Stereotypes and ill feelings
(Continued from p. 12.)

long been a topic of discussion and probably will remain so until newspapers begin to deal squarely with the fact that we live in a pluralistic society. We must begin to treat ethnic groups as integral parts of that society, not as anomalies. Coverage of black or other ethnic communities will not change substantially until all reporters and editors are sensitized to the need to make coverage of the communities in which we live inclusive and balanced.

Little else will change until composition of the newsroom, from reporter to management, reflects the diversity of the community, or of society as a whole.

Some newspapers are realizing, as Washington Post editors came to realize after the recall demand, the importance of being “more sensitive” to the inclusion and portrayal of minorities in stories and photographs that have nothing to do with race. In Seattle and Philadelphia, for example, seminars are being held to make reporters and editors more aware of how their coverage affects all readers.

One daily shows virtually no change in coverage of minorities since 1965

By Ted Pease

Ted Pease is director of the Midwest Newspaper Workshop for Minorities at the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University, Athens.

How are newspapers doing in terms of minorities and minority concerns?

The Kerner Commission raised that issue in its 1968 report, but little has been done to document what progress newspapers have made since then to improve the depth, breadth and salience of their coverage of minorities and minority communities.

“Far too often,” the commission wrote, “the press acts and talks about Negroes as if Negroes do not read newspapers or watch television, give birth, marry, die or go to PTA meetings.”

Since 1968, industry efforts have focused on numbers — training and recruitment of non-white journalists.

What the newsroom nose-count doesn’t reveal is what impact our recruitment programs are having on the way newspapers cover America.

In 1988, I conducted a study of a 260,000-circulation metropolitan daily in the Midwest. The study was a pilot attempt to develop a yardstick by which to measure any newspaper’s coverage of issues concerning the minority community.

The project examined minority-related news content appearing in the paper for a randomly constructed two-week period in 1965 — before the worst of the urban violence prompting formation of the Kerner Commission in 1967 — and a similar period in 1987. The purpose of the research was to measure and analyze how the coverage of minorities in this community has changed.

In this particular case, the content analysis found little to applaud in terms of quantitative changes in minority news coverage. In the 1965 sample, 3.2 percent of all news items appearing in the paper regarded minorities; in the 1987 sample, that percentage had barely budged to 3.3 percent. During the 22-year period under study, the minority population of the community had remained constant at about 17 percent.

The good news was that the tone and focus of the minority-related news items improved. The study coded news items as either spot news (time-bound and event-oriented) or process news (more in-depth, trend stories) and found an 18-percentage-point shift toward more process-oriented news in 1987, although most items were still spot news.

Further, minority-related news in 1987 was much more positive in tone than in 1965, with 58 percent of the items coded as positive in the 1987 sample, compared with 31 percent in 1965.
The Seattle Times began conducting racial-awareness seminars nearly two years ago, partly because Ku Klux Klan literature was left on the desks of three black staff members. A consultant was hired to help strengthen the resolve of editors to look at problems of racial insensitivity within the newsroom and in the paper's coverage and try to correct them, according to Times ombudsman Frank Wetzel.

Wetzel, in a recent column, said that Marilyn Gist, professor at the business school at the University of Washington, led the seminars and reviewed the story and photo content of the Times. She found that the depiction of minorities is often negative and stereotypical, and that the paper's perspective is essentially white. But, said Wetzel, the perspective of the paper is changing, in part because Times editors are willing to confront old attitudes.

Six years ago, Acel Moore, associate editor of the Philadelphia Inquirer, conducted a detailed study of that paper's coverage of blacks over a six-month period. He found a pattern of coverage: blacks were

(Continued on the next page.)

The study also placed each news item in one of 14 news categories, ranging from politics to crime to economic activity to public welfare to human interest. This offered the opportunity to examine changes in focus and in the decision-making of editorial gatekeepers.

Social-issue coverage of minorities declined sharply — by 29 percentage points — from 1965 to 1987, reflecting historical events and the end of the Civil Rights era. One conclusion of this finding may be that, lacking a time-bound and dramatic national event such as the civil rights movement, the newspaper in 1987 found little to report about social issues and minorities. However, minority crime content increased by nearly 16 percentage points between 1965 and 1987.

Where the newspaper got most of its minority-related news also shifted over time from national news about minorities to a tighter focus on local news. In the 1965 sample, 54 percent of all news items about minorities were national stories and 64 percent came from the wire services; that had changed by 1987, to 57 percent local and 52 percent staff-written.

Undoubtedly, these changes can be attributed in large part to the end of the national civil rights movement, but they also speak well about this newspaper's commitment to covering the local conditions affecting the minority community.

The goal of the study was to develop a means of measuring in a quantitative way how newspapers perform in covering segments of their communities. As a measurement tool, the study seems to be effective, yielding empirical assessments about content that could help editors gauge present and future performance.

The fact that this particular newspaper appears to have performed so badly in covering minority concerns in its circulation area should be a challenge to all of us to reevaluate how we approach the issue of minorities in the newspaper business and in our communities.

Although training, recruitment and retention of minorities in all phases of the newspaper operation are essential, it is wishful thinking to expect hiring to solve the more difficult conundrum of coverage and performance within minority segments of the community.

If ASNE's "Year 2000" goal linking newsroom demographics to local population demographics were to be applied to content, how many U.S. papers would pass the test? In such a case, 17 percent of the content of the newspaper in this test community would have to concern minority issues. That's a trek from 3.3 percent.

Given that about 26 percent of the U.S. population is not white, should all newspapers strive to make 26 percent of their content minority-related in order to provide even and balanced coverage of all Americans and to promote understanding among diverse ethnic and racial groups in society?

Increasing newsroom diversity is essential to inject perspective and context into the daily editorial process. However, the newspaper industry faces a more complex and difficult problem when it attempts honestly and comprehensively to assess how it covers what.

That issue must be tackled, however, and tackled soon if newspapers are to retain the minority subscribers they have now, let alone if they hope to increase their relevance and importance in that growing and increasingly disenfranchised community.