

(White) Guardians of Truth

The American Society of Newspaper Editors pledged in 1979 that the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities in newsrooms would reflect that of the general population by the year 2000 [1]. It failed -- miserably.

Minorities comprise 40 percent of the U.S. population today but represent less than 17 percent of reporters at print and online publications, and only 13 percent of leadership positions [2]. The newsrooms of *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, are both 81 percent white; *The Washington Post*, 70 percent [3]. Nationwide, about 25 percent of TV newsrooms are staffed by people of color; in radio, it is 11.7 percent [4].

Minorities do not have a seat at the table. This historic disparity has been made worse by the advent of digital media. Newspapers, especially, have been forced to deal with layoffs, early retirements, and retrenchment to survive, which does not bode well for inclusion. Nationwide, newspapers have lost half of their reporters since 2008; advertising revenue dropped 62 percent during the same period [5]. Circulation, meanwhile, has declined to its lowest level since 1940 [6].

Readers court news that relates to them. Therefore, it should also be a business imperative that newsrooms represent a broad range of backgrounds. Too often, white reporters show up in colored neighborhoods when news breaks, with no ties to the communities.

Passports into journalism include Ivy League schools, internships at flagship publications, and recommendations from well-known editors. Typically, those entry points are reserved for whites.

Newsroom diversity, though, is not just about skin color, gender, or sexual persuasion. It is about perspectives, backgrounds, and the stories journalists pursue. This requires a

transformation of newsroom culture. As an institution, journalism has often seen itself as above the issues it covers, as evidenced by its lofty moniker, The Fourth Estate.

Reporters often hide behind a longstanding tenet of their profession: objectivity, which is impossible to achieve. Newsrooms are awash with decisions that are colored by lived experience. From selecting which stories to cover, to word choices when writing, to countless editing decisions, journalism reflects subtle bias. It cannot do otherwise. Background, though, informs solid reporting.

For that reason, newsrooms need different optics to achieve racial and cultural resonance with audiences. In the absence of diverse voices, critical stories go unreported and news analyses are unbalanced. The result: public understanding is compromised.

Perhaps in no other profession does the maxim “words matter” have such clout. The language reporters use does more than convey facts. Their words have the power to stir emotions: anger, hope, fear. They can excite, inspire, provoke, or terrify. Words can divide people or unite them. They shape the way the public perceives the world.

The mainstream media, which control the national conversation, are the gatekeepers who mold public opinion. It has been said that reporters “write the first, rough draft of history” [7]. If true, their depiction of events is one-sided.

Works Cited

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