



Attention to, Predictors of, and Potential Consequences of Racism and Counter-Messaging in Mainstream Media

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Media messaging has been shown to play an important role in shaping and reflecting public opinion and public discourse. Research has also shown that media discussion occurs within a competitive environment where activists seek to define counternarratives that suit their end goals, and the arc of progress on social justice initiatives has long been followed by the politics of backlash. The Collaborative on Media and Messaging (COMM) for Health and Social Policy has been monitoring local television news across all 210 media markets in the United States

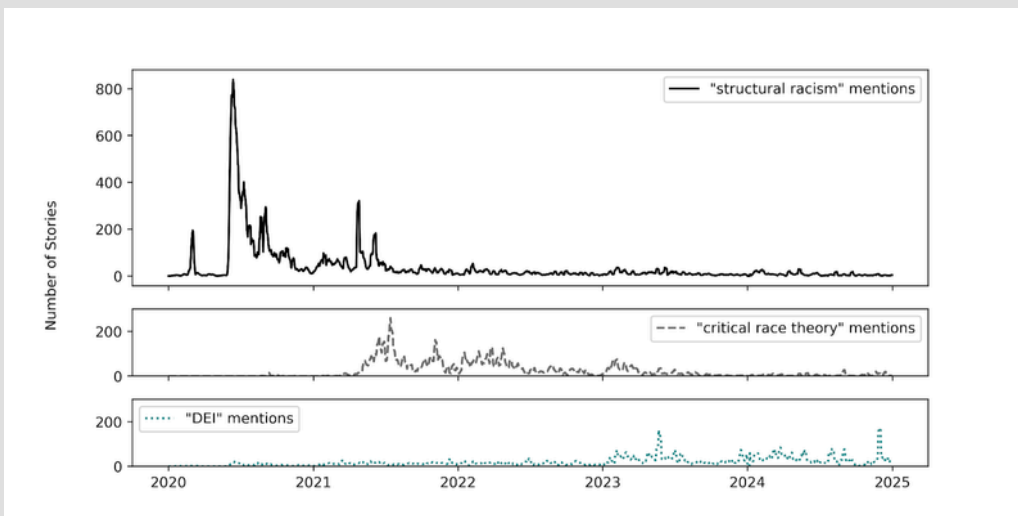
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since January 2020. Because of this continuous monitoring, we have been able to track partisan messaging in campaign advertising for attention to racism, as well as counter-messaging from “anti-DEI” movements. This brief report summarizes our findings from several ongoing investigations. In short, we identify abundant evidence for robust and growing counter-messaging aimed at eroding support for policies to combat structural racism and health equity.

As shown in Figure 1 below, although political attention to and media discussion of structural racism explicitly rose dramatically in the summer of 2020 due to the combination of COVID-19 disparities and George Floyd’s murder making the topic salient, the subsequent four years did not sustain this attention. In fact, we uncover evidence not only that the discussion of structural racism has declined but also that there is rising attention to strategic counternarratives to bolster anti-equity initiatives in the forms of both the anti-critical race theory and anti-diversity equity and inclusion (DEI) discussion.

Although political attention to racism rose dramatically in the summer of 2020, the subsequent four years did not sustain this attention.

Figure 1. Local media attention to racism, critical race theory and DEI initiatives. Trendlines are seven-day rolling averages.



Note: The y-axis for racism uses a different scale to accommodate its large magnitude.

Although much of this attention was typical event-driven coverage following legislative developments (e.g., anti-DEI policies introduced in Texas and Florida, which garnered coverage across the country), our time series panel investigations of the station- and community-level predictors of coverage reveal several important patterns of attention. First, attention to racism was lower in media markets that were more favorable to Donald Trump (as measured through presidential vote choice) while attention to counter-messaging was higher in those same markets. Second, stations owned by Sinclair ownership group, which have been shown to feature conservative slant in their coverage, were less likely to discuss racism but more likely to highlight counter-messaging. Importantly, the presence of a Sinclair-owned affiliate station in a media market is also associated with more coverage of anti-critical race theory counter-messaging on stations not owned by Sinclair, even while accounting for market demographics including partisanship.

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At the same time, we have been tracking attention to race-related issues in campaign advertising in the 2024 presidential elections, following our assessment of the 2022 midterm messaging published in JHPPL. Although much of the 2024 campaign discourse in federal races revolved around kitchen table issues that included housing and cost of living, political advertising also continued the trend we identified in 2022 in which messaging from both parties frequently featured discussion of crime and immigration with prominent and negative racialized stereotypes. **Critically, and also similar to 2022, in the 2024 campaign there was virtually no discussion of structural racism, racial equity, or social justice.** In fact, the most prominent messenger explicitly using the term racism specifically was presidential hopeful and Trump nominee Vivek Ramaswamy and his superPAC, which ran more than 1,200 ad airings discussing how “reverse racism is racism.” Similar to the midterm cycle, to the extent that the race, racism and identity-related conversations were being led by a party, they were led by Republicans with the sole exception of discussion of women and abortion by Democrats. Further, the much discussed anti-trans advertising by the Trump campaign was actually a continuation and expansion of pro-Republican messaging that began in the 2022 midterms and was prominent in races throughout the country in 2024.

The message patterns we have uncovered are likely to undermine efforts to move public opinion in support of equity-enhancing policies. The discourse and stereotypes most readily available in the information environment would appear much more likely to reinforce partisan polarization and produce negative responses to efforts which seek to advance health equity because of the increased accessibility of negatively valenced stereotypes about people of color. In short, the message environment since 2020 has steadily moved away from one favorable to public understanding of the structural barriers to racial and health equity.

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