

# Dominant Voices

How the news falsely portrays objectivity, promotes boosterism and socially constructs news by using public officials & dominant voices as sources

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*The school board of Anniston, Alabama has not achieved unitary status due to failure to prove integration of its elementary schools and the city newspaper, the Anniston Star (or simply the Star) frequently covers it. However, they cover it from a single vantage point – that of its public officials. This paper will explore how the newspaper, and news in general, speaks primarily on behalf of the entire community through the dominant voices of public officials like city council members, school board members, etc., while oftentimes, communal voices go unheard. It will challenge journalists to contend against the status quo, and dig deeper with their stories.*

**Keywords:** boosterism, unitary status, desegregation, social construction, racial issues as news, objectivity, dominant narrative

## Introduction

In the South, racism was once a very big deal. “The South,” defined here for the purpose of argument as Alabama, Mississippi, Kentucky and Tennessee, was not long ago known heavily for enslaving, lynching, segregating and overtly brutalizing black people (blacks being defined as those who identify as African, African-American, Afro-Caribbean, or who are otherwise discriminated against due to having a darker skin color). Some have bought into the myth that we

live in what is called a “post-racial” society<sup>1</sup>. However, this may not be the case in Anniston, Alabama.

If the name Anniston doesn’t ring a bell, think back to the Freedom Riders of 1961, who rode public buses in an effort to break down the politics of segregation by inciting a crisis situation in the South. A racially mixed group of 13 people headed for Birmingham, Alabama, on a Greyhound bus. They would have gotten off at a rest stop in Anniston, but did not, noting a mob of white men with weapons, ready to attack. Before they could pull off, the mob slashed all the tires then followed them in their vehicles as the bus “ground to a halt.” The mob held the bus doors shut and threw a firebomb through the windows (Hampton, 1990).

This act of racially motivated violence set a backdrop of the sort of message the South wished to convey. Fast-forward to over 50 years later and though Anniston isn’t quite burning buses anymore, racial tension still remains in spite of the community’s efforts to create a “Freedom Riders National Park” at the site where the bus burning took place (McCreless 3, 2015). This tension even now trickles down to the children, as the majority of the public elementary schools are still segregated. It appears The Anniston Star, primary local newspaper, has no qualms about addressing this.

As The Anniston Star has repeatedly reported, the elementary schools in Anniston, Alabama, are one too many for the amount of students they actually have. With the public schools containing nearly all black students according to demographics, and the two private schools housing the majority of the white population, segregation is evident. City officials want to consolidate the public schools, closing down the smallest one or two out of them all and

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<sup>1</sup> See [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dennis-trainor/the-myth-of-a-post-racial\\_b\\_4907733.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dennis-trainor/the-myth-of-a-post-racial_b_4907733.html)

moving those students to the bigger schools. However, federal oversight is hindering them from being able to do so. The U.S. Supreme Court found racial segregation of schools unconstitutional in 1954, and required mostly the resistant southern states to prove integration of students before school boards were able to take any major steps like closing a school down. Proving this integration would allow them to achieve unitary status and thus make their own decisions without having to ask for permission (Crain, 2013). But Anniston has not yet done that.

While the newspaper speaks frankly on this matter, it seems to believe it's telling the whole story rather than not. This paper begins by introducing background on the newspaper, its reporters and the town of Anniston. After analyzing articles discussing primarily the issue with school consolidation, a general idea about the ways the newspaper portrayed objectivity began to surface. This paper will analyze newspapers' tendencies to report an entire story from one perspective, along with boosting a particular topic while constructing the social reality and opinion on that issue, all in a sub-conscious effort to support and maintain the dominant voice and narrative.

## **Background**

This section henceforth will discuss the background of the city of Anniston and the Anniston Star.

### **Anniston and Its People**

Anniston is in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, a part of Calhoun County. As of 2010, blacks outnumbered whites in population, 52 to 45 percent, according to the U.S.

Census Bureau survey. Yet nearly the entire staff of the newspaper is white, or what appears to be white. Along with the schools having obvious segregation, their town is segregated as well. Many of the blacks live in west Anniston, while the whites live in the east and in the hills. Their library has a Bookmobile. It's a town that is agreeable, and on the surface, a typical southern town. But Anniston's people are aging and speculation indicates that is why the population of elementary schools has steadily been decreasing. It's also a city that has been in discussions about closing down their public, majority black elementary schools since at least 1991.

The residents of Anniston, such as Todd Borders, the white associate pastor of Hill Crest Baptist Church, don't seem to perceive the racist undercurrent that flows through Anniston. While he acknowledged that many of the blacks seem to populate in the west, he claimed to be unaware of racial tension "if there is any." So things like the elementary schools not being fully integrated can easily happen right under the citizens' noses and they wouldn't know it.

### **Goals of the newspaper & audience**

The newspaper seemingly covers all of Anniston (and its surrounding cities, and major national news) objectively, despite the segregation that takes place in its city. As it reads on the editorial page, "It is the duty of a newspaper to become the attorney for the most defenseless among its subscribers," words written by the original president and publisher, Colonel Harry M. Ayers. The Anniston Star, with its desire to "tell the complete story of their community – the good and the bad" according to editor Bob Davis, openly reports on school integration along with many other race-based conflicts. The newspaper not only functions through physical delivery to paying subscribers, but also online as "The Anniston Star Online," functioning to encourage an open exchange of information and ideas, as stated on their website.

Demetrius Hardy, who handles the paper's national accounts for advertising, says that the Star doesn't necessarily have a target audience. But, just as editor Bob Davis stated, the audience readership comes from a general conglomerate of the surrounding counties including Calhoun, Cleburne, Randolph, Clay and Talladega counties. The paper is published every day except Monday, and has a Sunday circulation of about 19,000 and about 17,000 during the week. Hardy also stated that the subscribers usually tend to have at least a high school education, with some technical school education, and college graduates. "Most of our readers are homeowners as well," he said.

### **The Issue**

The primary focus of this paper is to discuss the social construction of the Anniston Star as it pertains to reporting about issues of race, segregation/integration of their schools, and the ongoing battle of whether or not to close down some elementary schools, but not being able to due to the school board not achieving unitary status. Patrick McCreless is a staff reporter who reports on many of the town's political and controversial issues, albeit from a very dominant, white male hegemonic perspective. It was observed that the Anniston Star seems almost consumed with trying to report a holistic story of its city, embracing its hellish past of the Freedom Riders and various civil rights movements, and throwing its white police officers under the proverbial bus for allegedly being a part of a secessionist group. The Anniston Star works hard to bring about awareness of whatever racial issues come up, but only from their white perspective and truthfully, to nearly no avail. School consolidation and unitary status have been reported about year after year, and yet the school board hasn't put forth as much effort into making a change by desegregating their schools.

Residents have reported that it became obvious that once efforts were made to start integrating schools, whites began to move their children elsewhere (Baker, 1999). Thus, while the public schools were being integrated and filling up with black students from low income households, the whites were emptying out and into either the religious local private schools or the next town over, Oxford. The Catholic private school in Anniston costs a minimum of \$411 a month in tuition, while their Christian private school is a comfortable minimum of \$420 – and that’s not including the application fee, enrollment fee and any other fee<sup>2</sup>. It’s no wonder why the black residents all have their children in the public schools. However, that doesn’t seem to be a big issue to the Anniston Star, who instead focus their sights on whether or not the public schools will be allowed to be consolidated, and whether or not Anniston has yet achieved unitary status.

The ways in which the newspaper was discovered and analyzed will be discussed in the following section.

## **Method**

The Anniston Star was discovered through “Today’s Front Pages” on Newsuem.org. When compared to other newspapers, its subscription package, first and foremost, was the most reasonable and affordable. Additionally, many of their previous publications and articles were easy to find and accessible on News Bank. The content on the Anniston Star Online was plentiful and varied, so coming to a decision to make this news outlet the topic of the newspaper wasn’t very difficult.

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<sup>2</sup> Noted as per the Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic School and Faith Christian School websites.

Upon finding many articles related to the issue of integration and consolidation of the schools, typically covered by McCreless, it was evident that this was a semi-frequent topic. A qualitative analysis was taken by first finding multiple articles written regarding integration, black people, schools, consolidation, and unitary status. The articles were scrutinized to determine the overall tone and message that the reporter was trying to construct by using whichever quotes he/she decided to use (Bullock, 2011). Few dissenting voices came through the articles regarding school consolidation. To most people, it seemed like closing down the schools was the best option. No one seemed to know or inquire about what steps to take to achieve unitary status. The main focus was to save government and school board funds by closing down some schools and worry about achieving unitary status later. A few school board members thought it might be best to keep the federal oversight for “protection,” but from what, was not made clear.

Sources outside of the newspaper were not extremely receptive to a foreigner encroaching on their personal territory. The director of the homeless shelter “House is a Home Transitional Shelter” was not very open to communicating her views, insisting that she wasn’t the best person to provide insight on these issues, nor her name. She suggested that the city council would be the best crowd to reach out to. It was noted that many members of the city council, the school board, and other heads of organizations pertaining to their respective stories, were used as the newspaper’s primary sources. For example, Anniston’s city manager Brian Johnson can be seen quoted more often than not in McCreless’s local governmental stories. He frequently quotes the school board superintendent and president, and otherwise uses a multitude of “presidents” and “directors” for the organizations represented. Rarely are there “normal” citizens or marginalized people quoted in the articles.

Of course, this is not entirely to blame the reporters themselves for this flaw. Journalistic pedagogy as a whole perpetuates this cycle of instigating white news production, in that it primarily continues reliance on white elites as sources (Aleman, 2014). When white people are writing textbooks that help journalism students determine what is newsworthy, white dominance can seep through.

## **Concept**

Journalistic boosterism is being used by the newspaper to promote and provide awareness to its surrounding community of its racial issues. This interpretation says that the Anniston Star is attempting to “boost” achieving unitary status or consolidating the schools to show readers that Anniston has not come very far on the spectrum of racial desegregation. Since the community of Anniston is nearly defined by its past of tumultuous racial tension, it seems to ride on that wave with the citizens thinking they’ve come so far, and it’s as far as they can go. But it’s not. Banishment can be defined as this: while the paper discusses and presents the formal occasions in which school consolidation and other matters are discussed (such as city council meetings), and posts editorials that are almost always in favor of the dominant theme, many voices are still going unheard (Gutsche, 2014). This shows its sense of false objectivity. The newspaper may tell the story, but only from one point of view. At the same time, the Anniston Star is carefully using its power to construct an image and story of the city. While they may not be expecting anyone outside of Alabama to notice or care about their local dramas, each article is reported as if it was being written for the first time, and as a result, reads like a very integral part of a plan to garner attention toward these certain subjects.

### **Boosterism and banishment**

Recently, two police officers left Anniston's police department (one was fired, one resigned). Allegedly, they were a part of the League of the South, a secessionist group, also labeled a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Hankes, 2015). Many an editorial came in from presumably white readers who were outraged over the departure of their beloved police officers. This was reported, along with a meeting that the city council had with the U.S. Department of Justice's Community Relations Service (aka "America's Peacemaker") to help reduce community "tensions." The Anniston Star reported it all, and published the opinionated pieces – but not many words were found from people who agreed with the decision made by the city manager. This is boosterism.

The concept applied here casts the newspaper as telling its stories through the lens of the dominant interpretations of what is good for the citizens and how the community ought to be seen (Gutsche, 2014). The city is actually wanting to be known for rebuilding itself – and firing two "racist" police officers is a right step to take in that direction. It received a lot of publicity as the council met with America's Peacemakers and showed intentions of having racial-sensitivity trainings (McCreless 4, 2015). The articles discussing the school consolidation boost the "need" for it, but also the need for unitary status and freedom from federal oversight to make the "best" decisions for the city. It ultimately makes the city council look good (boosting) and portrays a reality of an Anniston intolerant of racism and segregation that may not be entirely consistent with the citizens' everyday lives.

### **News as social construction**

While the agenda of the newspaper isn't necessarily suspicious, it does seem targeted in some aspects toward getting the attention of its readers to focus on the issues of integration and race. However, the people of Anniston are either not reading or not heeding the Anniston Star. To people outside of the southern states, the idea of schools still being segregated is slightly bizarre. The people in the communities vaguely pay attention to the fact that the whites live in the east and the blacks in the west, never mind that their public schools contain nearly all black students, defeating the purpose of the integration that has already taken place. So while to outsiders the idea of even having to integrate the schools seems absurd<sup>3</sup>, the Anniston Star reports about it as if it's the norm.

The vast majority of the stories reported on the issue use members of the school board, or the city council, or whatever major organization is involved, as sources. News therefore is constructed with a still ever-present dominant perspective, being that of those making the decisions rather than those being affected by them. Davis states that the relationship between politicians and journalists shifts the shape of the news content and so the public's understanding of the politics is handled. As it turns out, these dominant sources regularly gain the upper hand, and journalists are generally expected to be allied to politicians (Davis, 2009). This can tend to have a negative effect on the journalistic ideal of holding the government accountable for the good of the people, or "offering a voice to the forgotten" (Gutsche, 2015, 39).

### **False objectivity**

The close ties between journalists and politicians leads to a very jaded and biased view of politics and issues relevant to local civilians. Although objectivity has a definition that should

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<sup>3</sup> A small survey was conducted to gather opinions on the fact that schools still need to be integrated.

seem to be clear, the actual understanding and application of the concept has not been consistent throughout the years (Munoz-Torres, 2012). Gutsche (2015, p. 39) sums up what journalists tend to believe objectivity is:

“By telling stories through sources rather than through their own opinions, for example, journalists distance themselves from directly commenting on what they deem to be the news. Sources – not the scribes – provide descriptions and interpretations of events. Combined with other standards such as accuracy and verification, journalists argue that they provide an objective representation of reality.”

The argument here is that simply providing one-sided facts with no apparent stance on the issue is not objectivity. If a reporter has a strong value system or beliefs, those could easily slip into an issue she is reporting on in the midst of her writing, essentially ruining the objective façade that journalists are expected to portray. But objectivity is too vast and ever-changing to be truly held down and defined, which is why this paper is accusing the Anniston Star of having a false sense of security that they are reporting objectively. McCreless reports from a seemingly objective point of view but is still only reporting one point of view.

## **Analysis/Discussion**

This analysis will relate the aforementioned concepts to the specific ways in which the Anniston Star’s reporting on the school consolidation and integration (among other issues of race) contributed to speaking on behalf of the dominant voice by reflecting boosterism, a false sense of objectivity, and socially constructing their story to create a (non)-reality for their readers.

## **Boosterism**

There is a theme of boosterism here. While the boosting may be applied to what the leaders deem “good” for Anniston, in an effort to play the devil’s advocate, the Anniston Star makes much of an effort to cover the many things that Anniston is needing and trying to change involving race, but not really hearing from those who may not want Anniston to change.

There was 14 articles in 2012 regarding school consolidation. Since then there’s been a total of 20 and counting.

Within the past 2 years, only about 12 editorials or opinion pieces were published that spoke on the issue of school consolidation – and all of them were in favor of moving forward with the school consolidation. The political boosterism that took place was evident. Even when the staff reporters relayed information that took place in city council meetings, there was always the idea that the options were close down and consolidate the elementary schools or achieve unitary status – but nothing else. In an editorial published in 2012, a reader argued for consolidation.

“It’s understandable that Superintendent Joan Frazier prefers not to close an elementary school; she told Board of Education members that during Tuesday’s board meeting. Keeping all five elementaries open solves the dilemma of deciding which one to shutter. But that option isn’t feasible. The quicker Frazier and the board settle on a system-wide consolidation plan that retains only four elementary schools, the better the Anniston system will be” (Editorial, 2012).

Of course, this is the politically correct thing to report, but to truly be fair and unbiased, it is important to show as many sides of the story as possible. Where are the people who don’t want

the schools to consolidate? If there are any, they are living under a rock for all the Anniston Star staff knows.

### **Social construction**

Politics play a pivotal role in the construction of social reality. As discussed in the concept's introduction, the way the newspaper frames its stories will determine what type of reality it is trying to portray to its readers. The city of Anniston desires to revive its reputation as the "Model City." The mayor and his council need to save money so they can build great things to attract tourists to Anniston. One of the ways to save money is to close down some of the (black) public schools that are over-funded for their meek populations. However, they can't close down the schools nor consolidate them due to the fact that they have not achieved unitary status. This matter has been in discussion for years now, yet it continues to pop up in the newspaper afresh at a minimum frequency of twice a year. The sources are always the same types of people, debating about whether or not the federal oversight should be lifted, but ultimately agreeing that, yes, school consolidation is best for the city budget. No one is consulted about whether or not this is detrimental in any way to the black community. In the midst of all of this, the social construction is forming that it's the opinions of the leaders and politicians that matter, something all journalists are taught by the white textbooks that circulate journalism schools. The social construction that school consolidation is necessary while unitary status is important, but can wait, is reiterated. All of this is contributing to the dominant voice that will always be heard.

### **False sense of objectivity**

The Star doesn't always report in favor of the city council in terms of its deliberations and decisions for the city. Sometimes, they do call them out for their shortcomings – such as the

City Hall needing more diversity (McCreless1, 2015). But that reporter, while reaching out to people outside of Anniston, still maintained the dominant perspective of professional experts on civil service and affirmative action, etc. No person of color who applied for these jobs or who was already working for the big-wigs was given a voice here. While he may appear to report objectively and advocating for the cause of diversity and such, there is still a one-sided story. Davis understands objectivity to be fairness and balance: “According to the principle of balance, the goal of good reporting is to present multiple, or even opposing, views about a topic, as if they were all equally valid, that is, without giving privilege to any of them.”

One of the Star’s favorite sources is the city manager, Brian Johnson. He was unresponsive to numerous responses to contact him for an interview, but his name pops up so frequently in the newspaper that an interview was almost unwarranted. He sits comfortably as a primary source among city council members, school board members, general organization presidents, and so on. This enables the lack of diversity among the sources the reporters use, thus crippling their ability to have a truly objective report.

When the Star reports on the issue of the schools being closed down or consolidated, word is not heard to express any perspective of the students abiding in those schools, or the principals or parents. As Gutsche (2014) said, “Instead, reporters choose to dissect issues related to schools through the sanitized, non-human lens of statistics and ‘official’ explanations. They report on what they are told through means that present notions of objectivity – reports made by officials about schools from the perspective of serving the ‘public good’ and, particularly, the children.”

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this paper aimed to take a look at how the news can attempt to report objectively and still have a subjective vantage point. In a place like Anniston, with such a marked history, it may be hard to grow out of the habit of referring to the immediate superior and dominant voices for information regarding a specific political issue. Where the young black kids are going to school matters to not only the government, but their families. Yet none of the families are reported to have been contacted. With the stale voice of the public officials and other statistics, newspapers like the Anniston Star deliver facts in an effort to boost agendas, construct a social reality, and yet operate within a false sense of objectivity.

What do the people want? No, really – what do they want? The Star has already graciously covered the totality of the education departments not reaching unitary status, the debates when it comes to consolidating the schools and the when's, if's and how's, and what pretty much every council member on the school board and city council thinks about it. It is of course, a very pointed agenda disguised under the notion of caring. Ultimately, whether it be intentional or not, the Star boosts the needs of the elite over the needs and wants of the people. Whether they are one and the same would be hard to tell though, since readers often only get one perspective.

To the outside reader not carefully analyzing the newspaper and subject matter in such a way as this paper did, they might not perceive the literal reality that was constructed for them in the paper. While also boosting the agenda of the officials, the articles identify a hierarchy of power (which exists naturally in US society at any rate) that communities succumb to, apparently mutely. The most important thing to do, moving forward, is broaden the perspective. The social construction must represent and report on each society within the community. Even outside of

speaking to common residents for their opinions, it's time to harshly contend against the set agenda that the government has deemed final, if only to explore other options.

In addition, it would be duly effective to hire journalists who have "other" perspectives. It has been noted that black people segregate themselves in addition to the innate structural segregation that has already taken place. But even while the staff of any newspaper should be diverse enough to encompass multiple perspectives, the fact that it's not diverse shouldn't hinder that multiplicity. Still, an active effort on the part of news organizations, as well as journalism schools and departments as a whole, to include writers and reporters who are black or non-white would broaden the scope of perspectives and make the news more inclusive to the voices that often go unheard.

Truthfully, no reporter is actually objective. With such a vast concept and no solid definition or application other than doing away with your morals, values, and opinions while reporting, objectivity is practically a mythical ideology. In fact, one argument is that the journalistic posture of objectivity is equal to a white identity and boasts of invisibility and neutrality, when in fact "objectivity" merely speaks to the quiet privileged vantage whiteness holds (Aleman, 2013). While journalists may feel they are reporting objectively because they are telling the "whole story," objectivity is impossibly naïve and nearly unattainable. It's time to strive for honesty.

It is all too easy and natural to rely upon the dominant voices and narrative for a story as journalists are taught to, but if an effort was made to form relationships outside of that ready-made batch, journalists would likely find a whole different picture. Hopefully, this paper will incite an introspective look that journalists will take at themselves. It will cause them to question

their methods and everything ever learned in their respective schools of journalism and mass communications. This paper should cause journalists to think about no longer feigning objectivity, to stop being the mouthpiece of elites, and to construct a new, real reality through reporting holistically.

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