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Reflection #2: Diversity and Journalism

Diversity has become one of those hot-button issues that seem almost omnipresent in society — people talk about it in Hollywood, in the music industry, in books, on college campuses, and more. “Diversity and inclusion” has become a ubiquitous term in society, even though it seems that no one fully understands the meaning of it or what it means or how to implement it. However, one industry in particular seems largely left out of the diversity debate: journalism. It’s not a field that many people think of when they hear the word diversity, but that does not make it any less important. It is a commonly accepted idea that journalists are supposed to “give a voice to the voiceless” and tell stories for people who cannot share them on their own. However, is it possible for journalists to truly provide a voice for underprivileged and marginalized parts of society if the industry itself is run by the majority? Minority groups only account for “22.4% of tv journalists, 13% of radio journalists, and 13.34% of journalists at daily newspapers,” making it clear that journalism as a whole is run by people with power and privilege, who then try to write about people without that power and privilege (White). This highlights the necessity for diversity in journalism, not only because minority reporters can better access stories about other minorities, but also because it balances the power dynamic in society. The “overwhelming white maleness” of newsrooms presents a major problem in the industry, compounded by the fact that it comes at a time when journalism is under pressure and stress (White). In order for journalism to finally achieve their goal of giving a voice to the voiceless, it

must diversify; this includes diversity in reporters, diversity in the stories and people covered, and recognizing intersectionality in both areas.

Diversity has actually *always* been an issue in journalism, especially among news reporters. Ever since Ida B. Wells, a black woman in the 1890s, became one of the only journalists to actually cover the horrific lynchings of black citizens in the South, journalists who belonged to marginalized communities have been ignored regardless of the crucial voice they add and the vital work they do. Because Wells was a black woman, she was aware of a problem and more willing to cover it than other reporters (Chideya). Later, during the Civil Rights era, President Lyndon B. Johnson founded the Kerner Commission, which pointed to the lack of diversity in newsrooms and called for more minority journalists to write stories that others either refused to write or were unaware of (Chideya). Even though journalism has had *a lot* of time to fix this diversity dilemma, the industry still falls behind in terms of representing the actual demographics of American society. According to a 2016 study done by the American Society of News Editors, Hispanic, black, and Asian women only account for five percent of the workplace (qtd. in Abbady). Another study from the Women's Media Center found that women journalists only make up 37 percent of newsrooms, despite accounting for about 50 percent of the American population (Abbady, U.S. Census Bureau). Reporter and Cultural Analyst Farai Chideya conducted an analysis for the Columbia Journalism Review about the race and gender breakdowns of political reporters covering the 2016 election, and of the 15 news agencies Chideya reached out to, only four responded in full: the Washington Post, the New York Times, USA Today, and NPR (Chideya). The Los Angeles Times and PBS Newshour only gave the statistics for the editorial staff, not the reporters themselves. Chideya's analysis found that racial

and gender diversity in reporters covering a highly polarizing election was extremely low — and the study didn't even look at LGBTQ representation, disability representation, or class representation (this is not necessarily a critique of Chideya's study, I am merely trying to point out that many aspects of diversity are overlooked or cast aside to deal with one problem at a time). These statistics were not even from tiny Southern newspapers, they were from powerful and respected news agencies. Chideya found that in the New York Times 2016 political team, 90 percent of the reporters and editors were white, while 10 percent were African American; additionally, the team was 70 percent male (Chideya). NPR was the best in terms of racial and gender diversity, with a 68 percent white staff and a 40 percent male staff (Chideya). The Washington Post and USA Today both fell between the New York Times and NPR, but even the best of these agencies had, frankly, a depressing lack of diversity, with the majority of reportings in almost all agencies being white or male (or both).

This lack of diversity is not, despite what some might believe, due to a lack of people studying journalism. Another Columbia Journalism Review study done by Alex T. Williams found that of all the journalism and communications graduates from 2004 to 2014, only half found permanent jobs in the news agency — most of which were white (qtd. in Abbady). Newsrooms also tend to have requirements unachievable for under-privileged groups. Because so many newsrooms offer only unpaid internships, lower class individuals (who are largely non-white, thanks to society's oppressive power structures) cannot afford to accept them, putting them at a disadvantage for jobs that require newsroom experience (White). Not to mention, women of color are being disproportionately affected by layoffs in a time of shrinking news staffs (Abbady). This, as Gillian White with the Atlantic writes, "is a big problem for an industry

whose ambition is to serve and inform an increasingly diverse public.” How can a non-diverse newsroom even possibly cover a diverse public? Jelani Cobb, a popular journalist, has encountered this problem firsthand, when he noticed that white reporters covering majority Hispanic and black neighborhoods fail to grasp the problems that the community faces. While reading an article about a string of robberies, Cobb was disturbed by the complete ignorance of the white reporter who failed to understand why people refused to give up even three dollars. Cobb points out that if a non-white reporter had been assigned to the issue, they likely would have seen the issue more fully than the white reporter (Cobb). Journalists are missing out on vital parts of a story — and in some cases, entire stories — by failing to hire diverse staffs that can speak to a multitude of issues.

Hiring more diverse reporters, however, does not necessarily solve the issues facing journalism. Of course, it will undoubtedly help, but it also brings up other issues, like tokenism, undue pressure, and larger societal power structures. One of the biggest issues, which Williams points out in his study, is that newsrooms must go beyond what he dubs “inclusion hiring” to avoid placing undue pressure on minority journalists to cover “minority stories.” This, in part, relates to tokenism, because newsrooms may *constantly* turn to their one minority reporter to cover all minority stories, even if they do not want to. It also creates an unfair pressure to cover potentially traumatic stories that have personal impacts on them — hiring a black reporter to cover Ferguson, or a queer reporter to cover the Pulse nightclub shootings may cause the journalist unnecessary emotional harm, even though they are probably more informed on the issue than other reporters (Chideya). The fix for this, as Williams points out, would be hiring a vast array of reporters, so that those who feel comfortable covering those topics can, and those

who do not are not forced to. This also highlights, in my opinion, a need for deeper education in American society about these sensitive issues, so that minorities won't feel like they are the only ones who can report on these issues. People need to make a more active effort to learn about privilege in order to become better allies to minority groups.

Another important aspect the journalism industry must fix lies in the coverage of minority groups. Not only should a diversity of opinions, from sources of all different life experiences, be presented, but journalists also need to watch how they present them. They need to step outside the stereotypical narrative that minorities are often given (Abbady). For example, black people are always given the crime and drug narrative, Latinx communities are always given the immigration narrative, disabled people are always given the inspirational recovery stories, and queer people are always given the marriage story. These people exist outside of the narratives forced onto them by the media, and should be presented that way. Their voices deserve to be heard in *many* different contexts, not just the ones that are “assigned” to them.

Reporters also need to look at *how* they talk about minority communities — something the AP Stylebook has already helped start. It now includes entries on pronouns, LGBTQ acronyms, and other terminology. GLAAD — a popular queer rights activist organization — also released a document for journalists about how to report on LGBTQ individuals. It gives definitions of different identities, highlights stereotypes reporters need to avoid and covers key topics facing the LGBTQ community.

Something else the GLAAD report does really well is address intersectionality. People have different forms of privilege based on their identities — a queer white woman has a very different experience in the world than a straight black man, but both of their stories and voices

are vital. Hiring one minority is simply not enough, because everyone is a human being who has their own experiences. One person can also not speak for the entirety of their community, because people fundamentally have different experiences. Intersectionality is often overlooked, but that does not make it any less important. The GLAAD report is especially great because it acknowledges that the experiences of people in the community differ drastically depending on their other identities. So, in line with what Williams said in his report, simply hiring a few minority reporters is not nearly enough to fix the industry. That would require a much deeper examination of power structures with journalism, an acknowledgement of intersectionality, and a vested effort to help solve the issues by all levels of the staff.

Overall, becoming more diverse will only benefit journalism. It will help more people trust the industry, give people faith that their stories are being heard, and help the industry to survive a time of intense criticism (more people will read if the newspapers cover the issues that matter to them). It also, according to Katherine Ellis with the American Press Institute, brings the industry closer to achieving the “journalistic mission” of reporting on all voices. There is hope for the future. The amount of minorities in the media are growing (though admittedly, it’s slower than their growth in demographics) (Abbady). The industry itself can start to increase the amount of diversity, with highly-esteemed awards like the Pulitzer and DuPont requiring diversity metrics (Chideya). There are many different paths towards improvement, and I believe that the industry can access them. It merely needs to try.

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