

Diversity and the Future of American Journalism

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, journalists of color bore the brunt of the impact on newsrooms. After hitting a high of 13.73% in 2006, the proportion of minority journalists fell rapidly for years after the Great Recession despite these groups' growth in the US population (Gold). Though recovered to an estimated 21.9% in 2019, renewed economic stress from the ongoing coronavirus pandemic is poised to again undo any perceived progress ("2019 Diversity Survey").

As in many industries, the deck has long been stacked against aspiring journalists from underrepresented groups. With career entry points like unpaid internships and journalism school favoring wealthier backgrounds, vital social networks perpetuating existing predominantly white and male demographics, and a lack of mentorship and advancement opportunities for the people of color who do get hired, these often insurmountable barriers have ultimately rendered surface-level pushes for diverse hiring ineffective (Arana).

Though the challenges are significant, the benefits of a diverse newsroom are becoming increasingly apparent. Research points to a clear link between group diversity and productivity—so much so that “diverse groups of problem solvers outperformed the groups of the best individuals at solving problems,” (Dreifus). In journalism specifically, these diverse worldviews can access unique stories and contribute to more nuanced coverage. Steve Wyche, an African-American journalist, was first to report on Colin Kaepernick’s 2016 protest of the national anthem in part because his own lived experience helped him “see layers of intersection” (O’Neal). Diversity is also vital to journalism’s economic prosperity and longevity. If newsrooms remain stagnant as America grows more diverse, readership will inevitably fall as more potential readers “don't see themselves reflected in coverage” (Gold).

While diverse hiring practices have long been recommended by organizations and individuals alike, this necessary step is only the beginning of the pursuit of more equitable coverage. Simply having a diverse voice in the room is rarely enough to make a substantial difference. In fact, if “people feel isolated as the outlier in a larger group because of their race or gender, it counteracts the benefits their "diversity" was supposed to help achieve in the first place,” (Demby, “Being the Only One in the Room”). Journalists from underrepresented groups must feel comfortable sharing their unique perspectives to change the conversation, making giving them access to promotions and leadership positions important to cultivating a fully collaborative environment (Arana). An equitable newsroom must also be able to address the unique needs of diverse individuals, from lactation spaces for nursing mothers to mental health resources for journalists reporting on violence affecting their own identity groups and communities (Demby, “How Can We Make It Work?”).

COVID-19 has already had a devastating impact on journalism. In the second quarter of 2020 alone, “advertising revenue fell by a median of 42%” at over 300 newspapers (Barthel et al.). But, there is reason to hope this crisis will not similarly decimate newsroom diversity. Along with the pandemic, 2020 brought renewed strength to the Black Lives Matter movement, highlighting disparities like those in journalism. With the call to reach accurate representation in newsrooms louder than ever, Americans may finally be prepared to commit to the extensive change this goal requires.

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