPB consulted Robert (Bob) Mott, Executive Director of National Educational Radio Network (NERN), formerly known as NAEB, to brainstorm candidates to head the Radio Division of Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The short list consisted of educational radio producers affiliated with the NERN. By Quayle’s account: “working with Ward Chamberlin [Chief Operating Officer of CPB] and Frank Pace [Chairman of CPB], we went through a number of possible candidates for the CPB radio job. We came up with young Al Hulsen... Al had worked with me at Ohio State, and at WGBH, and with the Educational Radio Network.”

Frank Pace had recruited Ward Chamberlin as Chief operating officer of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Mr. Chamberlin was a corporate lawyer when he was recruited by his friend and squash partner Frank Pace to join CPB as COO. Thus, while these CPB architects had no public broadcasting experience in general, let alone experience from educational radio, they were entrusted with their positions given their positions as leaders in the governmental fields, or their connections to such leaders.

Meanwhile, when these leaders made decisions on the workforce of CPB’s executive Radio Office, they, in conversation with Don Quayle conformed to normative pressures of the white-dominant field of educational radio by filtering personnel from the same industry. The department was ultimately a reflection of existing, majority-white educational radio stations. “Al [Hulsen], Liz Young, Bill Kling and secretarial help constituted the Radio Office. Al and Mott worked very well together. They brought in John Witherspoon as a consultant to help design an organization that, unlike PBS, would both produce and acquire and distribute and promote national programming for radio” (Public Radio Oral History Don Quayle).

⁵ International Executive Service Corps is an international economic development not-for-profit organization with headquarters in Washington, D.C. IESC was founded in 1964 by David Rockefeller, States M. Mead III, [Frank Pace](#), [Sol Linowitz](#), and other American business leaders. IESC has worked in sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and Eurasia, Asia and the Near East, and Latin America and the Caribbean. <
<https://www.bloomberg.com/research/stocks/private/snapshot.asp>>

The use of these closed networks in hiring CPB executives cascaded through to NPR's executives, as these selected CPB architects were then charged with constructing a board of directors for the public radio network. Don Quayle, who transitioned from his role at CPB to becoming the first president of NPR, delineated the search process in a retrospective interview: "NPR was set up by consensus of regional meetings. [Al] Hulsen and [Robert] Mott, and sometimes [John] Witherspoon, went out to talk to all of the [local station] managers, and to have them elect six [members]. These six elected three more [public members], and that constituted the Board of Directors of National Public radio. Working with legal counsel, they wrote the by-laws, the charter, etc."

The group of public radio professionals and managers from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting comprised the initial board of directors for the organization. Of the original 13 board members of NPR, 0 identified as women or as members of racial minority groups. These thirteen white men were tasked with selecting NPR's president, and working with this selected president to recruit its executive staff.

Executive Staff

When Don Quayle became the first President, since I knew Don and had worked briefly for him at CPB, I went to him and said, 'I don't know what I want to do, but I'd like to work for you.' I went on board with NPR in September of '70." - Elizabeth Young, first director of station relations

"[NPR President] Don Quayle calls from Washington. He says, "Hey, what do you know about National Public Radio?" I said, "I never heard of it." -Lee Frischknecht, first director of network affairs and second president of NPR

Don Quayle, a reporter with decades of experience in educational broadcasting, was elected president of NPR. Quayle and the elected NPR Board of Directors worked on hiring initial executive staff. He utilized cold-calls to put individuals he believed to be a good fit for the job in management positions, many of them close friends or at the very least acquaintances from his professional networks (McCauley 2012).

Like the hiring process within CPB, Quayle hired largely through informal networking to create a workforce that reflected the white field of educational radio of the time. I will highlight two illustrative cases of hiring through informal networks, using accounts from these employees' oral histories. For the position of director of station relations, Quayle hired Elizabeth Young, who had been working with Quayle on the CPB radio staff at the time and asked Quayle for any job within NPR. By contrast, Lee Frischknecht had never heard of National Public Radio before he was recruited for one of its lead positions, director of network affairs. The contextual details of these hires differ- in particular, Young was already embedded in CPB while Frischknecht was not privy to the project; but they are united through their informality. Rather than conducting an open job search for a public media, NPR's president used his existing national networks in noncommercial radio to find good fits for these executive positions.

Quayle's trust was contingent on previous contact through professional networks within the existing organizational field, which were inaccessible to Black individuals, and people of color more generally, at the time. This normative isomorphic pressure to use existing contacts within professional networks resulted in racial exclusion; however, the white normativity of the

organizational field obscured the connection between network recruitment and the resulting white-dominant executive staff.

Programming staff

The recruitment of programming staff, led by first program director Bill Siemering, is told in the written and oral histories of public radio as a substantial break from the recruitment process utilized to hire the executive staff. Siemering rejected the formal requirements of prior experience in government or in the educational radio system to make radio programs, to the chagrin of the board of directors. He balked at the normative pressure to recruit only those with professional experience, conceiving of the technology as “a powerful, personal, imaginative medium that is easily learned and can change lives” (Galenson 2012). As early employee Lee Frischknecht states in the quote above, the programming staff were seen as those led by passion rather than experience, a refreshing change in the old guard of educational radio.

In his previous role of station manager of WBFO, a university station in Buffalo, NY, Siemering pioneered a three-hour program known as *This is Radio*, which included voices of the Black-dominant ghetto in discussing issues ranging from the Vietnam War to civil rights domestically. However, his commitment did not extend into his consideration of who would be recruited for staff positions. While he set up shop in a storefront in the ghetto of Buffalo, NY, the Black voices highlighted by *This is Radio* volunteered their opinions; those at the predominantly white university were volunteer journalists who were gaining skills in production and management. In other words, even though the voices on the air were racially diverse, the “voice-givers” who gained professional experience from their time at WBFO were majority-white, and the alumni network was, too. According to Siemering, “WBFO had an extraordinary group of gifted students that went on to have impressive careers in and out of broadcasting” (Galenson 2012).

As in WBFO, the majority of Siemering’s original hires were young white reporters from college stations, along with a handful of experienced white reporters from commercial media looking to make a switch (Seymour 2008). In 1971, There were 26 staff members at the national level. Of this staff, there were 15 men and 11 women. Of the 21 employees whose racial identity could be ascertained from the archives, there were 20 white staff members and one Black staff member (Stamberg Papers). This staff was seen as a passionate bunch that served as a contrast to the establishment figures in positions at CPB (Frischknecht Oral History). Some found the approach to be a welcomed shift to valuing passion and life experience over expertise; others, however, including veteran reporters and public radio managers, grew frustrated by its haphazard output of a 90-minute news program without the consistency of an experienced staff (McCauley 2005).

From either perspective, despite limited experience within the government or educational radio establishment, this staff’s privileged racial position in existing white-dominant social networks was a salient factor in recruitment potential. While Siemering and his hiring team did not rely on the existing organizational field, they relied on university specialization to ensure that they hired individuals with the institutional backing, if not the experience. What this reliance on university specialization neglects, however, is the potential for the voices interviewed to become radio professionals. The normative isomorphic pressure to rely on universities as markers of legitimacy removes the majority non-white community as a viable pool of candidates and centers majority-white university radio interns as future recruits for public radio stations; these normative isomorphic pressures create a racially exclusionary pipeline for programming staff.

Technological standards

“I mean we now have stations that are owned and operated by minority groups, like American Indians, Eskimos, what have you. Sometimes those communities are finding it difficult to meet the criteria. Yet even there I think having them has thrust forward the thinking: well, if this is what we have to do to get the money and get the programs, we’ll do it. Which is probably not all bad.” Liz Young, first Station Relations Associate, 1977

In creating a national membership network, the founders of NPR had to consider the standards for national station membership. Which standards did they adopt, and why? The board deferred to the expertise of educational broadcasters in the room, like board member Al Hulsen, who had a prior decade of experience as a reporter and educational radio manager.⁶ However, the imposed standards he supported limited the amount of stations that could receive national funding, heightening the barrier to entry. One such standard was the need for a higher watt station power to meet the criteria of a national member station. From the perspective of the founding members, this ensured excellence as defined by technical programming quality and by consistency.

The move eliminated a disproportionate number of minority-owned community stations. Fledgling community stations had to find the funds to match membership standards, or they would not receive national funding or national programming. In heightening barriers to entry and providing only limited grants for station development, it discouraged would-be members without an existing formal institutional backing.

In contrast, university stations were rewarded for their existing infrastructure backed by university funding, despite their disproportionately white and elite racial and class composition. This composition did not reform with time. By 1977, it was found that “[t]he lowest level of minority participation on public radio and television station boards was found among stations licensed to universities—6.4 per cent (56 of 869) and 8.1 per cent (45 of 554), respectively.”

Board member Al Hulsen led the charge in advocating for the exclusion of ten-watt stations or below from NPR membership; Hulsen justified his role as a board member in making this decision. In a retrospective interview, he quips: “Democracy has its place; but if you believe that educational radio is important, you might just say that the boards ought to do it. I think the boards did a pretty good job. I think they were conscientious and careful in their dealings.”

Furthermore, Hulsen described the process of implementing it as relatively painless due to lack of contact with the affected stations: “I never felt too terribly uncomfortable with any of that because, first of all, you have to remember the structure. There weren’t a lot of national meetings. There weren’t a lot of get-togethers. Most of the business then was done by small meetings of boards of directors. Incidentally, life might be a lot better today if they had less national meetings and more actions by boards of directors.”

His attitude reveals a prioritization of growth and coherence of national station membership over consideration of lower-resourced stations. To garner input from local stations would open up lines of dissent and slow the process down. However, a refusal to reckon with the underlying reasons for material inequalities between stations reinforces and exacerbates the inequality, rewarding the well-endowed stations and punishing those historically disadvantaged.

Hulsen is able to remain blind to the racially biased implications of this behavior; technological standards, on their surface, do not appear to be racialized, until one considers

⁶ Al Hulsen <http://openvault.wgbh.org/catalog/A_B29FCE218ACD4F0686969643B235B941>

longstanding racial inequities in station resources. President Herbert Hoover passed the Radio Act of 1927 in an attempt to regulate the airwaves. It created the Federal Radio Commission (FRC), which controlled station licenses and reduced the number of stations on the air. Stations applied for frequencies, and the commission used their discretion to decide which broadcasts were most worthy to get airtime on a given frequency at a particular time. The commission often deferred to the station with the most capital, i.e. for-profit stations (McCauley 2005).

Educational stations that banded together to form a larger network in response were largely white-owned universities, as the cost of a license for a noncommercial station was prohibitively expensive for many community centers and nonprofits in which nonwhite communities more often participated. Because of his position on the dominant side of the color line, Hulsen could look at his decision as one that was based on technological limitations. His isolation from smaller, ten-watt stations was a choice that allowed him to hold onto this unknowing stance of the history of racialized resource allocation across races.

Programming Priorities

Recall that Mitchell's memoir describes his own position within the noncommercial radio field. Within his self-assessed experience at NPR, he continually discusses how the audience was like him as educated and civically-minded; the term white is elided from his own self-reflection, used once throughout the book when quoting one more leftist critique. Founders thought of themselves as admittedly left-leaning and accounted that in their biases; however, they saw their own perspective as *white men* as universal and "general" among the educated, inhibiting racial representation in program production even within the similar political spectrum. NPR aimed to produce national content in addition to distributing programming, in part because there were an insufficient number of high quality local noncommercial programs to air nationally (McCauley 2005). Thus, while pluralism became a hallmark of NPR in the abstract through Siemering's famous programming purposes, NPR employees' inattention to their own whiteness inhibited them from seeing their own perspectives as racialized.

In addition to deciding which local stations would be considered for NPR membership, executive staff had to chart out what the national programming production team would focus on. In conversations about what national programming would cover and sound like during NPR's first board meeting in January 1970, board members decided that minority groups would be served by their local communities, and that NPR's national team would only focus on general programming of interest to the whole nation.

Board members "agreed that NPR should not be duplicating local stations' efforts, nor should it initially be providing a special service to minority groups, except in so far as 'minority' programs were of national interest" (John Macy Files 1970). It soon became clear that general programming of interest, defined by the board and national programming staff, would not be about communities of color. The attitude of nonwhite perspectives as the "other" manifested in founders' conversations regarding news programs produced on the national level. The board's discourse consistently differentiated between general and specialized audience programming, deciding that they would handle the general daily programming whereas local stations would provide more specialized community programs, such as shows for racial and ethnic minorities.

National Programming

The national programming that they did invest in was a unique shift from more traditional molds of educational radio, which had either a news bent or culture bent. Siemering, as programming manager, insisted that they develop a show akin to a newsmagazine, that hits a

variety of topics within three hours. By May of 1971, *All Things Considered*, staked as their flagship program, went on the air (Stamberg and Roberts 2010).

Engelman, in his political history of NPR, notes that while this form deviated from the archetypal news broadcasts, its form and content mirrored those programs that station employees worked on before their switch to NPR. “Various precedents are said to have influenced its format—among them, Al Hulsen's former show *Kaleidoscope* on the Eastern Educational Network, a program called *This Is Radio* broadcast by WBFO/Buffalo during Siemering's tenure as station manager, the CBC's early-morning offering *America as It Happens*, and the public and cultural affairs programming of the BBC, which influenced Jack Mitchell, another veteran of WHA/Madison who helped create ATC” (Engelman 1996).

And yet, zero of these programming staff looked to nonwhite-owned stations to see the content or form outside of existing educational radio programming. While setting themselves apart from the archetype of educational radio, they still sought a position already established within the field: white liberal programming that demonstrated an appreciation of pluralism and of different voices, within the mediation of an all-white programming staff.

Membership Station Programming

This assumption that NPR's local stations would automatically reflect the demographic diversity of the district, despite no evidence suggesting it would be so, was a logic that ignored the history of racial exclusion in noncommercial radio and in wider U.S. society. Furthermore, it implied that the national interest is the interest of the white majority. The narrative of change towards pluralism without a corresponding investment in nonwhite stations was an illogical one, only made comprehensible when a person's social conditioning facilitates a normalization of white dominance. The move also excluded the interests of minoritized groups in the understanding of who counts as part of the nation.

Furthermore, the model of local stations providing minority group programming proved insufficient. For instance, Detroit's local station served a majority-Black district, and the white staff wanted to create specialized Black programming. However, as the white station manager lamented to his fellow public radio professionals: “As a white person you're not exactly in the most advantageous position to determine the needs of the Black community, or to judge the standards of programming by and for Blacks— that is, the Black aesthetic. That's why you need to find a committed Black to do this for you. But where do you look?” (John Macy Files). The sentiment was shared across this 1971 conference, as the write-up declared that “many managers who stated they were interested in minority programming said they didn't know where to start” (John Macy Files).

The statement that they would need to “find a committed Black to do this for [them]” is reminiscent of practices spanning back decades, of Black Americans being called on to consult and comment on their own communities but not to become station owners, or even members of the station (Savage 1999; Stoeber 2011). This attitude homogenizes blackness as a unified concept to be included in white-owned broadcast stations to create a more diverse media.

However, in this recruitment of Black voices, the white manager does not consider the possibility for Black ownership of media. In stopping short of consideration of nonwhite ownership, the conversation seeks solutions that address unequal conditions “without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them,” which Fraser refers to as affirmative remedies (1995: 82). This approach stands in contrast with transformative remedies that challenge the underlying framework of the institution. In the dominant narrative of NPR as a blank slate,

however, the need for a more drastic intervention attuned to historical legacies of exclusion and current ownership status is obscured.

Discussion

Public radio and the broader academic world are liberal or progressive in their thinking, but are not radical. [The people who live in this world] are not about to jeopardize their own comfortable situations by fostering fundamental change” - Jack Mitchell (McCauley 114).

“The scenario would not be so dismal for minorities however, if the public broadcast industry were alone: in negating the minority presence and the positive aspects of the lives and cultures of the diverse and ethnic minorities in America. However, finding no place set for them at the commercial broadcasting table, minorities have discovered that they must look further than public broadcasting to find a place at all.” - Gloria Anderson, 1977

As Anderson states at the conclusion of the CPB’s 1977 Minority Task Force Report, these findings of white dominance in public radio are not isolated; rather, they are reflective of broadcasting organizations more generally. Considering new organizations as structures subject to normative pressures of a potentially racialized organizational field has implications for our conversations about racial justice. Recall that Fraser differentiates between affirmative and transformative remedies (1995). If we are to conceptualize only individuals and their acts within organizations as racist or non-racist and treat race as a demographic variable specific to individual-level actors, we could hope to use a set of affirmative remedies to address unequal conditions by race “without disturbing the underlying framework.”

However, if we conceive of race as a structural mechanism that upholds white dominance through nonwhite exclusion, we acknowledge that legally authorized organizational frameworks developed in an environment of legally sanctioned racial exclusion will be, at their foundation, white dominant. Affirmative remedies obscure the need to challenge hierarchies of difference by treating such social categories as race as fixed, static, and attached to individual bodies. Fraser (1995) stresses that a transformative ethic is one that would serve to disrupt and destabilize categories of social difference, rather than accommodate and reify them. In order to consider such a transformative effort would require two societal shifts: (1) a recognition of race as embedded in not just organizations, but in the larger field to which new organizations must conform; and (2) from that recognition, a mass divestment from the normalized practices that keep whiteness at the center of conceptions of professionalism

Conclusion

In the present paper, I have limited the bounds of my analysis to how professionalism and fieldwide standards can be racialized, and the diffusion of such covertly racialized practices. However, the case study would benefit from sustained attention to the co-constitution of class and gender-based professional norms in this set of field-wide practices adopted, and how these practices reinforce one another. Furthermore, future research may marshal in a different set of empirics to illuminate how the global regime of whiteness intersects with other historically contingent factors specific to the space and time of the case in question.

The analytical concept of white normative isomorphism introduced in the present paper exposes the diffusion of white dominance to new organizations within an organizational field, via racialized norms of professionalism in the field. Without rethinking modern professional

standards in U.S. organizational fields—often created by well-educated white men in an era of legalized racial segregation—organizational attempts at racial inclusion shall continue to be merely invitations into a white-dominant world, contingent on white discretion. The organizational form invested in racial justice will seek deeper transformative remedies for legacies of racism, rather than stopping at affirmative hiring into a white dominant frame.

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