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The *Times-Picayune* and Its Use of the Racial Slur “Nigger:” How Did the *Picayune* Compare with the *New Orleans Item* and *The New York Times*?

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ABSTRACT

This study focused on the New Orleans morning daily newspaper, the *Times-Picayune*.¹ The author searched back issues of the newspaper to find mentions of the racial slur “nigger” published during the 81-year period between 1877 and 1958. The purpose of the analysis was to determine the extent to which the editorial staff at the *Picayune* allowed the term “nigger” to enter their paper. Besides being offensive, “nigger” connotes hatred, belittlement, patronization, disgust, or intimidation directed toward black people. To compare the findings derived from the search of the *Picayune*, the author employed two other newspapers, the counterpart afternoon paper the *New Orleans Item* as well as the national daily *The New York Times*. The author focused the investigation on the paper’s use of “nigger” over time because the use indicates severe disrespect for black people whose culture changed the fabric of New Orleans and the nation and whose political involvement gave rise to the Plessy v. Ferguson decision as well as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Keywords: newspaper coverage, racial slur

Newspapers are mostly local, and throughout history, they have reflected the culture of their community. The daily paper assumed the role of monitor, agenda setter, and thought leader (Aitamurto & Varma, 2018). Newspapers launched ideas, critiqued issues and actions, and challenged wrongful practices of the powerful as well as the commoner. Daily newspapers did not print other tragically offensive words, such as expressions of profanity or descriptions of sexual acts. They maintained professional language despite whether people commonly uttered vulgarities. A newspaper that printed the condescending word “nigger,” other than in hard news reporting, indicated that it led with bankrupted mores or followed the thinking of the people who viewed African Americans as sub-human. This study critically analyzed the publication of one word: “nigger,” focusing on the *Times-Picayune* historically. The author argues that a reputable newspaper would not publish the vulgar term frivolously. Such a news organ, if it printed the derogatory racial label, would include it in a hard news story to capture the tone and tenor of an event or issue or offer it in commentary intended to stimulate discussion in the public arena.

The *Times-Picayune* is the focus of this study because it was the major daily servicing New Orleans during the period of inquiry. Founded in 1837 and continuing through the present, the newspaper had grown to become the largest in the South by 1860. In terms of reporting, newspapers nationally reprinted *Picayune* dispatches, such as those concerning the Mexican-American conflict in which the paper embedded a journalist among American troops (Dabney, 1944; Wilds, 1976). This author included the *New Orleans Item* in the analysis because it is a comparable newspaper located in the same city as the *Picayune* and published during the period of interest. The *Item* served the same market as the *Picayune* and provided a yardstick by which to measure the *Picayune*'s performance in terms of the use of the insulting word. *The New York Times* was a part of the analysis because it is the leading newspaper in the United States, one of the most studied publications in the country, and the most cited in academic studies (Danker-Dake, 2008). The paper was also published in the North and could shed light on whether there were regional similarities or differences in the occurrence of the term “nigger.”

New Orleans is the locale because the city historically had a large population of African Americans. In 1900, the black population comprised 77,714 or 37 percent of a total census of 208,946. The proportion of the black population rose to 39 percent of 328,446 in 1930; and 47 percent of 387,814 in 1950 (Population, 1981). The city is further significant because black leaders resisted white supremacy and campaigned against disenfranchisement and racial segregation that was codified by the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896 and the state constitutions of 1898 and 1921. Black people in New Orleans and the state of Louisiana endured violence at the hands of white men who denied African Americans social, political, and economic opportunities, including access to quality education and training (Reynolds, 1964). The city holds further significance because black people, the vast majority of whom were prohibited from developmental opportunities, directed their energies into permissible activities and laid the foundation on which jazz, gospel, and rhythm and blues were built. They used foods available, added spices, and advanced what would be called creole soul food.

Furthermore, blacks in New Orleans affected race relations nationally. Creoles of color staged a demonstration in 1892 to challenge the constitutionality of Louisiana's Separate Car Act of 1890. The law prohibited black people from occupying sections of train cars reserved for white people. Homer Plessy, a mixed-race black man from New Orleans, sat in the whites-only section of a train car and refused to move to the black section. He was promptly arrested. Black leaders in the city filed the lawsuit known as *Plessy v. Ferguson* that challenged the law. The suit failed when, in 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that whites could assign blacks to separate public accommodations. As a result, the "separate but equal" doctrine was born. The philosophy made racial segregation legal throughout the country and guided the South for 58 years until the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, in 1954, ruled that white exclusivity in public accommodations was unconstitutional (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Newspaper content is also significant because it informs people of what to think about and subsequently what to talk about. Professors of journalism Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1972) originally conceptualized agenda setting in “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media.” They professed that agenda setting predicted that news reports alerted consumers to the events and issues that were newsworthy enough to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). They stopped short of saying that agenda setting influenced a perspective for or against an issue or event. Other studies concluded that exposure to newspapers and their focus on certain content influences consumers’ perspectives (Liao, 2023).

Such influence contributed to the Society of Professional Journalists establishing codes of ethics. Founded in 1909 the organization advocated for news professionals, the industry, standards of reporting, journalism accountability, and other ethical considerations. SPJ’s code contended that “Journalists should balance the public’s need for information against potential harm or discomfort” (SPJ, 2024, n.p.). The *Picayune*’s publication of the pejorative conflicted with the code’s encouragement of journalists to mitigate potential harm or discomfort among its constituents.

In a months-long series in 1993 called “Together Apart: The Myth of Race,” the *Picayune* explored a wide range of racial issues including, the history of race relations in New Orleans, the meaning of race, an exploration of black and white cultures, and institutional racism. The series examined race relations “from the days of the city’s booming trade in enslaved Africans through the era of civil rights to the present” (*Picayune*, 1993, p. 5). Notwithstanding, the paper did not acknowledge its use of the term “nigger” in its pages over the years.

In contrast, in 2020, the *Charlotte Observer* apologized in writing for publishing the word “nigger” more than 6,212 since its founding in 1873. “The N-word is an obscenity, and we would not print an obscenity in the newspaper, so why would we put something that is so hurtful and such an obscenity into our newsprint?” said former *Observer* columnist Mary C. Curtis (Crump, 2020, n.p.). TV station WBTV reported in 2020 that a search of the website

newspaper.com found that publications nationally used the label more than one million times. Scholars, however, have not analyzed the history of newspaper’s use of the ugly word.

In terms of the etymology of the word, law professor Randall L. Kennedy (2001) wrote that the term “nigger” began as *niger* in the Latin language. *Niger* translated to the color black. For example, writers as early as the 6th century B.C. used a *Lapis Niger*, or a black stone, onto which to inscribe messages. “Nigger” originally did not project a racial slur. Over time, writers spelled “nigger” differently, sometimes as *niggah*, *nigguh*, *niggur*, and *niggar*. The record does not indicate precisely when “nigger” acquired a derogatory meaning. It is clear, however, that people of European descent popularly used “nigger” to demean black people at the emergence of African slave trading circa 1650. The use of and meaning of the term “nigger” has evolved as language does over the years. Subsequently, using contemporary standards on historical texts is misinformed. Nevertheless, “nigger” has consistently had hurtful connotations. Assistant professor Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor (2016) contended in “The Etymology of Nigger: Resistance, Language, and the Politics of Freedom in the Antebellum North” that: “This single word “nigger” captured the magnitude of anti-black feeling and was unleashed upon free people as they moved through urban spaces, rode public vehicles, and even ventured abroad” (Pryor, [2016](#), p. 23).

Linguist Keith Allan (2015) suggested that people used the concept “nigger” synonymously with *Negro* until the late-1700s. Thereafter, until the mid-1900s, racists frequently referred to black people using the racial slur “nigger” as the term became a colloquial synonym for *Negro*. According to philosophers Luvell Anderson and Ernie Lepore (2011), a white individual or organizational spokesman who used the unacceptable term intended to derogate, demean, insult, belittle, disparage, or diminish a black person or African Americans in general. In his analysis, political and legal theorist Alexander Brown (2019) applied speech act theory to the use of the word “nigger.” The theory suggests that individuals speak to communicate meaning, which is called an illocutionary act. On the other hand, a perlocutionary act occurs when an individual speaks to affect the actions of someone or others. Subsequently, a communicator could use “nigger” illocutionarily to demean an individual or group. Another messenger might use “nigger” perlocutionarily to strike fear in the hearts and minds of black people with the intention of stopping them from performing a certain action(s).

Socialist Eugene V. Debs (1903) suggested that southern whites embraced hatred of African Americans to keep the subjugated in their place.

...in the state of Louisiana, where the race prejudice is as strong and the feeling against the ‘nigger’ as bitter and relentless as when Lincoln’s proclamation of emancipation lashed the waning confederacy into fury and incited the final and desperate attempts to burst the bonds that held the southern states in the federal union. (p. 257)

Later in 1936, social anthropologist W. Lloyd Warner maintained that the socio-political ideology of the South inculcated lower-class white men to believe that they were better than upper-class African Americans. With such logic, a poor-white subsistence farmer considered a black medical doctor to be a “nigger” whom he need not respect.

The context in which “nigger” is used determines whether it is speech protected by the First Amendment. According to Kennedy (1999), in “Who Can Say ‘nigger’? and Other Considerations,” the use of the word “nigger” is acceptable if it advances debate on a legitimate public issue. For example, a university coach was fired for improper use of the term “nigger” while talking to his players. He sued saying his First Amendment rights were violated. The court disagreed saying that all speech by a public employee is not protected. Speech that communicates information regarding issues of public concern is protected. His use of “nigger” uttered in the context of coaching was not protected. The athletes also sued and won because the court invalidated the university’s speech code because it violated the students’ rights but not the employees’.

Plous & Williams (1995) found that racially stereotyped media content, such as of black people being referred to as “niggers” is linked to prejudice. An observer could argue that “nigger” conjured in the minds of southern whites that an apelike, intellectually underdevelopment boy would attend an integrated school with their daughters. Parents with such a perspective would support racially segregated public schools. They would also likely oppose governmental programs that assist black people. The authors conclude that racial stereotypes of black people prevalent during the period of slavery remained prevalent in American society throughout the mid-1990s.

Some white people at the outset of the period of enslavement assumed that Africans were inferior and referred to them as “niggers” to convey a neutral connotation or a patronizing attitude, such as indicating insincere interest or pseudo kindness, according to Rahman (2012), the meaning of “nigger” evolved as the Civil War approached. It became an overtly hostile and abusive word meant to be a slur that insulted the enslaved people. After the war and the ratification of the 13th Amendment that ended slavery in 1865, the 14th Amendment that granted citizenship to the formally enslaved in 1868, and the 15th Amendment that gave black men the right to vote in 1869, use of “nigger” intensified to the level of the expression of pure contempt. “Nigger” had become widely used among whites to intimidate blacks. As black leaders, particularly after African Americans served in World War I, began to demand to public policymakers and the media that blacks deserved to be treated with equality and dignity, “nigger” began to be regarded as an insult, but not yet profane (Kweku & Kingsbury, 2021). By the late 1900s, “nigger” became increasingly unspeakable by whites who wanted to avoid condemnation and the appearance of being a racist (Rahman, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, there is a lack of scholarly attention to the use of “nigger” in a major newspaper. Nevertheless, Baptiste (2023) wrote:

The use of the term ‘nigger’ suggested that the referent should not be taken seriously. If the *Picayune* generalized ‘nigger’ at all black people, an explanation exists of why it waited 133 years from its founding in 1837 until 1970 before it hired its first black journalist.” (n.p.)

METHODOLOGY

The *Times-Picayune* was the newspaper of focus. The *New Orleans Item* was used to put into context any appearances of “nigger” in the *Picayune*, while *The New York Times* was used as a second component of the analysis. The *Times* provided a litmus indication from a major northern newspaper regarding the publication of the invective. The period of this study was chosen for convenience. The years represent the time period during which all three of the dailies were published. The *Item* began publishing in 1877 and continued until 1958. The *Times-Picayune* had a much longer publishing life. It was founded in 1837, and *The New York Times* first appeared in 1851. The *Picayune* and the *Times* continue publishing presently.

This comparative analysis used historical newspaper databases to search the contents of the *Times-Picayune* and the *New Orleans Item*. The *Times* operates an online archive accessible to subscribers. The New Orleans Public Library has a database of select local papers that is accessible online via its website. The author identified five major race-related news events that occurred between 1877 and 1958, including: The Supreme Court decisions in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, May 18, 1896; the adoption of the Louisiana state constitutions, May 12, 1898; the ratification of the subsequent constitution on June 18, 1921; the announcement of the ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, May 17, 1954; and the signing of the bill that became the Civil Rights Act on September 9, 1957.

The author entered the dates of each seven-day period within which the five news events occurred. For example, the first news event was the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that the court announced on May 18. The dates of the search were May 17 to May 24. The search term was simply the word “nigger.” The author noted whether there were hits, and if so, the number of articles or other content that contained “nigger.” The author clicked the link to each hit, read the content, and categorized the use of “nigger” as anecdotal, a fact in a news story, an inducement to a debate in the public sphere, or a proper noun.

FINDINGS

During the period of interest, the *Picayune* included the concept “nigger” in five stories and a classified ad, while the *Item* published the term only once (See Table 1). To put the above findings into perspective, the following numbers represent the quantification of the total number

Table 1

Date	Event	Date Range	Number of Items Using “Nigger”		
			<i>TP</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>NYT</i>
May 18, 1896	<i>Plessy v Ferguson</i>	May 17-24, 1896	1	0	0
May 12, 1898	State Constitution	May 11-18, 1898	2	0	0
June 18, 1921	State Constitution	June 17-24, 1921	2	0	0
May 17, 1954	<i>Brown v Board</i>	May 16-23, 1954	1	1	0
Sept. 9, 1957	Civil Rights Act	Sept. 8-15, 1957	0	0	8

of articles or entries that mentioned the aspersion in each of the papers. A keyword search using the word “nigger” was conducted on all the content published in each newspaper between 1877 and 1958. The numbers do not take into account that the *Picayune* published on average more pages per issue than the *Item*. Therefore, it had more pages within which to publish “nigger” than the *Item*. The universal search revealed that “nigger” appeared in the *Picayune* 4,070 times compared to 1,833 times in the *Item*. In other words, “nigger” appeared 2,237 times more in the *Picayune* than in the *Item*, which is 56 percent more.

Instead of relying on a general search, this study narrowed the inquiries. It analyzed the use of the slur during a week in which each of the five major news events occurred. The assumption was that “nigger” would appear in a story concerning each news event. That was not the case. No such story appeared in the *Item* during the first period of analysis. While the *Picayune* published stories that contained “nigger,” none of the stories related to any of the news events. For example, during the week, between May 17 and May 24, 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in favor of Ferguson in the Plessy case. The *Times-Picayune* did not publish a story about the ruling. Instead, it published a long story concerning speeches by Louisiana candidates for a seat in the U.S. Senate. Three days prior to the publication of the article concerning the speeches, the Supreme Court decided Plessy v. Ferguson and established that states could legally enforce their laws requiring separate accommodations for whites and blacks. In other words, law enforcers could compel African Americans to stay away from close proximity to whites in public and private spaces. In the unrelated story wherein “nigger” was mentioned, candidate John Newton Pharr, one of four hopefuls who spoke at the Baton Rouge forum, did not speak about Plessy. Pharr talked about voting and the potential that the votes of white men would not count. “This is a question between white men. Don’t let us have to stand by the polls with Winchester riffles to see our votes counted fairly” (*Times-Picayune*, 1896, p. 1). Pharr added, “Your votes are not going to be counted out anymore on any ‘nigger’ question or anything else.”

During the second period, the week between May 11 and May 18, 1898, the *Picayune* published two stories that mentioned “nigger” and suggested that black people were worthless (*Picayune*, 1898, p. 4; *Picayune*, p. 10). In contrast, the *Item* did not use the degradation in articles it published during the period. The week embraced the day that the Louisiana legislature enacted a new state constitution on May 12, 1898. The constitution erected obstacles that obstructed black men from voting or serving on juries. Established law prohibited women, black or white, from voting. To stop African American men from voting, the constitution required black people to pay to vote, demonstrate that they owned property, read and interpret complicated passages, and fill in a confusing voter registration form. To avoid disqualifying poor, illiterate white men, the framers crafted wording that permitted a man to vote if his ancestors enjoyed the right to vote before 1867. Prior to 1867, Louisiana law prohibited virtually all black people from voting (*Times-Picayune*, 1896).

The first of the two “nigger” mentions came in the “Our Picayune” column, a collection of anecdotes of observations of the day. The miscellany concerned a boxing match in which a

black man knocked out his white opponent. The paragraph that mentioned the belittling term said the black man disgraced himself by punching a white man and knocking him off his feet.

A white man who will engage in a prize fight with a black man seems too mean to receive attention enough to be knocked down by a ‘nigger’: but Dobbs, a Memphis black, has degraded himself enough to knock out Case, of Seattle, in a prize fight (*Times-Picayune*, 1898. p .4).

The second story published during the same week beginning May 11, 1898, referred to a black man as a “nigger.” It came in a column called “Lagniappe,” which in New Orleans culture means a little extra for no additional charge. This Lagniappe column took the form of a poem written in heavy stereotyped so-called, black vernacular. The poem was titled “Er Plea Ergin Lynchin,” which translated to a plea against lynching. Despite the title, the poem discounted lynching, supported white supremacy, and mentioned “nigger” three times. The poem began: “Here’s er plea ter yo’, ma marsters, Ter de great Caucasian race” (Hall, 1898, p. 10). Translation: Here’s a plea to you my master. Toward the great Caucasian race. A few stanzas later, the poem admitted that white sheriffs and judges made the laws. Furthermore, it read, “So, yo’ should’n’ hang er “nigger.” Maybe he did not commit the crime he’s convicted of. “Ter go co lynch er ‘nigger’ when de jedge co jury’s white. Er ‘nigger’ ain’ no angle.” Translation: To go and lynch a “nigger” when the judge and jury’s white. A “nigger” ain’t no angel.

Within the third period, Louisiana adopted another state constitution on June 18, 1921, that more explicitly indicated that blacks were inferior to whites. The *Picayune* did not refer to black people as “niggers” relative to the new constitution. Instead, the paper celebrated the framers who crafted additional racial segregation measures. Relevant to black people, the law said, “Separate free public schools shall be maintained for the education of white and colored children between the ages of six and eighteen years” (Louisiana Constitution, 1921, n.p.). Nevertheless, during the seven-day period, two *Picayune* articles mentioned “nigger.” Again, the *Item* did not use the degradation. The first “nigger” mention in the *Picayune* during the period concerned a gunfight between Mr. Calmes and a gang of thieves. Bullets struck several items, including the “nigger kitchen” (Vandervoort, 1921). The second “nigger” mentioned occurred in a collection of miscellany items titled “Not in Vain.” The following is the exchange between a poor white man and a judge who heard his plea during a hearing.

You are, said his honor, accused of profanity in a public place. I recon I did it jedge, said the cracker. A ‘nigger’ was trying to steal my hoss. But you should know better than to take the name of the Lord in vain. It was’n’t in vain, jedge. You jest oughte seen that ‘nigger’ run! (*Times-Picayune*, 1921, p. 74).

On May 17, 1954, during the week of the fourth of the five news events, the U.S. Supreme Court announced a decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. The *Brown* decision outlawed racial segregation in public schools, which was interpreted as a reversal of the *Plessy* decision. There was one mention of “nigger” in the *Picayune*, however, it was not in relationship to *Brown*. It appeared in a small classified ad soliciting a purchaser for a steam sawmill that included a “Steam Nigger,” a mechanical device that was controlled by a

person who operated the saw and provided the capability to adjust a log before it is sawed (*Times-Picayune*, 1954).

In terms of the *Item*, the paper published on May 21, 1954, its first and only mention of “nigger” in relationship to the five news events during the 81-year period. The term appeared in an innocuous mention in a short feature story called “Barataria Speckles.” The piece concerned fishing excursions at various locations. During one excursion a party of several men caught 175 large speckled trout using No. 303 Fisherman’s Favorite Glo-Lures. The party fished at “Nigger Lake” (*Times-Picayune*, 1954). The use of “nigger” connoted a word that was a part of a proper noun.

During the week of the fifth of the five major black-oriented news events, President, Eisenhower signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1957. The Act established the Civil Rights Section of the Justice Department and empowered it to seek court jurisdiction against individuals who interfered with black suffrage. During the week, neither the *Picayune* nor the *Item* printed an insult against people of African descent.

In terms of the analysis of content in *The New York Times*, the author used the same methodology that was used to search the *Picayune* and the *Item*. The search revealed zero mentions of “nigger” during the period of the first four news events. The last segment, during the occurrence of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, saw seven content items that mentioned “nigger.” Six of the seven mentions indicated facts derived from reporting events of hard news stories. The seventh was published in the form of a letter to the editor and subsequently categorized as contributing to debate in the public sphere. None of the mentions were in the categories of anecdote or proper noun. The six mentions of “nigger” in news stories concerned two topics, the content of Mark Twain’s book “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn” and whites in Little Rock, Arkansas, defying the Brown public school integration order.

All of the stories were published during the week of September 8-15, 1957. The first mention of “nigger” in the *Times* was published on September 8, an account of approximately 400 white protesters gathered at the Central High School in Little Rock demonstrating against black students attending the white high school. As 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford approached the high school, someone shouted, “A ‘nigger!’ They’re coming! Here they come!” (*New York Times*, 1957, 172).

The protesting continued. Two days later, on September 10, 20 white people stood at the school jeering, attempting to intimidate six black students who were trying to enter the school. “You can’t bring those ‘niggers’ in here” (Popham, 1957, p. 1), one of the protesters yelled. Another article published the same day concerning the demonstration reported that protesters also hurled vitriol at white liberals. A white protester shouted at Benjamin Fine, a Caucasian *Times* editor, “You got a ‘nigger’ wife?” (*The New York Times*, 1957, p. 179). On September 11 another story concerned the protestors turning their rage in the direction of the other journalists covering the protests. A demonstrator shouted at an *Afro-American News* reporter: “Go home, you black ‘nigger.’ We don’t want you here” (Fine, 1957, p. 1).

In the other news stories, the subject matter changed to the mention of nigger in literature. The NAACP led the way in expressing its disgust for the disparaging label appearing in a book used to teach literature. In another short article printed on September 12, an NAACP representative said, without using the term, that the organization objected to “the racial slurs and belittling racial designations in Mark Twain’s work” (Buder, 1957, p. 1).

The next day, in the fifth of seven stories, an article appeared in the *Times* titled “Huck Finn’s Friend Jim.” The story discussed the New York City Board of Education’s decision to drop the Huckleberry Finn book from its list of approved textbooks. The book was published in 1885. An example of a phrase in the book that was considered offensive was, “Miss Watson’s big ‘nigger,’ named Jim” (p. 22).

On September 14, a letter to the editor appeared in the *Times*. It was categorized as contributing to debate in the public sphere. In the letter, English professor Hoxie N. Fairchild wrote: “...any adult who objects to this enlightened work because Huck calls Jim a ‘nigger’ rather than a Negro simply does not know how to read a great book” (Fairchild, 1957, p. 18). The last of the stories came on September 15, in a short piece that said many schools used a version of the Huckleberry Finn book from which the offensive word “nigger” had been removed.

DISCUSSION

The *Times-Picayune*, during the 81-year period under investigation, published the racial label “nigger” on several occasions as anecdotal, superfluous affronts to black people. During the period, the *Picayune* published five articles and one classified ad that contained at least one mention of the insult. In comparison with its competition, the *Item* used the belittling term only once. An observer could argue that whites regularly vocalized or printed “nigger” to refer to Africans ever since the people of color arrived on American shores and at least until circa World War II. The argument is that the *Picayune* was simply staying in step with the culture of the residents of New Orleans and the broader population of the state of Louisiana. As well, the *Picayune* was following the mores of the community. Nevertheless, whites did not utter “nigger” in a congratulatory, positive, or progressive connotation. Whites used “nigger” to patronize, belittle, disparage, insult, condemn, intimidate, or frighten black people into submission.

The offensive concept “nigger” was spread by mass media such as the *Picayune*. By printing the word, the newspaper overtly or tactically endorsed the concept and set the agenda for its acceptance. Even if a lower-class white man could not read, opinion leaders would pass along to the illiterate information gathered from newspapers, books, or other informed voices. Opinion leaders included preachers, businessmen, and other members of the literate class (Katz and Lazarfeld, 1957). Despite experiencing deprivation, lower-class southern white men acted as though they were superior to even a successful black person.

The *Picayune* had every right to publish the terminology. Such speech was protected by the First Amendment which gave the press specific freedom to distribute news reports, features, and commentary. A black person could not win a lawsuit claiming that the publication of “nigger” defamed him. The claimant needed to prove that the word “nigger” identified him or

her, was injurious, and damaged the claimant’s reputation. The case would have been difficult to win because black people were commonly considered and treated as being second-class citizens, incompetent, or otherwise less than human. The black person would not have had a reputation that could have been defamed. Nevertheless, the *Picayune* had the right to print “nigger” despite it contributing to a negative stereotype of black people. An apropos question is, should it have?

Certainly, the meaning of “nigger” has changed somewhat over the years. Generally, before the Civil War, “nigger” was patronizing and condescending but, after the war, it became more intimidating and increasingly associated with violence against blacks, especially as they attempted to gain full citizenship. As World War I unfolded, and the U.S. military began slow movement toward deploying black troops and later desegregation, the use of “nigger” began a major shift. A white person who in public called a black person a nigger would face being ostracized. Therefore, bigots began to use euphemisms such as espousing opposition to the government establishing programs that benefit African Americans or saying that the race problem began when the government forced integration on white people such as by busing students.

Of course, it is misleading to apply contemporary standards of objectionable language to that which was acceptable in the years prior to the early 1900s. Some words that society deems acceptable or unacceptable in one time period might be interpreted differently in another period. *The New York Times* on several occasions in the early 2000s quoted Republican strategist Lee Atwater’s statement that illustrates how people substitute acceptable phraseology as a code for what is otherwise deemed racist language. Atwater said: “You start out in 1954 saying, ‘nigger, nigger, nigger.’ By 1968 you can’t say ‘nigger,’ that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states’ rights, and all that stuff” (Stephens, 2021, n.p.).

On the other hand, newspapers are in the business of surveilling the socio-political and economic environments. The press collects information, interprets issues, disseminates facts, and shares ideas. Journalists, especially editorial writers and opinion columnists, critique and evaluate the big questions of the polity (Buckridge, 1999). Therefore, journalists are intellectuals, and their work should be thoughtful instead of reactionary. Editors for instance have personal perspectives and work in environments where people share varying views. All editors do not share the same perspective. They serve the interests of their local community. Newspapers are among the largest and most influential community boosters. But what happens when the interests of the community are in opposition to African Americans?

A publication should practice neutrality, objectivity, and balance in the presentation of the facts of a news event or issue no matter the topic. That approach originated with the rise of the Penny Press, beginning with the *New York Tribune*, *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Boston Herald* in the mid-1830s and early 1840s (Williams, 1993). However, the practice of objectivity was not widely adopted by the press until circa the late 1890s. The evolution from political party control to neutrality in news reporting was driven by the use of the telegraph to transmit news, the advent of the news wire services like the Associated Press, and, most importantly, the desire to

increase profits by disassociating with a single political party and taking a balanced and objective perspective that would not specifically offend Republicans or Democrats.

In terms of a newspaper exhibiting a socio-economic role, one could argue that slavery benefited the Southern agricultural society. Therefore, a newspaper’s community booster role suggested that the publication fall in line with the financial interests of the elite. Notwithstanding, when the objectivity paradigm emerged, slavery was no longer in practice, but racial bigotry was still active. If the *Picayune* would have applied objectivity broadly to its content, and since “nigger” was offensive, it would have or should have discontinued its use, except in reporting the facts of a hard news story or presenting ideas for public debate.

Comparatively, in the single case where the *Item* used the aspersion, as in, the party fished at “Nigger Lake,” it would be misleading to identify the lake as a common noun such as referring to it simply as the lake or a lake. Similarly, it would not have been reasonable to refer to “Nigger Lake” as negro lake. Clearly, at the time, it could not have been identified as the N-word Lake. The concept was not in fashion in 1957. Subsequently, the journalist accurately identified the lake by its name. In one of the six cases, it could be argued that the *Picayune* followed this author’s contention that journalists might legitimately write “nigger” if it identifies a proper noun. The *Picayune*, in a classified advertisement, identified a piece of equipment by its slang name, a “Steam Nigger.”

The *New York Times* reported the facts of a news story when its reporter said a white man engaged with a crowd at a pro-segregation protest yelled to a journalist, “Go home, you black ‘nigger’” (Fine, 1957, p. 1). In another piece, a college professor wrote a letter to the *Times* editor that contained “nigger” (Fairchild, 1957). The editor published the letter anyway because it was about a legitimate issue of concern that had the potential to advance debate in the public sphere. The professor said a person is under-informed if he or she preferred that Mark Twain referred to Jim as a negro instead of a “nigger.” At any rate, none of the *Times*’s journalists belittled black people, unlike the *Picayune* stories. Instead, the *Times* told readers what happened at news events. Even the letter to the *Times* editor was sober in its mention of “nigger.” All of that was intentional. The *Times* presented its readers with enlightened intelligent information. The newspaper did not attempt to present black people as less than human.

Conversely, it is not difficult for a white bigot to justify the actions of people who represent the racist elements of Southern culture. *Picayune* historian and former employee of the paper, Thomas Ewing Dabney, justified racial segregation in New Orleans and the white notions that black people were inferior. In his book, *One Hundred Great Years - The Story of the Times-Picayune from Its Founding to 1940*, Dabney (1944) explained, “Southerners felt no antipathy to or bitterness against the Negroes: they sincerely believed the race had not advanced sufficiently in intelligence to merit the vote and feared the consequences if this power were put into the hands of a people so recently delivered from slavery. The Negroes heavily outnumbered the whites in many sections” (locations 30-31). Dabney, who published the book in 1944, suggested that injustice was acceptable when satisfactory reasons exist. Perhaps the obscene term “nigger” did not rise to injustice because it indicated a negative stereotype against black people. The

Picayune's content evidenced that the newspaper did not care to indicate simpatico with black people. The *Picayune* placated the stereotypes and prejudices of traditional southern separatists.

CONCLUSION

This study² focused on the use of the slur “nigger” in the oldest daily newspaper in the South, published in 1837, and the largest in New Orleans. The study explored an exulted southern white newspaper that through the lenses of black people was a diminutive, racist publication that reflected and influenced white supremacy. The analysis compared the use of the term “nigger” in the morning *Picayune*, the afternoon *New Orleans Item*, and the national paper *The New York Times*. The *Picayune* and the *Item* both served New Orleans during the 81-year period of exploration of the use of the term “nigger.” The author included the *Times* because is widely regarded as the leading newspaper in the United States. The author established that a respectable newspaper printed “nigger” when it was an essential part of a news story, contributed to an important debate in the community, or was a proper noun. A reputable newspaper would not have printed the term in an anecdote that belittled black people. The *Picayune* did. New Orleans had a significant number of black residents throughout its history, but while laws prohibited African Americans from obtaining quality education and developing marketable skills, their work defined the culture of the city and focused national attention on the struggle for equal rights.

This study also discussed the roles of newspapers, which include monitoring the affairs of powerful individuals and institutions in the socio-political and economic sectors. Newspapers also tell the truth about what they find, and they set the issues agenda that guides thinkers who contribute to advancing debate in the public sphere. Nevertheless, the ethics of journalism prohibits publishing offensive slurs for the purpose of ridiculing, demeaning, and disparaging individuals.

Some argue that historians cannot successfully use contemporary standards to analyze “nigger” as published in the past. Others suggest that the use of the insult did not indicate hatred or bigotry against black people. It was simply a word used by whites who believed blacks had not sufficiently developed as a result of slavery and were not ready for full citizenship. Notwithstanding, this study demonstrated in five of six articles during the period of investigation that the *Picayune* published “nigger” as anecdotal fodder to demean black people. On the other hand, the *Item* avoided replicating the racist insult as a trivial pursuit. It avoided printing “nigger” except in one case when the usage identified a proper noun. The *Times*, while mentioning the slur in seven stories, limited its use to the presentation of facts in news stories and to stimulate constructive debate. This study provides a baseline for future studies that analyze newspaper content in search of uses of “nigger” or other derogatory language. While the sample size is small, there is an indication that a major daily newspaper in the South employed the label “nigger” more gratuitously than a counterpart in the North. Future studies might explore the use of the ugly term among southern versus northern newspapers.

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Endnotes

¹ The *Times-Picayune* began publishing in 1837 as the *Picayune* and shortly thereafter as the *Daily Picayune*. In 1914, the *Daily Picayune* merged with the *Times-Democrat* and assumed its current name, the *Times-Picayune*. This study refers to the *Daily Picayune* as the *Times-Picayune*.

² This study is a shortened version of an anticipated chapter in the author’s upcoming book manuscript that will fully discuss the racial integration of the New Orleans daily newspapers, the *Times-Picayune* and the *States-Item*. Among what the manuscript is intended to do is zero in on the point at which the *Picayune* and the *Item* hired their first black full-time journalist. In July 1970, Warren Brown began reporting at the *States-Item*, and in July 1971, the *Picayune* hired Dwight Ott. The manuscript will explore the factors that contributed to the papers racially integrating their newsrooms. The manuscript will also analyze the newspapers’ coverage of issues important to black people, the *Picayune*’s battle with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the U.S. Attorney’s Office charge that the *Picayune* violated the federal anti-trust statute, and other related episodes.

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