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Ducking the Diversity Issue: Newspapers’ Real Failure Is Performance

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Ducking the Diversity Issue
Newspapers' real failure is performance

by Ted Pease

Perhaps we've paid too much attention to issues of hiring minorities and diversifying newsrooms, avoiding the tougher questions of content, coverage and newspapers' role in a pluralistic society. After each annual newsroom nose-count is completed, where do newspapers stand on issues of performance?

Let's face it – minority hiring by newspapers is a gimmick. Newspaper owners know it; as soon as the economy slows, so do programs to increase staff diversity. Not that increasing staff diversity isn't essential; it is. But, relatively speaking, hiring minority staffers is the easiest and cheapest thing publishers can do, much easier than more substantive changes in newspaper content and performance. And since personnel changes constitute such a comparatively simple first step, the fact that progress in this area has been so excruciatingly slow indicates that newspaper owners have used the "solution" of minority hiring as a sop to deter critics. Very little real progress has been made.

What the ostriches in the newspaper business seem unwilling to acknowledge is that diversity is both a moral issue – providing voice to all people in society – and an economic one; what's at risk is nothing less than survival.

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newspapers as a mass medium with a real and substantive role in the democratic marketplace of ideas. Ultimately, a major communications medium that fails growing segments of a society betrays that society’s democratic identity, and is left behind as irrelevant. Ever since the Kerner Commission condemned the press in 1968 for failing to serve either white or nonwhite audiences adequately, and thus for contributing to conditions that spawned misunderstanding and violence, the newspaper industry has made stabs at correction. Among these was the American Society of Newspaper Editors’ declaration in 1978 of a goal of “parity” by the year 2000; that, the editors said, by the turn of the century, individual newsroom demographics should reflect those in communities where the newspaper circulates.

Having made that concession to common sense and their moral imperative, newspapers have made sporadic attempts – when economic conditions permitted – to increase the ethnic and cultural diversity of their newsrooms. Increased hiring of persons of color is an essential first step. But that’s all it is, a band-aid on the problem, as if the hiring of more minorities really will produce some magical change in the way newspapers cover their communities.

Let’s be clear: It is not just fatally shortsighted but wrong for the newspapers that cover America not to employ the people of America. But adding new entry-level employees to the newsroom is a lot like adding new rowers to the oars aboard the galley ship; they power the boat, but make few decisions about speed, direction or mission.

We’ve focused too much on numbers in examining issues of diversity and newspapers, to the exclusion of more difficult questions – content, coverage, performance. Improving newsroom demographics is important, but if
all we do is count faces in newsrooms or business offices, is that inventory really any more meaningful in terms of the final product than counting oranges or detergent at the corner grocery?

Every year, the ASNE's employment survey reveals the number of minority and other journalists hired in newsrooms in the previous 12 months, to hand-wringing and self-congratulation by the industry. What the nose-count doesn't reveal is what this annual inventory means. The more important and more difficult question too often overlooked is what impact those minority reporters and editors have on the newsroom and much more critical - on newspaper content and newspaper readers in the communities newspaper seek to serve.

In addressing the larger questions of newspaper content and how well newspapers serve their publics - all their publics - as purveyors of informational goods and services in a diverse marketplace of ideas, aggressive recruiting, training, retention and promotion of minorities are only tools, a means toward a larger end.

There has been progress since 1978 and ASNE's espoused "parity" goal, but what's missing has been an understanding of the larger aim, the question of the relationship between the news product and the consuming audience. The leap of faith has been that increasing newsroom numbers somehow would magically equate to a product more salient to the diverse audiences in a market, which, in turn, would mean that more of those diverse, nonreading publics would find a way to integrate newspapers into the contexts of their lives. The equation between numbers and performance, however, doesn't compute. Writes Carolyn Martindale:

By some mysterious alchemy, the whole task of providing better coverage of minority issues seems to have become tied to the effort to bring more minority individuals into journalism. The idea seems to be that if we can just get more minority reporters into our newsrooms, they will make sure that we provide more accurate and representative coverage of minorities in society.

Dorothy Gilliam of the Washington Post, addressing the 1988 national convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, said, "Statistics don't tell the full story of how segregation in the news business affects us all. ... We must get past the numbers game"
to address how we provide minorities an authentic voice."²

The larger question is critical. The newspaper industry must address the threatening contradiction of growing minority populations – particularly in urban areas, where America’s largest newspapers publish – coupled with declining penetration, especially among those same nonwhite groups. Placing the question of newspaper use and reliance by minority audiences in the larger social and cultural context also means that individual newspapers must consider how to make their products more important to individual audience members in their individual and personal contexts.

Threat & challenge

This situation offers both a threat and an opportunity to newspapers. A comprehensive 1988 study by the Task Force on Minorities in the Newspaper Business makes the economic argument that “publications that successfully target minority communities could emerge among [the country’s] fittest.”³ The opportunity is clear: The combination of population press in urban centers would seem to add up to greater circulation, but has not.

The threat is two-fold: Metropolitan dailies are not attracting or holding minority readers, who are “voting with their feet” (to borrow a description from political science), dropping subscriptions or not subscribing in the first place, threatening the financial well-being of those papers. Further, if the newspaper industry cannot hold minority reading audiences, its position as a medium with meaningful impact in the marketplace of ideas and the commerce of democracy is threatened. If these nonsubscribers are not getting news of public affairs and society from other sources, they may be cutting themselves off from the communities and nation in which they live, disenfranchising themselves from the larger society to form discrete, fragmented and estranged subgroups. This raises the second threat, one to an American society founded on a premise of democracy, full citizen participation and the free flow of goods in the informational marketplace of ideas. As U.S. newspapers circulate less among certain segments of society, not only may those nonreading segments become less well-informed and so less well-equipped or interested in participating in the larger socio-political system, but the newspapers themselves run the risk of becoming increasingly narrow in their content focus, more elite, as they try to retain what readers they can.
Some readership studies have argued that this is as it should be, given market realities, espousing for the sake of expediency what amounts to an elite press because of the difficulty of attracting nonreaders. One nonreader study concluded: “We probably should not try to continue to serve everybody equally; instead, we should try to serve better those who continue to find the newspaper vital and useful in their everyday lives. Those who read the newspaper more often represent the present leadership strata of our society."

Such an elitist attitude, however, is as much a threat to the continued health of newspapers as it is to democracy. Instead of approaching the question from the market perspective of what sells and what doesn’t sell in a newspaper, let us start, rather, from the other side of that coin, and ask what nonreading audiences are missing that would make newspapers vital and useful in the contexts of their everyday lives. Advising newspapers to cut their losses and cater to the safe audiences they have already may be sound economic advice, but is philosophically indefensible.

Three explanations

There are at least three possible explanations for why metropolitan newspapers in increasingly pluralistic urban markets cannot attract and hold minority readers:

1.) Nonwhite newspaper readers are alienated by a largely white press that offers relatively little in terms of content to fill their needs. This is the simplest of three explanations and one often raised at meetings of newspaper industry representatives fearful of the economic ramifications of growing urban nonreader populations.

2.) Racial and ethnic minority groups may feel disenfranchised from society as a whole and relatively detached from and apathetic about its
problems as reported in what to them may appear – because of its content and focus – as an elite white press. That newspaper content may have little salience for those readers.

3.) Considering these questions of unfulfilled needs and societal disenfranchisement, another question remains: To what degree do or can the newspaper media understand and orient their coverage toward those audience groups they aren’t reaching? U.S. newspapers do not “accommodate” themselves to minority audiences, perhaps for reasons of economics and advertising; beyond those economic considerations, newspapers don’t appear really to want nonwhite audiences.

In short, 1990s newspaper audiences may find little of salience to them in the “mainstream” American press. Just as they are increasingly disenfranchised from American society – look at voting trends, increasing poverty levels, declining college enrollment and rising illiteracy levels – minority newspaper readers have “voted with their feet,” choosing not to use newspapers to inform themselves about society, because the society reflected in the pages of American newspapers is not the society in which they live.

Instead of approaching the question from the market perspective of what sells and what doesn’t sell in a newspaper, let us start, rather, from the other side of that coin, with the audience, and ask what nonreading audiences are missing that would convince them to make newspapers vital and useful in the contexts of their everyday lives. Addition, because of lack of minority representation in the newsroom – and far fewer nonwhites in decision-making positions – newspapers may have too little in common with nonwhite audiences, disaccommodating themselves from those potential readers’ needs and lives. Further, there is the suspicion that the newspaper industry itself – programs for minorities and its protestations to the contrary – may have written off that potential reading audience as politically and economically unimportant.

There is evidence to support all three conclusions, with the first two suggestions leading to the third. If, in fact, the problem stems from lack of salience or minority audiences’ lack of interest in accommodating newspapers as vital parts of their daily lives, then the direction from which to approach it is not from the media, but from the perspective of the lost audience, the dissatisfied nonreader. The credo of Frost Weekly, which describes itself as “an Afro-American, equal opportunity, weekly newspaper” founded in the year of the Kerner Commission report, 1968, in Fort
Wayne, Ind., enunciates some of the theoretical and philosophical ground on which the present study is based: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations in things which concern us dearly. ... Hating no man, fearing no man, the BLACK PRESS (emphasis original) strives to help every man in the firm belief that all men are hurt as long as any one is held back."\(^5\)

A SNE’s 1978 “parity” goal was morally and philosophically unassailable; David Lawrence Jr., publisher of the Miami Herald and former chairman of the Task Force on Minorities in the Newspaper Business, has said repeatedly that the industry must increase the diversity of its workforce “because it’s right.”\(^6\) (See Lawrence, pp. 18-23.) Media voices reflecting all the diversity of the American ethnic and cultural melting pot have been seen as necessary in a representative democracy, and increasing numbers of minorities in the newsroom has been a means of accomplishing that in a task-oriented industry. A key assumption was that, by increasing the number of non-white faces in the newsroom, newspaper content, agenda and perspective also would change; the issue was not just increased coverage of different segments of society but heightened sensitivity to the cares, hopes, concerns and interests of the members of those societies.

That’s not a new concept. In 1968, the Kerner Commission criticized newspapers for their misrepresentation of minorities and lack of perspective of their lives, calling for sharply increased hiring of blacks, as well as for training programs, scholarships, internships and recruitment starting at the high school level. It was a remarkably progressive vision for 1968, and one whose responsibility, compassion and common sense haven’t changed in the ensuing years. The Kerner Commission said: "If the media are to comprehend and then to project the Negro community, they must have the help of Negroes. If the media are to report with understanding, wisdom and sympathy on the problems of the cities and the problems of the black man – for the two are increasingly intertwined – they must employ, promote and listen to Negro journalists."\(^7\) But progress has been painfully slow.

In fact, last year, the pace of minority hiring at newspapers slowed to a

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The percentage of minorities in U.S. newsrooms edged up less than a third of a percentage point in 1989, to 7.86 percent. But given U.S. population change over the same period, a .32 percent “increase” is probably a decline in real terms.
near-halt, as ASNE’s annual employment survey showed minority hiring up just .32 percent in 1989, with persons of color constituting just 7.86 percent of all U.S. daily newsroom personnel. As 1989-90 ASNE President Loren Ghiglione pointed out in April 1990, given U.S. population change over the previous 12 months, a .32 percent “increase” is probably a decline in real terms. 8

But in the debate over numbers, we have lost sight of the central fact that numbers alone are not enough. Increasing the newsroom inventory is only one of the components of that larger issue of how well and fully American newspapers serve their function as a mirror, watchdog, commentator and conscience of the society as a whole.

Like the hiring question, that larger issue of newspaper performance is not a new concept. In its impressive Chapter 15, “The News Media and the Disorders,” the Kerner Commission described the more important and broader societal issue of press performance and responsibility:

Our ... fundamental criticism is that the news media have failed to analyze and report adequately on racial problems in the United States and, as a related matter, to meet the Negro’s legitimate expectations of journalism. By and large, news organizations have failed to communicate to both their black and white audiences a sense of the problems America faces and the sources of potential solutions. The media report and write from the standpoint of a white man’s world. The ills of the ghetto, the difficulties of life there, the Negro’s burning sense of grievance, are seldom conveyed. Slights and indignities are part of the Negro’s daily life, and many of them come from what he now calls the “white press” – a press that repeatedly, if unconsciously, reflects the biases, the paternalism, the indifference of white America. This may be understandable, but it is not excusable in an institution that has the mission to inform and educate the whole of our society. 9

This core criticism by the Kerner Commission of the press in 1968 may be broken down into five basic areas:

1. Performance. From a standpoint of both minority groups and society as a whole, the press “failed to analyze and report.”

2. Lack of depth. When the press did report race issues, it failed to communicate – to black and whites alike – much depth about the problems
or possible remedies.

3. Exclusion. "The media report ... (from) a white man's world." New, nonwhite perspectives were needed, the commission said.

4. Bias. Beyond the need for new viewpoints, the report said, the "white press" is too often biased, reflecting the "indifference of white America."

5. Social responsibility. In 1947, the Hutchins Commission formulated a view of the press' role in society that came to be known as Social Responsibility Theory, holding that a free media have a responsibility to the free society in which they operate, to report the news of the day in a context that gives events meaning. The Kerner Commission said the press had failed in its "mission to inform and educate the whole of our society."

These issues still are not addressed by the newspaper industry as a whole, and the threat is not just to newspapers' economic well-being, but to U.S. society as a whole and to the ability of the nation to survive as a democracy. One commentator pointed in 1988 that, "Leaving blacks and other minorities out of the newsgathering and dissemination process isn't just unfair to the minorities, it is unfair and unfortunate for members of the larger society who know little, if any, truth about their fellow Americans."

As in 1967, escalating racial and ethnic violence in 1989 and 1990 became an expression of societal frustration. Behind the violence of Flatbush, Bensonhurst and Howard Beach, there is the sense is of disenchantment, disenfranchisement and disillusionment. In many ways, lack of participation in the larger society by persons of color in 1990 is more ominous than the eruptions of the 1960s in terms of implications for American democratic society, citizen participation and survival of the newspaper as a mass medium with an important voice in the marketplace of ideas. If, in fact, minorities in America have given up on the mainstream mass media – either as a source of information vital to their lives or relevant to their needs, or as a medium for expression of their hopes and dreams – then America's self-perception as a land of equality and free expression is threatened.

The sobering question for the 1990s is how much newspaper structure and performance have changed in regard to covering minority communities since the Kerner Commission released its report. The answer appears to be, "Not much."
What readership research shows

In the past two decades, newspaper readership studies have identified certain distinct demographic characteristics of nonreaders. Penrose, Weaver, Cole and Shaw found in 1972 that blacks were disproportionately more likely to be newspaper nonreaders than whites. Bogart confirmed in 1972 that blacks read far fewer newspapers than whites. Two major studies also found that, in addition to leaving the newspaper audience, the urban poor had shifted their media reliance to television, relating this shift to low socio-economic status; other studies found that minorities, blacks in particular, had cut their ties with newspapers. One ominous ramification of this shift has been in minority participation in politics. "Blacks ... pay considerably less attention to newspapers than whites," wrote Graber. "Since newspapers are the medium which supplies the most ample amounts of standard political news, average black citizens lack this information." Declining newspaper circulation among minorities appear to correlate with the phenomenon of nonwhites to "vote with their feet," to sit out their communities' political process, recent voting trends as an example.

Other studies have examined readers' content preferences, but most readership studies have the fatal flaw of excluding nonreaders; it seems only logical that in order to understand how to gain new readers, one should find out what services are desired by those who don't subscribe, not those who do. Yet other research has found that, while editors thought they had a handle on what readers wanted in their newspapers, the readers themselves disagreed - nonreaders likely would disagree even more.

A more holistic approach to the issue is needed: Instead of examining individual newspapers and the readers they already have, the larger picture of the role of the newspaper in society would be more helpful in setting policy priorities, both for the newspaper industry and society as a whole.

Recent studies of newspaper content have found that not only does event-oriented, spot news dominate coverage of minorities, but that the amount...
of minority news content as a proportion of the total news hole has changed little since the 1950s. Martindale’s 1989 study of newspaper content in New York, Chicago, Atlanta and Boston (and her followup study appearing on pp. 96-112) found only marginal amounts of coverage of blacks—4 percent and less of the total content—much of it stereotypical. Pease’s in-depth examination of one Ohio newspaper found that “minorities have made little progress since 1965 in terms of having their voices and concerns heard, their problems discussed, their triumphs and sorrows reported and their opinions considered.” Other studies have found that minority communities are not covered in proportion with their population except in times of unrest.

These kinds of descriptive studies help translate the numbers game into support for changes in newspaper structure and suggestions for policy change both in the newspaper industry and in society as a whole. While simply counting minorities in the newsroom doesn’t translate into coverage and performance, an inventory of minorities in positions of authority over news content and editorial policy may add yet more descriptive weight toward the goal of forcing the newspaper industry into the 20th century. A 1988 ASNE survey found that fewer than 5 percent of news/editorial managers and executives were racial minorities. In another 1988 ASNE survey by Pease and Stempel of upper-echelon minority newsroom managers—assistant managing editors to publishers—86 percent said they had encountered racism and what they perceived as race-related resistance. (See Pease & Stempel, pp. 64-79.)

This theme is reflected in a 1988 Louis Harris poll for the NAACP and the Colored People’s Legal Defense Fund, which found that although 53 percent of American adults thought George Bush should do more for minorities, responses to that question were sharply divided along racial lines: 49 percent of white respondents said more should be done to help minorities, but 43 percent of whites said no increase in programs was needed, compared to 85 percent of blacks. Half of whites said they thought the Reagan administration had helped minorities, but 78 percent of minority respondents said the Reagan administration had “tended to keep blacks down.”

The poll showed that perceptions between the races were “worlds apart.” Sound familiar? Back in 1968, the Kerner Commission said, “Far too often the press acts and talks about Negroes as if Negroes do not read newspapers

DIVERSITY in THE PRESS
If the moral or political arguments aren’t enough, then how about dollars and cents? From the pragmatic, market-driven perspective of the 1990s, it is economic suicide not to pursue this growing population segment, to do everything imaginable to make the newspaper product something these consumers can buy and use and accommodate as a part of their lives.

or watch television, give birth, marry, die and go to PTA meetings.”

New approaches needed

If U.S. newspaper publishers are serious about the need to improve their performance regarding persons of color – as employees and news sources and the subjects of coverage – then a different, more comprehensive approach is needed to effect change in the relationship between disenfranchised minority audiences and mainstream American newspapers. The violence of the 1960s was spawned in part by the indifference of white America to the concerns of people who weren’t white. If the nation is to repair the kind of racial schism that the Kerner Commission called “two societies—one white, one black, separate and unequal,” a more over-arching approach is needed by scholars, researchers and editors in every newsroom in the country to win back the alienated audiences for whom newspapers are not salient, who find no room or relevance in their everyday lives for the kind of information contained in newspapers.

As David Lawrence says, we must do it “because it’s right.” But beyond the moral rightness of expanding the diversity of voices in our nation’s newspapers, what’s at stake is the democratic ideal on which the nation was founded: Thomas Jefferson’s vision of a nation of many newspaper voices and everyone able to read them. And if the moral or political arguments aren’t enough, then from the pragmatic, market-driven perspective of the 1990s it is economic suicide not to pursue this growing population segment, to do everything imaginable to make the newspaper product something these consumers can buy and use and accommodate as a part of their lives.

A key assumption of any theoretical or practical framework from which to initiate a real effort to address these issues, however, is a focus on those disenfranchised audiences and a fundamental belief and perspective of
Audience and media as coequal partners in society’s communication structure. Seeing potential audience members as consumers may help the newspaper industry lose some of its arrogance and understand their importance; the fact is, newspapers need these disaffected nonreaders much more than the nonreaders need newspapers. Adapting the product to fit their lives, to offer content they want and can use and has meaning and which is not degrading or insulting – that’s the challenge to newspapers.

In jeopardy is not only newspapers’ viability, but society’s.

... ... ... 

Notes

2. Dorothy Gilliam, address to the national convention of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, July 3, 1988, Portland, Oregon.
15. George Comstock, Steven Chaffee, Nathan Katzmann, Maxwell McCombs and


