



3 2044 030 936 934

---

**Implementation of Racial  
and Ethnic Diversity  
in the American Press:  
Objectives, Obstacles, and Incentives**

---

The Joan Shorenstein Center

---

**PRESS • POLITICS**



**•PUBLIC POLICY•**

---

Harvard University  
John F. Kennedy School of Government

Supported by the Ford Foundation

---

1996

The Joan Shorenstein Center

---

**PRESS • POLITICS**



**•PUBLIC POLICY•**

---

Harvard University  
John F. Kennedy School of Government

Supported by the Ford Foundation

---

1996

## SUMMARY

Racial and ethnic diversity in the American press is a long-standing concern. This report concludes that while much research has been done and the objectives are clear, there are numerous obstacles to implementation. Under-representation of minorities is a pervasive problem in all of America's elite professions, including the press. Affirmative action programs are under fire. The "pool" of reporters emerging from traditional journalism education is not diverse. And the central press tradition of objectivity is in conflict with the notion that diversity in the newsroom is essential. In an ideal world, good ideas prevail by their own force. In the non-ideal world we inhabit, the implementation of good ideas is as much of a problem as their generation.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Introduction .....	1
II. Identifying the Problem .....	5
A. Diversity as Opportunity	
B. Diversity and the News Product	
III. Race and the Question of Qualifications .....	19
IV. Obstacles .....	25
A. Journalism and the Tradition of Objectivity	
B. Resistance to Affirmative Action	
C. The Complexion of Journalism Education	
D. Transforming the Nature of Journalism	
E. The Misdirection of Complaint	
V. Incentives to Change .....	35
VI. Conclusion .....	39
Appendix .....	41

# I. INTRODUCTION

---

This report, sponsored by the Ford Foundation, attempts to address and analyze a series of questions about press coverage of issues of race, and, more specifically, about racial and ethnic diversity in professional journalism and about the relationship of racial and ethnic diversity in staffing to press coverage of race. This report was prepared by the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

This report's exclusive focus is on the related questions of race and ethnicity. Although race and ethnicity are different,<sup>1</sup> they share numerous social and political characteristics, especially in the context of issues related to the press. Consequently, this report addresses issues of both racial and ethnic diversity as they relate to the press, and the report will at times use the oversimplifying label "race" to refer to both. This report does not, however, address questions of diversity outside of the domain of race. Although the broader topic of diversity properly encompasses questions of diversity on the basis of gender, ideology, political inclination, social class, sexual orientation, religion, wealth, geographic origin, physical handicap, and many others, it is

---

1. Thus, for purposes of the census and related statistical compilations, the racial categories are American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and White. United States Office of Management and Budget, Statistical Policy Directive No. 15, as described in Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995. By contrast, Hispanic origin is, according to the Policy Directive, an ethnicity.

a mistake to underestimate the salience of race and ethnicity, and the similarities between them, as problems of public policy and categories of social understanding. Consequently, it is a mistake to assume that the questions of race and ethnicity can or should be addressed as merely a subset of a larger question of diversity. Racism and discrimination on the basis of ethnic background are not just examples of a larger issue. Racism has its own pathology, its own history, and its own consequences. As a result of this, the topics of race, racism, and ethnicity can and often should be addressed without having to address simultaneously the large number of other areas in which the issue of diversity in the press arises. This is not to deny the pressing importance of examining those other areas in which diversity in the press is worthy of attention. Nor is it to deny the frequent utility of discussing racial diversity in conjunction with diversity of other types. It is, instead, to say that there is a risk of diluting the urgency of continued attention to the problem of race as such by thinking that it must of necessity be addressed simultaneously with every other area in which diversity is an issue.

Much the same, of course, could be said about the various forms in which the problem of race appears. Racism is not monolithic, and thus neither are its consequences nor the possible remedies for those consequences. The history of slavery makes it impossible in the United States to assimilate discrimination against African-Americans to discrimination against other races and to discrimination against members of various minority ethnic groups, and the social stereotypes that hinder the advancement of African-Americans, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos, among others, are sufficiently different from one another that it would be a mistake to think that it is impossible or undesirable to consider in discrete units the different faces that racism and ethnic discrimination take in contemporary society. A report that focused exclusively on representation of African-Americans in the American press, or on press coverage of Asian-Americans (or on one of the national groups that produces this generalizing category), should not for that reason be faulted for ignoring the problems of other racial minorities. The producers of such a report might have thought it useful, as it often is, to focus on a problem that has its own unique characteristics, even as it shares characteristics with other problems.

Still, we choose here to address the many issues of racial and ethnic diversity in the American press, rather than the discrete issues of racial and ethnic diversity that arise in the context of particular groups. In doing so we express the belief that there are many ways in which issues of racial and ethnic diversity and the possible solutions to the consequences of racism are

similar across groups. As with our decision to focus on race and not on the full range of questions about diversity, this decision is, in part, premised on the current existence of socially contingent, but no less real, groupings of problems and groupings of possible solutions to those problems. We are mindful of the fact that discrimination and the remedies for it take numerous forms, but our approach is based on the belief that sometimes, even if not always, it is useful to focus on real similarities among phenomena that may also be different in equally real and important ways.

If analysis and research are different, then this report is devoted primarily to the former and not to the latter. To the extent that research is narrowly defined as the generation of new data, our studies of the literature - academic and non-academic - have satisfied us that there is little overall shortage of information about the subject of race and the American press. Some of this information has been generated by scholars, some by industry organizations such as the American Society of Newspaper Editors, the American Newspaper Publishers Association, the Radio and Television News Directors Association, and the National Association of Broadcasters, and some by organizations especially concerned with issues of race and the American press, such as the Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism, the National Association of Black Journalists, the Native American Journalists Association, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, and the Asian American Journalists Association. Not only have we drawn heavily on these sources of data, but in collecting the data we have become convinced that the problem is, except in certain discrete areas, not one of a paucity of information. Indeed, the problem is not even that much of a problem of identifying objectives. Rather, the primary problem is one of implementation. As a result, this report relies on much of the existing and valuable data, and the extensive literature on the objectives of racial and ethnic diversity, in order to focus on the obstacles to implementation, and then on possible ways of overcoming those obstacles. At various places we do note gaps in the existing research, and questions for which more data would help in formulating an answer, but by and large the problems we and others have noted are much more about obstacles to implementation than about empirical questions for which the answers remain unknown.

In addition to drawing heavily on the previously published work of others, we have been assisted by the input of both scholars and journalists. Conferences in Los Angeles on June 17, 1994, and in Washington, D.C. on October 22, 1995, helped to clarify the issues in need of further attention. We then convened two further working sessions in Cambridge, on March 1,

1995, and on May 3, 1995, at which scholars and journalists came together to identify problems, exchange ideas, and generate most of the perspectives that are embodied in this report. Earlier versions of this report were circulated among the attendees at these latter sessions, and also to a larger group of scholars and journalists, some of whom were unable to attend the working sessions. We have thus profited from the input of a large number of people, all identified in the Appendix, even while this final report represents only the analysis of the Shorenstein Center and not necessarily that of any of the individuals who have assisted at various stages in the process. The Shorenstein Center is especially grateful to William M. Boyd II of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and Sonia R. Jarvis of George Washington University, both former Visiting Lecturers in the Lombard Chair at the Kennedy School of Government, who were actively involved in many phases of this project over a long period of time, and who were instrumental in producing the earlier drafts on which much of this final version is based. In addition, Marion Just and Louis DeSipio, who had attended our earlier discussions, offered careful and insightful comments on the penultimate draft.



## II. IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM

---

### A. DIVERSITY AS OPPORTUNITY

It is well-documented that members of virtually all racial minorities are represented in significantly smaller percentages in the American print and broadcast press than they are in the population of the United States. The 1994 figures compiled by the American Society of Newspaper Editors indicated that of a newsroom work force of 53,711, 5% were black, 3% Hispanic, 2% Asian-American, and .3% Native American, all of these percentages being substantially below the percentages in the population at large,<sup>2</sup> which are, again for 1994, 12.5% black, 10.0% Hispanic, 3.4% Asian and Pacific Islander, and .9% American Indian and Alaskan Native.<sup>3</sup> Among newspapers, the largest concentration of minority newsroom staff is in newspapers with a circulation greater than 500,000, where the average minority representation is 17%. Smaller newspapers, consequently, tend to have minority employment significantly below the aggregate figures. In fact, 45% of American daily newspapers have no newsroom staff at all who are members of racial minori-

---

2. See Brenda Paik Sunoo, "Tapping Diversity in America's Newsrooms," *Personnel Journal*, November 1994, pp. 104-111. On representation in the broadcast press, see Dhyana Ziegler and Alisa White, "Women and Minorities on Network Television News: An Examination of Correspondents and Newsmakers," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 34 (1990), pp. 215-23.

---

3. Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995, Tables 12 and 18, at pp. 14, 18.

ties. More recent figures reveal only slight change,<sup>4</sup> and the picture within broadcasting is of somewhat greater minority representation, at least in television, but still substantially below the percentages of racial minorities represented in the total population.<sup>5</sup>

This minority under-representation is quite clearly a problem, both for the press itself and for the society it serves. It is less clear, however, just what kind of a problem it is. We have concluded that the under-representation of racial minorities in the American press is better seen not as one problem, but as two distinct ones. The first is the problem of the overall under-representation of racial and ethnic minorities in elite segments of American life, with minority under-representation in the press being an important but not unique exemplification of this larger problem. The second problem is the relationship between the racial and ethnic identities of journalists and the content of what they report, a content that frames much of American public debate. We discuss the first of those problems in this part, and the second, which is more the primary focus of this report and which fits more closely with the ensuing discussion of obstacles, implementation, and incentives, in the second part of this section.

\* \* \*

The American press is one component of what many might refer to as the "elite." Not everyone is comfortable with that frequently tendentious term, but whether the word is appropriate or not, the central idea is that in many respects the positions of journalist and editor (or other supervisory position) are positions that occupy a position within the American social hierarchy not unlike the positions of corporate manager, university professor, lawyer, physician, political official, investment advisor, and high-ranking executive in a non-profit organization. Such positions frequently provide for their holders a degree of access, prestige, social influence, cultural status, and financial reward not enjoyed by others within the society.

---

4. A newspaper account indicates that the American Society of Newspaper Editors figures for 1995 show that total newsroom employment was approximately 55,000, of whom 2980 (5.4%) were black, 1768 (3.2%) were Hispanic, 1088 (2.0%) were Asian-American, and 224 (.4%) were American Indian. Of the approximately 6000 total minority journalists, 18% held supervisory positions. Iver Peterson, "Hiring of Minorities Shows Another Rise in Newsrooms, but Not by Much," *The New York Times*, April 17, 1996, p. A17.

---

5. See Maria Shao, "Shortfalls Linger in Media," *The Boston Globe*, May 24, 1995 (reporting 18% total minority representation in television news, and 11% in radio news).

One way of viewing the substantial under-representation of racial minorities in both the broadcast and print press is accordingly as an under-representation within one of these high-status segments of society. Although minority groups are under-represented within the press, the evidence indicates that the degree of under-representation is, subject to some variation among the various professions, not substantially different from minority under-representation within the professions of law and medicine, within professorial positions at universities, within the arts, and within the senior ranks of management in both the profit and non-profit sectors. For example, the United States Department of Education figures for 1993 indicate that among American university faculty who were citizens or resident aliens, 5.48% were black, 2.58% were Hispanic, 5.39% were Asian, and .43% were American Indian.<sup>6</sup> Figures such as these demonstrate that the problem of under-representation of minorities within the American press is hardly unique, being both a component and a manifestation of a much more pervasive under-representation of racial minorities within America's elite.

To point out that minority under-representation within the press is consistent with minority under-representation in other elite segments of American society is not to diminish the pressing importance of the larger problem. Nor is it to suggest that the press, as with the other institutions that are the individual components of the larger problem, does not bear its proportionate share of the responsibility for the existence of the problem and its proportionate share of the obligations involved in working to lessen the under-representation of racial minorities within the American elites. Still, the fact that minority under-representation in the press is consistent with similar under-representation in parallel segments of society suggests that the root of the problem is hardly press-specific. Given that the press increasingly draws its reporters and editors from among the ranks of the university-educated, a large part of the problem is access to university education. Black men, for example, account for only 3.5 percent of American college students, which is approximately half the percentage of black men in the population at large.<sup>7</sup> Among Americans twenty-five years old or older, 12.9% of blacks but 22.9% of whites have a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, if one takes the fact of

---

6. *Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac*, September 2, 1996, p. 14.

---

7. E.J. Dionne, Jr., *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), p. 20.

---

8. See Walter R. Allen and Joseph O. Jewell, "African American Education Since *An American Dilemma*," *Daedalus*, vol. 124 (1995), pp. 77-100, at p. 86.

university education as a given for the profession of journalism just as one takes it as a given for the professions of law, medicine and investment banking, for example, then the degree of minority under-representation in the press, controlling for education, turns out to be much less.<sup>9</sup> Thus, blacks comprise 12.5% of the population, 7.3% of the college educated population, and 5.4% of total newsroom employment; Hispanics are 10.2% of the population, 4.0% of the college educated population, and 3.2% of newsroom employment; Asian and Pacific Islanders are 3.4% of the population, 6.3% of the college educated population, and 2.0% of newsroom employment; and American Indians and Alaskan Natives are .9% of the population, .3% of the college educated population, and .4% of total newsroom employment. With the exception of Asians and Pacific Islanders, therefore, the degree of press under-representation measured against the college educated population is less than the degree of under-representation measured against the total population.<sup>10</sup>

Insofar as some of the minority under-representation in the press might thus be a product of the use of qualifications such as a university education, one possible response might be a call for the American press to rethink what it takes as the necessary qualifications for entry into the profession, with particular focus on those qualifications that might have a disproportionate negative impact on the hiring of racial minorities. In numerous segments of society, patterns of exclusion and under-representation have often been entrenched by the perpetuation of qualifications that have a disproportionate and negative impact on members of minority groups, and which, upon further reflection, have been shown to be less important to successful performance of the task than has traditionally been supposed. Insofar as the under-representation of minority groups in the press is in part a function of the non-malicious but no

---

9. Although 22.2% of whites have four or more years of college (1994 figures), only 12.9% of blacks do. Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995, Tables 49, 238. Accordingly, a degree of under-representation reflecting this differential would be expected in professions for which four or more years of college is a prerequisite. For advanced degrees (masters or higher), 7.9% of whites hold such degrees, compared to 3.4% of blacks, and 2.9% of Hispanics. Statistical Abstract, Table 240. That table combines Asian and Pacific Islanders with American Indians and Alaskan Natives under the category "other," and 10.4% of the members of that category hold advanced degrees.

---

10. Variance among subgroups within these groups is often high, making some of the figures potentially misleading. For example, within the group of American Indians of twenty-five years old or older, 13.3% of the Choctaw but only 4.5% of the Navajo have a bachelor's degree or higher. Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995, Table 52.

less consequential reliance by the press in its hiring and promotion practices on qualifications in which there is considerable minority under-representation, one response would be a careful rethinking of the qualifications on which the press has traditionally relied. As just noted, a requirement of a university education, or a requirement of an advanced degree, or a requirement of an advanced degree in a particular speciality, may reduce the available pool for certain racial minorities, given existing disparities. It is highly likely, for example, that a publication looking to hire a business and economics reporter would have a smaller pool of African-Americans if it treated a Ph.D. in economics as a requirement than if it used the less formal requirement of considerable knowledge and understanding of business and economics. Similarly, using native fluency in English as a criterion or requirement will have a disproportionate impact on Latinos and Asian-Americans, groups in which, in 1996, the percentage of people for whom English is not their first language is higher than for the population at large.<sup>11</sup> Because racial minorities are not evenly distributed geographically throughout the population, geographic requirements (preference for local residents, or people with roots in the area, for example) may again have, in some geographic areas, a racially disproportionate impact.<sup>12</sup> Given the racial makeup of existing newsroom personnel, and given that approximately 24% of new newspaper hires are members of

---

11. Using 1990 figures, 198,601,000 Americans spoke only English at home, 17,339,000 spoke Spanish at home, and 4,472,000 spoke an Asian language at home. Thus, more than half of the Hispanics and more than half of the Asian-Americans, in 1990, spoke a language other than English in the home. Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995, Table 57. Yet most college-educated Asians and Latinos are English dominant or bilingual, and further research would be warranted on the extent to which hiring decisions about Asian-Americans and Latinos are infected by unjustified assumptions of language problems in many cases.

---

12. This raises the separate question about what it means for a group to be under-represented, given the geographic differences in the dispersal of the racial and ethnic minority population in the United States. The City of Phoenix, for example, has a Latino population of 20.0%, and the City of Richmond has a Latino population of 0.9% (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995, Table 46). If a Phoenix newspaper and a Richmond newspaper each had 10.0% Latino newsroom staff, would we say that Latinos were underrepresented in Phoenix and overrepresented in Richmond? Or would the issues be more complex, taking account of the fact that reporting is not only about local issues, but about national and international ones as well? If so, it would be plausible to be concerned about the absence of Latino and Asian reporters, especially given the salience of immigration and other issues in which those with Latino and Asian backgrounds might have a distinct perspective, even in areas in which Latinos and Asians were a very small proportion of the population.

racial minorities,<sup>13</sup> policies providing job security for existing personnel may slow the rate of increased diversification. It may turn out, upon careful rethinking, that these and other qualifications and criteria are all closely related to the performance of the task for which they have been deemed to be qualifications - that the qualifications that the press now seeks in its hiring and promotion practices are strongly indicative of the ability to be a high quality journalist - or that practices such as strong seniority preference serve other important institutional or organizational goals. If this is so, then modifying those qualifications or abandoning those practices would reduce the quality of the final product. On the other hand, it may turn out that some of those qualifications and practices are less necessary than has been traditionally supposed.<sup>14</sup> If that is the case, if some of the qualifications for, and practices of, journalistic employment are less related to the quality of the journalistic product than many people have believed, then abandoning those qualifications and practices, in favor of ones that are less race-skewed and more related to journalistic quality, might produce less minority under-representation with no diminution of the quality of the journalistic product.

It is also possible that rethinking the nature of the news product itself would be justified. It may turn out that even if changing the standards for hiring and promotion causes the quality of the news product to suffer as that quality or that product has been traditionally defined, that it is the traditional definition that is problematic. Again, rethinking what the news product is may confirm the importance of the traditional definition, and thus be consistent with the view that changing the qualifications will involve some sacrifice in news quality. But it may also turn out that the traditional conception of the news product is itself open to question, and that both the definition of the news product, and the definition of the qualifications of those best suited to produce it, can be changed with no loss of quality at all. A good example might be drawn from the current debate within professional journalism about so-called "public" or "civic" journalism. Without taking sides in this debate, it is still possible to note that it would be unlikely if the array of talents that made one a high quality practitioner of "traditional" journalism was exactly

---

13. Cornelius F. Foote, Jr., "Minority, total newsroom employment shows slow growth, 1994 survey says," *ASNE Bulletin*, April/May 1994, p. 20.

---

14. "The extent to which standardized aptitude tests like the S.A.T. and tests used for the promotion of police officers are measuring merit or real potential to succeed, not privilege, is not readily apparent." William Julius Wilson, Book Review, *The New York Times Book Review*, July 14, 1996, p. 11.

the same as the array of talents that would make one a first rate civic journalist. It is at least possible, therefore, that there are conceptions of journalism other than existing ones that might lower the barriers to minority representation, just as there might be conceptions that would raise them even further.

Although we view it as vital that the press engage in just this kind of self-evaluation of the nature of its product and of its selection and other employment practices, we do not view it as any less vital for other segments of society to engage in the same type of self-examination. And in this respect the question as we have just framed it is a question about the representation of racial minorities in the high status, high-visibility, and high-reward segments of society. There is another way, however, in which the question of minority representation in the press is especially important for the society that the press serves and the society in which the press exists, and this alternative conception of the problem will dominate the remainder of this report.

#### B. DIVERSITY AND THE NEWS PRODUCT

When the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, the Kerner Commission, issued its report in 1968, Chapter 15 of that report focused substantially on the press, and attributed part of the problem of racism, and part of the problem of race-related violence in America, to the way in which African-Americans were portrayed in the mainstream press.<sup>15</sup> The American press was criticized for "basking in a white world, looking out of it, if at all, with a white man's eyes and a white perspective." For the Kerner Commission, a significant impediment to racial integration in the United States was a failure of integration in both the "product and [the] personnel" of the American press.<sup>16</sup> Since 1968, the concerns of the Kerner Commission

---

15. *Report of the National Advisory Committee on Civil Disorders* (New York: New York Times Co., 1968). On the same theme, see the roughly contemporaneous Paula B. Johnson, David O' Sears, and John B. McConahay, "Black Invisibility, the Press, and the L.A. Riot," *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 76 (1971), pp. 698-721. Other perspectives from the period are collected and tested in Carolyn Martindale, "Coverage of Black Americans in Five Newspapers Since 1950," *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 63 (1986), pp. 321-28.

---

16. For an even earlier critique, see Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy* (New York: 1944) ("The press, with remarkable exceptions, ignores the Negroes, except for their crimes. . . . The public affairs of community and state are ordinarily discussed as if Negroes were not a part of the population." p. 37). See also Robert D. Leigh, ed., *A Free and Responsible Press: A General Report on Mass Communication: Newspapers, Radio, Motion Pictures, Magazines, and Books by the Commission on Freedom of the Press* (The Hutchins Commission) (Chicago: Midway Reprints, 1947), pp. 21-25; Stephen Bates, *Realigning Journalism with Democracy: The Hutchins Commission, Its Times, and Ours* (Washington: The Annenberg Washington Program in Communications Policy Studies of Northwestern University, 1995), pp. 10-20.

have been repeated,<sup>17</sup> and there have been numerous critiques of press coverage of race,<sup>18</sup> although the critiques have taken numerous forms.

One variety of critique focuses on the way in which issues are framed,<sup>19</sup> and charges the press with using a racial or ethnic frame for issues in which such a frame is either unnecessary or inaccurate, or with selecting a particular racial frame for an issue in which alternative yet still racially-based frames might again be more accurate.<sup>20</sup> A common form of racial framing occurs, for example, when political candidates or public figures who are members of minority races are identified by race, while white candidates or public figures are not. When race is part of the underlying political campaign, or part of what made the public figure famous, the racial identification may serve a purpose. When it is not, however, the common and often justified charge is that by putting a racial frame on some candidates but not others, and on individuals of some races but not others, press coverage serves to entrench rather than to ameliorate racial divisions and racial tensions. And when the same race-based framing occurs with respect to those charged with crimes, the charge continues, as when the race of black defendants is noted but not the race of others, or when the gang affiliation of Hispanics and Asian-Americans is featured but not the gang affiliations of whites, the effect is even greater.

The problem of frequently unnecessary racial identification of criminal defendants suggests a larger problem, and again a frequent source of justified complaint about press coverage of issues touching on race. This is the problem of stereotyping, and it is frequently argued that press coverage often and unnecessarily stereotypes African-Americans as criminals, Native Americans as having problems with alcohol, Latinos as lazy, Asian-Americans as passive

---

17. See, for example, Mollyann Brodie, "The Four Americas: Government and Social Policy Through the Eyes of America's Multi-racial Multi-Ethnic Society," A Report of *The Washington Post/Kaiser Family Foundation/Harvard Survey Project* (December 1995).

---

18. See the Special Issue, "Race - America's Rawest Nerve," in *Media Studies Journal*, Summer 1994.

---

19. William A. Gamson, "News as Framing," *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 33 (1989), pp. 157-74.

---

20. See, for example, Robert Entman, "Modern Racism and Images of Blacks in Local Television News," *Critical Studies in Mass Communications*, vol. 7 (1990), pp. 332-45; Erna Smith, "Transmitting Race: The Los Angeles Riot in Television News," Joan Shorenstein Center Research Paper R-11 (May 1994).



or inscrutable, and people of Middle Eastern descent as terrorists.<sup>21</sup> At times coverage that is both accurate and necessary has the unfortunate but unavoidable incidental consequence of reinforcing these stereotypes, as when coverage of those who bombed the World Trade Center in New York included the fact that one of the principal defendants was an Islamic religious figure, or when a story on economic problems in areas heavily populated by Native Americans includes mention of a problem of alcoholism. In these circumstances there is a risk that individual incidents will be taken more "as a sample of group action," to quote the 1947 report of the Hutchins Commission, than the underlying empirical reality would justify, and careful news reporting would be sensitive to this risk. But it would be hard to justify refraining from mentioning important aspects of an important story just because those facts happened to coincide with an unfortunate stereotype. Still, much more often the problem is even greater than that of unjustified generalization from accurate incidents, or exaggerating the magnitude or import of real group differences. With disturbing frequency, the reinforcement of racial stereotypes is both inaccurate and unnecessary, as when Japanese business initiatives are described as "invasions," and when descriptions of American Indians are laden with the vocabulary of savagery. This variety of racial stereotyping is disturbing not only because of how it denies individuals the equal respect they deserve, but also because the possession of racial stereotypes has major implications for how people view race-related questions of public policy.<sup>22</sup> In particular, the extent to which people hold

---

21. See Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism, "News Watch, A Critical Look at Coverage of People of Color" (1994). For a summary of the conclusions of the report, see M.L. Stein, "Racial Stereotyping and the Media," *Editor & Publisher*, August 6, 1994, pp. 12-13. For further coverage of the report, see Elizabeth Atkins, "Racial bias still widespread in the media, study finds," *The Detroit News*, July 24, 1994; Laura Castaneda, "News media insensitivity examined in yearlong study," *Dallas Morning News*, July 24, 1994; William Glaberson, "Press," *The New York Times*, August 1, 1994; Howard Kurtz, "Minority Journalists Join Forces to Seek Fairness, Power in Media," *The Washington Post*, July 24, 1994; Teresa Moore, "Minority Journalists Work to Combat Stereotyping," *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 25, 1994. On press stereotyping of Asian-Americans, see Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism, "Project Zinger: A Critical Look at News Media Coverage of Asian Pacific Americans" (August 20, 1993).

---

22. See Ronald T. Takaki, *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1979); Donald R. Kinder and David O. Sears, "Prejudice and Politics: Symbolic Racism Versus Racial Threats to the Good Life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 40 (1981), pp. 414-31; James R. Kluegel and Lawrence Bobo, "Dimensions of Whites' Beliefs About the Black-White Socioeconomic Gap," in Paul M. Sniderman, Philip E. Tetlock, and Edward G. Carmines, eds., *Prejudice, Politics, and the American Dilemma* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

negative stereotypes about racial groups will, not surprisingly, lower the degree of political support for policies designed, in part, to assist those groups.<sup>23</sup> If those negative stereotypes are inaccurate, even as generalizations, then the effect on public policy is little different from any other policy that is made on the basis of inaccurate factual premises.<sup>24</sup>

Complaints about specific instances of stereotyping, or about the exacerbation of racial divisions by unnecessary racial identification, are undoubtedly a matter of great concern. Yet such complaints, for all their importance, may not get to the heart of the matter. Even more problematic, it is often charged, is the way in which press coverage of matters dealing with race is slanted, tilted, or framed in ways less conducive to encouraging racial equality than it could be, or ignores issues vitally important to some racial groups but which may seem unimportant to the majority,<sup>25</sup> or treats some minority communities as more invisible than their numbers would justify.<sup>26</sup> This

---

23. See Michael W. Link and Robert W. Oldendick, "Social Construction and White Attitudes toward Equal Opportunity and Multiculturalism," *Journal of Politics*, vol. 58 (1996), pp. 149-68; Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram, "Social Construction of Target Populations: Implications for Politics and Policy," *American Political Science Review*, vol. 87 (1993), pp. 334-47.

---

24. The question of stereotype accuracy is a difficult one, both politically and empirically. See Yueh-Ting Lee, Lee J. Jussim, and Clark R. McCauley, eds., *Stereotype Accuracy: Toward Appreciating Group Differences* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1995). One way of understanding a stereotype is as a claim that all members of some group share some trait, in which case virtually all stereotypes are inaccurate with respect to those members of the group for whom the generalization does not hold. A more plausible understanding of the idea of a stereotype, however, is as a claim about identifiable aggregate group differences or tendencies. As so understood, some stereotypes might be accurate in reporting differences in group tendencies (to stereotype African-Americans as Democrats in the United States in 1996 would be accurate in this sense, even though there are many African-American Republicans), but others would be inaccurate (for example, there is no evidence supporting the proposition that Arab-Americans are more prone to political violence than members of other groups). When this is applied to the question of reporting, it is possible that the remedy for the problem of people assuming that probabilistically warranted stereotypes apply to a larger percentage of the group than is in fact the case is different from the remedy for the problem of acceptance of stereotypes that do not even have any probabilistic basis.

---

25. On this last dimension, see J. Dale Thorn, "Media Inertia in Reporting on Southern Higher Education Desegregation Cases," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 6 (1994/1995), pp. 113-14.

---

26. See National Council of La Raza, *Out of the Picture: Hispanics in the Media* (1994); Jorge Quiroga, "Hispanic Voices: Is the Press Listening?," Joan Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper D-18 (January 1995).

charge gets closer to the crux of what troubled the Kerner Commission, and what has troubled so many people since then. If the problems of race are at the least substantially exacerbated by the ways in which people understand those of different races from themselves, if people understand those of different races substantially by virtue of the way in which they are viewed in the mass media,<sup>27</sup> and if a significant component of the mass media consists of that combination of print and broadcast news and analysis provided by professional journalists, then it is likely that different behavior in portraying issues of race by professional journalists can help to reduce racial tensions and perhaps thereby to decrease some of the consequences of racism.

When couched in terms of the behavior of professional journalists, the link has not been conclusively established between the nature of the journalistic product and the racial and ethnic diversity of journalists and other professional staff in the institutional press that produces that product. And under one view, a view we address more directly in Section III, the link may not exist. Under this view, reporting (as well as editing and the other professional functions within journalism) is a largely objective task, in which the good reporter sees, describes, and explains in ways that are unrelated to the reporter's own politics, perspectives, ideology, and identity, and that are certainly unrelated to the reporter's own race or ethnicity. There now exist many problems with the ways in which issues touching on race are reported, the same view continues, but these problems can, in theory and perhaps in practice as well, be corrected by better reporters, and by better training of reporters, neither necessarily connected with the race or ethnic background of the reporter. Representation of all races in the newsroom is a good thing, it is said, in the same way that representation of all races in scientific research is valuable. It is valuable as opportunity, but not because the product is any different just because of the race or ethnic background of the reporter. Just as good science is good science regardless of the race of the scientist, it is said, so too is good reporting simply good reporting, even on issues relating to race, regardless of the race of the reporter.

Under an alternative view, however, there are important differences between reporting and laboratory scientific experimentation. The reporter

---

27. We use the more encompassing term "mass media" here to emphasize that the way in which people understand those of other races and ethnic backgrounds is likely to be as much, if not more, informed and framed by images in motion pictures, popular fiction, and entertainment television as it is by the framing and information provided by the "press" or by "news."

has much greater freedom to determine and formulate the question on which he or she is reporting, and has even greater freedom in deciding which facts are important and which are unimportant, which explanation is plausible and which is not, whose account to believe and whose to disbelieve, which sources and experts to consult and which to ignore, and, most pervasively, in deciding how a story is to be framed, or, in the contemporary jargon, "spun."

Under this alternative view, reporting is much more of an observer-dependent task than it is under the more objectivist account. According to an observer-dependent account of just what the press is, the identity of a reporter, including but hardly limited to the racial and ethnic identity of a reporter, is no longer an irrelevant attribute. Rather, it is an essential component of reporting, and from this perspective it would be absurd to think that whites would have the same perspectives on race as non-whites, and equally absurd to think that African-Americans would have the same perspectives as Latinos, and so on. If this view is correct, then the question of racial and ethnic diversity is no longer necessarily the same question as it is for law, medicine, accounting, laboratory research, and investment banking. Rather, the question of racial and ethnic diversity in press staffing is now inextricably related to the questions of press content that we have known since the Kerner Commission report, and for many even earlier, are essential components in how people construct the very question of race,<sup>28</sup> and how they think about the policy issues that surround it.<sup>29</sup> In the following section, accordingly, we explore more fully a range of questions surrounding the relationship between the hope for better treatment of race in press content and racial diversity in press staffing and management. It would be a mistake to assume that even an instant change in press content would produce much of a short-term change in racial attitudes, since racial attitudes have been shown, especially in the short term, to be "among the

---

28. The issue of the role of the press in the construction of the understanding of race is the topic of a series of articles by Adeno Addis: "Hell Man, They Did Invent Us": The Mass Media, Law, and African Americans," *Buffalo Law Review*, vol. 41 (1993), pp. 523-566; "Recycling in Hell," *Tulane Law Review*, vol. 67 (1993), pp. 2253-2291; "Role Models and the Politics of Recognition," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, vol. 144 (1996), pp. 1377-1468.

---

29. See Harold Gray, "Race Relations as News," *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 30 (1987), pp. 391-96. Moreover, the way in which Americans think about policy issues that touch on race may be influenced by whether they think about and confront those questions in an integrated or segregated setting. See Lynn M. Sanders, "Racialized Interpretations of Economic Reality," unpublished paper presented to the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, August 29, 1996.

most stable and strongly held of political orientations.”<sup>30</sup> But the very depth of the entrenchment of racial views suggests not only that they are difficult to change, but also that changing them is a matter of enormous social importance.

---

30. Martin Gilens, “Racial Attitudes and Opposition to Welfare,” *Journal of Politics*, vol. 57 (1995), pp. 994-1014, at p. 994. See also Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1954); Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh, and Lawrence Bobo, *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); Philip E. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964). Yet despite what appears to be short- and intermediate-term resistance of racial attitudes to change, things may be different in the long run, and there may be demonstrable shifts in views about race and public policy over time, or at least so Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro conclude in *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

### III. RACE AND THE QUESTION OF QUALIFICATIONS

---

What *are* the qualifications of a journalist? Many of them can be described in terms that do not depend on anything about the personal characteristics that a journalist might happen to possess. Intelligence, a concern for factual detail and accuracy, the ability to write well, and others are characteristics without racial or ethnic incidence. But the stories a reporter decides to report, and the stories a newspaper decides to print, or a radio or television station decides to air, are not selected simply on the basis of which are the most accurate, or the best written. Rather, the very idea of "news" presupposes a conception of *importance*, and importance is dependent on those facts or explanations that an audience either does in fact find important, or should find important.<sup>31</sup> Yet whether we define importance, or its common synonym "news value," in terms of what an audience in fact wants or instead in terms of what an audience should want (or what a particular segment of an audience wants or should want), there is inevitably involved in deciding what is news a factor that is at once both subjective and audience-dependent.

Once we recognize the inevitable subjectivity and audience-dependence in determining what is news, we are prepared to think in different ways about the necessary qualifications for being a reporter. A useful comparison here would be the job of teacher. Suppose that it is a socially contingent but

---

31. See Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek and Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1979); Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Macmillan, 1978).

nonetheless current and real phenomenon that students relate better to teachers with whom they share racial or ethnic characteristics. If that is so, then students are likely to learn better from teachers of their own race or ethnic background, or, more plausibly, in an environment in which teachers of their own race or ethnic background are well represented. Under such conditions, then, race would become a qualification for teaching, or at least a factor in the hiring decision, precisely because generating a certain reaction - learning - on the part of students is one factor in what makes one successful at the job. Much the same might be said about police officers, insofar as community trust may be an important part of the qualifications for the job, and it may again be a contingent but real fact that this trust often has a significant racial component.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, in jobs where reaction qualifications, to use Alan Wertheimer's term,<sup>33</sup> are important, it may turn out that race is one of these qualifications, in much the same way that gender may be a qualification for particular positions within those medical specialties in which people are uncomfortable with physicians not of their own gender.

In many respects, therefore, recognition of the audience-dependence of questions of framing news stories, and of the audience-dependence in determining which news stories are worth pursuing, will lead to the conclusion that racial diversity is a reaction qualification in journalism just as it is in teaching and policing.<sup>34</sup> If success in journalism is defined in part by the ability to produce understanding for readers, then readers who are more trusting of the reporting of members of their own race have some control over what it

---

32. "We know why police promotions have been based on multiple-choice tests: to thwart political and personal favoritism. Still, Memphis's population is more than half black, and it is likely that blacks make up a high proportion of those having contact with the police. For the city to have effective law enforcement, it would be prudent to have a strong black presence at supervisory levels. And to obtain those officers, the department would have to reduce the importance of multiple-choice scores. This said, it can and should be argued that what was done in Memphis was not 'affirmative action,' but a policy designed to create a more effective police force." Andrew Hacker, "Goodbye to Affirmative Action?," *The New York Review of Books*, July 11, 1996, p. 21, at p. 24.

---

33. Alan Wertheimer, "Jobs, Qualifications, and Preferences," *Ethics*, vol. 94 (1983), pp. 99-112.

---

34. In an interesting study of daily newspapers, Dick Haws concluded that minority hiring has been less successful, proportionately, for newspapers in communities with larger minority populations than in communities with smaller minority populations. "Minorities in the Newsroom and Community: A Comparison," *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 68 (1991), pp. 764-71. Yet if daily newspapers considered the race of a journalist as a qualification for dealing with issues of race within a community, and if the salience of issues of race within a community varied with the size of the minority community, one would have expected to find results just the opposite of Haws' conclusions.

is that makes a successful reporter.<sup>35</sup> And the question is not only one about the needs of the community. In other dimensions of the profession of journalism, the social and political reality of race and ethnic identification will make the race and ethnic background of the journalist important qualifications for performing a number of tasks. If sources are more comfortable talking to people of their own race and if witnesses at events are more comfortable being interviewed by members of their own ethnic background, then there may be some tasks in which the race or ethnic origin of a journalist becomes a qualification of the job, or at the least a factor that might, other things being equal, make one reporter better than another. Moreover, if some of journalism is precisely the task of telling a story from some perspective (and some would say that all of journalism is properly described in this way, although this report does not subscribe to this view in its unqualified form), then the perspective of a person of a certain race or who is a member of a certain ethnic group cannot be represented by those of other races or who are members of different ethnic groups. Again, race and ethnicity are now not just attributes of a person. They become included among the factors that, with many others, produce success in performing the job.

Recognizing this reality is not without its costs and its risks. A frequent complaint of minority journalists is that they are channeled almost exclusively into race-specific stories, and thus do not have the same opportunities as their white colleagues to cover the important stories that do not have a specific racial focus. And when important stories do have a racial focus, a common complaint continues, non-white journalists are assumed to have a bias or interest that would prevent them from covering the story fairly or objectively, as if non-white people had a race but white people did not. The consequence, it is said, is that minority journalists often find themselves dealing with low-importance race-related issues, and thus are rarely on the fast track for advancement within the organization or within the profession. Relatedly, minority television journalists are often channeled into high visibility roles as anchors with few reporting responsibilities, again highlighting their visibility while diminishing their impact on the reporting process.

There is considerable anecdotal evidence in support of these charges, although it remains an area in which more systematic research is needed. But assuming that these charges of racial channeling have some basis,

---

35. For a survey supporting the existence of race-based trust on the part of readers, varying from 74% for blacks to 68% for Hispanics to 63% for Asian-Americans, see Mark Fitzgerald, "Most Blacks Upset by News Coverage," *Editor & Publisher*, August 6, 1994, p. 15.



there is a genuine risk that thinking of race or ethnicity as a job qualification, which is what much of the language of racial and ethnic diversity does either explicitly or implicitly, will increase the unfortunate phenomenon of slotting minority journalists exclusively into minority issues. For a minority journalist to think of her or his race as a significant part of the qualifications for the profession may raise rather than lower the likelihood that that journalist, and others as well, will be seen in excessively race-specific terms, and receive assignments and advancement disproportionately in race-related terms.

In addition to the dangers of channeling minority journalists into exclusively minority-based assignments, thinking of race or ethnicity as a job qualification also risks entrenching an excessive degree of race-consciousness. Insofar as race consciousness is one of the factors making race a credential in the first instance, there is a risk that thinking of race in these terms may justify or legitimate the social factors that have made it necessary. This concern, of course, tracks a significant dimension of the debates about affirmative action. In taking account of race in order to alleviate the effects of past and present discrimination, an excess degree of race-consciousness may be the unfortunate byproduct. Yet not taking account of race in order to avoid extending an unfortunate degree of race-consciousness is also costly, because it entails the potentially greater risk of entrenching and extending the harms of previous discrimination. Thus, the question of racial and ethnic diversity in journalism resembles current debates about the use of race in legislative districting.<sup>36</sup> Insofar as race is ignored, the reality of racial identification in public life is ignored as well; but insofar as race is taken into account in order not to ignore that reality, the conditions that have produced that reality may be extended and reinforced.

Despite the risks that a focus on race and ethnicity may produce, we believe that it is unrealistic to suppose that race and ethnic affinity are irrelevant in today's world in determining, in part, who trusts whom, who talks to whom, who understands what, and how people see the world around them. As long as race and ethnic background remain salient in just this way, then there will be many tasks within journalism in which the race or ethnicity of the journalist is as relevant as his or her ability to write well, to locate sources, and to test assertions for accuracy. The language of racial and ethnic diversity, whether in journalism or elsewhere, is designed to reflect this

---

36. Compare Lani Guinier, *The Tyranny of the Majority* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), with the majority opinions of the Supreme Court in *Shaw v. Reno*, 509 U.S. 630 (1993), *Miller v. Johnson*, 115 S. Ct. 2475 (1995), *Shaw v. Hunt*, 116 S. Ct. 1894 (1996), and *Bush v. Vera*, 116 S. Ct. 1941 (1996).

reality, and thus for journalism, even if not for all other professions, the pursuit of racial and ethnic diversity can be seen largely in terms of seeking the people necessary to do the job at hand.

## IV. OBSTACLES

---

Although there is no shortage of articles, panels, and discussions about increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the press, it is a familiar complaint that progress has remained, at best, slow.<sup>37</sup> The number of minority journalists grows, both in absolute and percentage terms, but at a decreasing rate. And the rate of minority advancement into managerial positions in both the print and broadcast press has been especially slow.<sup>38</sup> One reason for a degree of progress that is slower than many would wish, we have concluded, is that there has been little direct confrontation with many of the existing obstacles to such progress, and that many of the advocates for increased racial and ethnic diversity in the American press have acted as if the soundness of the idea of increased racial and ethnic diversity were a sufficient condition for its widespread acceptance and adoption. Yet this is too optimistic a picture of the way in which change occurs, and successful change usually involves the surmounting of substantial obstacles. Consequently, as long as those obstacles are ignored, the likelihood of progress and change is low. In this section, we discuss a number of those obstacles, in the hope that exposing them will be useful, eventually, in eliminating them.

---

37. See, for example, Mercedes Lynn de Uriarte, "Inching Numbers," *Quill*, vol. 84 (May 1996), pp. 16-18.

---

38. See National Association of Black Journalists, "Muted Voices: Frustration and Fear in the Newsroom" (1993); Sam Howe Verhovek, "Black Journalists Talk of Gaps in Newsroom Advancement," *The New York Times*, July 23, 1993, p. A11, col. 1.

## A. JOURNALISM AND THE TRADITION OF OBJECTIVITY

Like history, law, literary criticism, anthropology, and many other disciplines, journalism is an interpretive discipline. The journalist sees a large and messy world, and from that world extracts the facts that seem important, the explanations that seem plausible, and the trends that seem noteworthy. And in doing so, the journalist, like other interpreters, describers, and explainers of the world, likes to think that he or she is "telling it like it is." Under this view, journalism at its best mirrors and reports an observer-independent reality.

In most of the interpretive disciplines, there have been dominant traditions of understanding the discipline in similar "telling it like it is" terms. Under this view, the historian attempts to understand what actually happened and why it happened, the anthropologist seeks to explain how a culture actually understands itself, and how it really goes about daily life, and the judge makes decisions on what the law says rather than on the basis of what the judge thinks ought to be the case. But in all of the interpretive disciplines, this tradition of objectivity has been subject to question over the last several generations.<sup>39</sup> When historians suggest that history must be rewritten by each generation, they mean to suggest that each generation will have different ways of seeing past events, in light of different concerns, different views about what is important, and different conceptual apparatuses through which they see the events of the past. When literary critics focus on the reader, when scholars of art take seriously "the eye of the beholder," when sociologists and anthropologists consider the possibility that different observers will see different phenomena and produce different explanations, and when legal scholars focus on the judge as an essential part of any legal outcome, they all question the extent to which there is an accessible observer-independent or interpreter-independent reality.<sup>40</sup>

At the extremes, these perspectives strike us as implausible. Even though the identity, background, and perspectives of scientists - natural or social - are important in deciding what to observe and what criteria to select among equally logically sound explanations, scientific truth is not entirely a social construction. And much the same can be said about the truths of

---

39. See Peter Novick, *The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

---

40. On the similarity among these questions across disciplines, see Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1989).

human behavior that are the focus both of social scientists and of journalists. There is a "there" there, which some observers are better at identifying than others, and some analysts are better at explaining than others.

Yet although the extreme forms of "social construction of reality" perspectives appear unsound, the challenge to objectivity that has been widely discussed at least since the middle of the twentieth century is far more important in those disciplines centrally involved with the explanation of human behavior and the interpretation of human events. History is perhaps the closest analogue, and increasing numbers of historians find it an important corrective to traditional objectivist views to note the ways in which the agendas, perspectives, identity, and situation of the historian is a component in what is taken to be historical truth.<sup>41</sup>

Our purpose in this brief survey of other disciplines has been to contrast the modern history of journalism with much of the modern history of those disciplines with which journalism bears some affinity. Unlike most of the other observing and explaining disciplines, journalism has a far thinner critical (Critical with a capital "C," perhaps) tradition, in the technical sense of a tradition either questioning the existence of an observer-independent reality, or, more plausibly, questioning the ability of the practitioner - any practitioner - to identify in an unfiltered way the important features of an observer-independent reality. More than its disciplinary compatriots, journalism has adhered to the tradition of objectivity.<sup>42</sup> Although this tradition has been questioned within journalism and by practicing journalists, the image of objectivity still has a strong grip on the self-understanding of most practicing journalists.<sup>43</sup>

Because the tradition of objectivity has deeper roots within journalism than it has in other disciplines, journalists have appeared to be more resistant than others to accepting the idea that the nature of a story will, of necessity, vary with the personal characteristics and with the social, cultural, and political background of the journalist. Under the tradition of objectivity, when the politics or perspective of the journalist informs the story, that is a defect to be cured, and not an inevitability to be accepted. Consequently, the central

---

41. See Novick, *op. cit.*

---

42. See Denis McQuail, *Media Performance: Mass Communication and the Public Interest* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), pp. 183-92.

---

43. See Judith Lichtenberg, "In Defense of Objectivity," in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch, eds., *Mass Media and Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1991), pp. 216-31.

focus of much of the concern for racial and ethnic diversity - that the racial and ethnic identity and experiences of the reporter helps to determine what he or she reports and how he or she reports it - is in conflict with one of the traditional and central tenets of American journalism. If acceptance of racial and ethnic diversity as a component of better journalism, as opposed to a different focus on affirmative action as a remedy for past wrongs, involves accepting the idea that one's racial or ethnic identity is a necessary part of most journalistic tasks, then the lack of a strong critical tradition within American journalism may help to explain why the challenge of racial and ethnic diversity is seen as being as great a challenge as it is.

#### B. RESISTANCE TO AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

The previous section of this report contrasted the language of racial and ethnic diversity, which focuses on the necessary qualifications for a job or the necessary characteristics for an institution that is doing its job, with the language of affirmative action, which calls forth images of remedies and not qualifications, and which is more likely backward-looking rather than forward-looking. Given this contrast, the language of racial and ethnic diversity is seen by many people to be superior, strategically, to the language of affirmative action in addressing the questions and problems of race, because the latter but not the former suggests compensation, or preferences, or adjusting qualifications, in a way that the former does not. In large part this difference in perception reflects reality. Insofar as racial and ethnic diversity is understood as responding in part to the way in which various personal characteristics ought to be seen as optimizing the function of some institution, then seeking racial and ethnic diversity does not involve relaxing or lowering what would otherwise be the standards for hiring or promotion, since racial and ethnic diversity is now part of those standards and not an exception to them. Moreover, it appears to be the case that even the same policy, having the same beneficiaries, is more likely to be accepted by the public if couched in racially neutral terms (such as "diversity") than if it is couched in terms that appear more race specific (such as "affirmative action").<sup>44</sup>

Yet whether the pursuit of racial and ethnic diversity is seen as a change in the traditional criteria for selection and advancement, or whether it is seen as a change in terminology to describe the same phenomenon of affirmative

44. See Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided By Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Paul M. Sniderman, Edward G. Carmines, Geoffrey C. Layman, and Michael Carter, "Beyond Race: Social Justice as a Race Neutral Ideal," *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 40 (1996), pp. 33-55.

action, it cannot be denied that affirmative action is a highly contentious subject in the contemporary United States.<sup>45</sup> And as widely reported events at the *Boston Globe* and *The Washington Post* indicate, the American newsroom is hardly immune from the tensions surrounding affirmative action.<sup>46</sup> Although some of the people who oppose affirmative action do or would support actual discrimination against members of minority races, the vast proportion of those who are skeptical of affirmative action are not racists in any plausible conception of that inflammatory but sometimes justified term. Instead, they have different views about the best way to achieve racial equality, and about the costs that a society ought to be willing to incur to achieve it. Our purpose here, however, is not to rehearse the existing social, political, and philosophical debates about the merits of affirmative action. Rather, it is to point out that it should come as no surprise to discover that American journalists are divided on questions of affirmative action just as is much of the rest of American society, that these divisions are exacerbated with decreasing circulation and consequent downsizing in the print media<sup>47</sup> and

---

45. The degree of public contentiousness may, however, mask a moderately widespread public opinion that "clearly defines acceptable policy as falling somewhere between color blindness on the one hand and preferences on the other." Charlotte Steeh and Maria Krysan, "Affirmative Action and the Public, 1970-1995," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 60 (1996), pp. 128-58.

---

46. One big-city paper after another - *The Los Angeles Times*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Boston Globe*, *USA Today* - has struggled with racial flare-ups in recent years. Howard Kurtz, "A Diversity of Opinions: New Republic Story on Race in Newsroom Stirs Up the Post," *The Washington Post*, September 21, 1995, p. C1. On the controversy at *The Washington Post*, see also Ruth Shalit, "Race in the Newsroom: The Washington Post in Black and White," *The New Republic*, October 2, 1995, p. 20; Leonard Downie, Jr., Donald Graham, Ruth Shalit, "Race in the Newsroom: An Exchange," *The New Republic*, October 16, 1995, p. 14; Jonathan Alter, "Black and White and Mad All Over," *Newsweek*, October 2, 1995, p. 75; William Glaberson, "Racial Charge Causes Anger at Newspaper," *The New York Times*, September 22, 1995, p. A23.

---

47. Daily newspaper circulation in the United States was 62.1 million in 1970, and 59.8 million in 1993. Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995, Table 897. During that same period, the number of daily and Sunday English-language newspapers in the United States dropped from 1748 to 1556. *Ibid.*, Table 918. By way of contrast, the number of AM radio stations in the United States increased from 4288 to 4987 from 1970 to 1990, the number of FM stations increased from 2126 to 4392 during that time period, and the the number of television stations increased from 691 to 1092 (G.T. Kurian, *Datapedia of the United States 1790-2000* (Lanham, Maryland: Bernan Press, 1994), p. 299). And from 1970 to 1993, the number of cable television subscribers rose from 5,100,000 to 58,500,000. Statistical Abstract of the United States, Table 912. With the exception of cable television usage, where the disparity between white (64.0%) and black (48.1%) likely reflects economic differentials and to a lesser extent geographic residential patterns, there is little racial difference in press consumption by medium. 94.5% of blacks and 91.7% of whites watch television regularly,

with increasing competition and profit-consciousness in the broadcast media, and that substituting the language of racial and ethnic diversity for the language of affirmative action is unlikely to eliminate many of those divisions, especially for those whose professional self-understanding as well as their own professional position is tied to the hiring and promotion criteria that have dominated their professional lives.

Even the language of racial and ethnic diversity, therefore, and even the substitution of the goal of diversity as a job qualification for the goal of affirmative action as a remedy for past wrongs, cannot escape the fact that diversification of the press will involve hiring people whom skeptics about affirmative action believe would otherwise not have been hired, or promoting people who otherwise would not have been promoted. Even if the substitution of criteria for the "otherwise" is simply a recognition of a broader range of talents and qualifications, or the elimination of those channels of hiring and promotion often going by the name of the "old boy network," the tension cannot be ignored, and the opposition to affirmative action that exists in large parts of modern American society cannot be discounted as an obstacle to achieving greater racial diversity in American journalism. Just as some of the causes of minority underrepresentation in the American press are hardly press-specific,<sup>48</sup> so too are some of the obstacles to alleviating that underrepresentation obstacles that exist throughout the culture of which the press is but one component.

### C. THE COMPLEXION OF JOURNALISM EDUCATION

Increasingly, journalists are drawn from the ranks of those who have received formal education in journalism, whether by way of a degree or major field in journalism, or by way of a journalism degree at the masters level after an undergraduate degree in a different field, or by way of college-based journalism experience. Yet an examination of the racial makeup of those sources of entry-level journalists reveals that editors who complain about the smallness of the pool have some justification in their complaints, and that the problem of lack of diversity in journalism is attributable in part

---

78.0% of whites and 81.1% of blacks watch prime time television, 84.8% of whites and 84.7% of blacks listen to the radio, and 83.6% of whites and 82.2% of blacks read a daily newspaper. *Ibid.*, Table 898. There is, however, lower newspaper reading (75.2%) for those who describe themselves as Spanish-speaking, a not surprising figure given the relative scarcity of Spanish-language dailies in a largely English-speaking country.

---

48. See Part II.A. above.



to a lack of diversity in the institutions from which tomorrow's journalists will come.

The most dramatic evidence comes from the statistics about student newspapers at the country's major universities.<sup>49</sup> According to a 1995 survey, the major student newspapers of the twenty-five highest ranking universities in the United States had a total of 380 student editors, of whom five were black. At twenty-one of these student newspapers, no members of the editorial staff were black. If a significant source of professional journalists has substantially more under-representation of racial minorities than does the profession itself, the outlook for the future is not good.<sup>50</sup>

This under-representation in student newspapers is consistent with, albeit somewhat more dramatic than, the picture at university-based schools of journalism.<sup>51</sup> Yet it is still the case that journalism education, in one form or another, has not been especially successful in attracting students from racial minorities. This certainly suggests that schools of journalism, and even more the primary student newspapers at the country's major universities, should increase the efforts they are making to increase racial diversity. But it suggests as well that insofar as American journalism targets its entry-level recruiting at journalism programs and at the student press at major universities, then the shortage of qualified non-white candidates within the pool as so defined should come as no surprise.

#### D. TRANSFORMING THE NATURE OF JOURNALISM

An analysis of the complaints of minority journalists, and representatives of minority communities, reveals that the complaints about coverage of minority issues often track complaints about American journalism in general. For example, a frequent complaint is that coverage of issues involving race frequently focuses on the negative, and that positive stories about minority individuals or initiatives in minority communities are either ignored or downplayed. Another complaint is that the press focuses on conflict, and ignores examples of cooperation. Yet the charge that American journalism

---

49. "The Student Newsroom: The Most Segregated Place on Campus," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, No. 7 (1995), pp. 12-13.

---

50. For a more detailed study of the same issue, see Betty Medsger, *Whither Journalism Education?* (New York: Freedom Forum, 1996).

---

51. See de Uriarte, "Inching Numbers," op. cit., note 37.

focuses on the negative rather than the positive, and that it finds conflict more appealing than cooperation, is hardly a charge that is specific to coverage of issues of race.<sup>52</sup> Even apart from coverage of issues of race, the American press is charged with focusing on the negative and ignoring the positive, with being far better at dealing with episodes and anecdotes than with trends, and with identifying and framing stories in ways that stress conflict and combat, and downplaying events that are characterized by cooperative behavior and successful social outcomes.

What these race-independent complaints suggest is that many of the charges made against the press in its coverage (or non-coverage) of issues of race are charges that go to the core of existing press practices. As the current debate over so-called public (or civic) journalism suggests, there are widely-discussed and influential challenges to those existing press practices. But the fact that there is a debate suggests as well that many people in the press view those existing practices as serving an important public function, and believe as well that it is not and should not be a function of the press to help people feel good about themselves, or to help communities and their citizens satisfy their civic obligations. To the extent that improved coverage of issues of race involves an attempt to avoid ignoring non-white sources and protagonists, or to avoid the unnecessary negative stereotype, or to avoid racial identification for non-whites when there is no parallel racial identification for whites, the traditional standards of American journalism are not being challenged. To the extent that improved coverage is taken to include an attempt to cover positive developments in minority communities, however, or to downplay racially charged features of events that traditional standards would consider newsworthy, those traditional standards are being challenged, and those who believe in the desirability of those traditional standards will, not surprisingly, feel threatened. This is not to say that some of those standards are not in need of rethinking, and, in some cases, discarding. It is to say that calls for improved coverage that are also calls for rethinking the existing understanding of American journalism will, expectedly, encounter substantial obstacles in the form of resistance from those for whom these existing understandings are both desirable and genuinely worth preserving.

#### E. THE MISDIRECTION OF COMPLAINT

Throughout this report we have noted a large number of complaints about press coverage of race. Some of these complaints have been made by

---

52. See, for example, Thomas Patterson, *Out of Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994).

political leaders within minority communities, some by academics, and others by minority journalists themselves. Yet one of the striking features of these complaints is that they are uniformly directed to the press itself. This is not inappropriate, but it suggests that one reason for the comparative lack of effectiveness of many of these complaints is that they have not been directed to those with greater power over the press, and to whom the press is likely to be especially responsive. When faced with a choice between talking to the press directly and talking to those whose actions and words might influence press behavior, most of the critics of the press's record on racial and ethnic diversity have chosen to talk directly to the press, even though it is possible that this might not be the most effective way to secure implementation of a changed strategy about that diversity.

Let us be more specific. Although prominent leaders of minority communities have on occasion spoken out against the ways in which the members of their communities have been portrayed in the press, and have on occasion criticized the press for its relative lack of racial diversity, the topic of the press has not been a significant part of the agenda of most of these leaders. Perhaps this behavior is just the reaction of the intelligent leader who has absorbed the teaching of the old maxim that one "should never argue with the fellow who buys ink by the barrel." And perhaps it is simply that there are perceived to be more important problems involving crime, employment, immigration, welfare policy, education, the economy, and so on. But whatever the cause of the relative failure of minority leaders to focus strongly on the press, the consequence seems to be that the movement for greater racial and ethnic diversity in the press, and greater sensitivity in the coverage of issues of race, has been a movement primarily of minority journalists, and of those who teach and do research in schools of journalism. Given the location of most of the concerns within the community of minority journalists and journalism school academics, it is not surprising that those concerns would most often be expressed directly to the press and to its management and senior editors. By contrast to the concerns expressed by minority journalists themselves, however, complaints about the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the press from non-press members of minority communities, or leaders of minority communities, or leaders in general, has been, at best, episodic.

Moreover, and again not surprisingly, the complaints by minority journalists and by researchers in journalism schools have been directed to the press itself. Yet although well-meaning publishers and editors have frequently responded to these complaints, it should come as no surprise to discover that the force behind them is limited. It is widely believed that the press is, these

days, especially sensitive to pressure from readers, to pressure from advertisers, and, in the case of chain newspapers, to pressure at the highest corporate levels.<sup>53</sup> Yet in the existing debates, all of these voices have been remarkably silent, and there has been little effort on the part of those who would seek to change existing coverage practices and existing hiring and promotion practices to attempt to activate those potential sources of pressure. A significant obstacle to change, therefore, has been the absence of concerted effort by those with the political, economic, or social power to force it. Until that happens, the slowness of change should come as no surprise.

---

53. This is another area in which further research is needed, since few of the common hypotheses about the pressures on the press, and the incentives for the press to change for the better or for the worse, have been subject to systematic examination.

## V. INCENTIVES TO CHANGE

---

This last obstacle strikes us as perhaps the most important. Like most other institutions, the American press wants to do the right thing as it understands it. But like most other institutions, the American press is disinclined to make changes that it does not believe are warranted, or to make changes at a faster rate than it believes is feasible, unless there is some reward for doing so, or some punishment for not. Although incentives are not the only stimulus of press behavior - what the press does is largely a function of the values and preferences of the people who staff it and the institutions and culture around which it is created - incentives are a highly important component of why institutions change in ways that the institutions themselves are independently disinclined to do, or change at a rate different from an institution's own judgment about the optimal rate of change.

This being the case, a significant part of the current problem of the rate of racial and ethnic diversification is the absence of substantial incentives for the press to change its existing practices, or the rate at which it changes those existing practices. As we have noted, the bulk of the pressure for increased racial and ethnic diversification of the press has come from minority journalists, or from organizations representing or closely associated with minority journalists. These are powerful voices,<sup>54</sup> but they are voices comparatively less well situated to be able to apply the positive and negative incentives that are necessary for significant change. If racial diversity in the press is going to

---

54. Among the most prominent examples is the Unity '94 conference. See "Voices from Unity," *ASNE Bulletin*, August 1994.

increase substantially, it will take more than the actions of a relatively small group of the press's own employees to produce that change. More specifically, we believe that the rate of change would be accelerated if leaders of minority communities, and political leaders in general, joined the minority journalists who are now urging greater diversity in the press, and if these leaders directed their efforts not so much to the press directly, but instead to the readers and the advertisers who may for obvious economic reasons have a much greater ability to influence press behavior. For those who would wish to increase racial and ethnic diversity in the press at a greater rate than is now the case, it would seem that their efforts would be more effective if directed not at the press, but at those who represent the constituencies to whom the press is in fact most responsive.

One of the most important of those constituencies is that of readers, viewers, and listeners, since the size of the audience not only affects direct revenues in the case of the print press and cable television, but has an equally great indirect effect on revenues by being the largest determinant of advertising rates.<sup>55</sup> Yet even though the advantages of increased audience size on revenues are obvious, there has been little research on the relationship between press content and minority readership, viewership, and listenership. There are occasional case studies or anecdotal reports about instances (the *San Jose Mercury News*, for example, and the *Seattle Times*) in which significantly increased attention to coverage of minority issues, or coverage of issues from a minority perspective, has been accompanied by an increase in circulation or audience, but little systematic research on the relationship between press content and the size and demographics of the audience. Especially relevant in this regard is the existence of the minority press, especially the minority print press. There are now 184 primarily black (measured by self-identification) newspapers, most of which are weekly.<sup>56</sup> The largest dailies are the *New York Daily Challenge/Afro Times*, with a circulation of 78,000, and the *Chicago Daily Defender*, with a paid circulation of 23,489 and a free circulation of 28,214, these figures being usefully compared to the 100th largest daily newspaper in the United States, the *Wichita Eagle*, with a circulation of 111,827. Spanish language newspapers are

---

55. An important qualification is that advertising often responds not only to the size of the audience, but also to its demographics and spending patterns. If some racial and ethnic groups have spending patterns and levels that do not appeal to potential advertisers, then an increase in the size of the minority audience may be less economically advantageous to publishers and broadcasters than it appears at first glance.

---

56. See *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook 1995*, pp. II-85-87.

again mostly weeklies, and the dailies, although at their largest slightly larger than the daily black newspapers, are still comparatively small, with the largest dailies being New York's *El Diario de la Prensa* (48,000) and *Noticias del Mundo* (24,714), Miami's *Diario las Americas* (66,174 paid, 70,214 free),<sup>57</sup> and in Los Angeles *La Opinion* (105,918).

The relevance of the comparatively small numbers for the minority print press is that the numbers make it plain that newspapers directed to minority populations (and the same holds true to an even greater extent for broadcast and cable television) do not constitute substantial competition for the existing "mainstream" or "non-minority" press. As a result, the mainstream press, while plainly concerned about audience in general, has what appears to be somewhat of a captive audience with respect to minority populations, and thus less incentive to change its behavior than many have supposed. Yet if the minority press were a more serious competitor, minority readership might be more sensitive, in the economic sense, to the ability of a non-minority broadcaster or publisher to satisfy its needs. Although the economic and social interaction between the minority press and the mainstream press is an area in which the ratio of speculation to data is high, it does appear likely that one reason for a rate of change that is slower than many would wish is that those with the power to effect those changes have little reason to believe that failure to make them will lose them very many readers or viewers, and equally little reason to believe that making them will gain them very many readers or viewers that they do not already have.

Even more apparent is the level of advertising as an incentive to press behavior, and thus the potential effect of advertisers in producing change in that behavior. An interesting contrast here is the behavior of the groups objecting to the content of network television entertainment, particularly with respect to the portrayal of matters touching on sexuality, abortion, sexual orientation, and related issues.<sup>58</sup> Although such groups do on occasion take their complaints directly to broadcasters and producers, more commonly they

---

57. Also relevant, especially so in light of the themes of this report, is the Spanish language section in the English language *Miami Herald*.

---

58. A prominent example is the Mississippi-based American Family Association, under the leadership of Rev. Donald Wildmon. Although this is an organization commonly thought of as "conservative," the strategies we discuss here have not, historically, had a particular political incidence. Indeed, the use of purchasing power to induce social change was an important strategy of the civil rights movement in the South in the 1950s and 1960s. That this strategy has been less used to attempt to induce or encourage changes in press conduct is, in light of that history, slightly surprising.

attempt to mobilize the potential audience, and commonly to mobilize that audience not against broadcasters directly, but against the advertisers (and their products) who they believe are sponsoring the programming they find objectionable. Here again is an area in which the evidence is anecdotal and undocumented, and much more systematic research is needed. Still, it appears as if such strategies have some effect, largely because advertisers are highly sensitive to the possibility that they will lose consumers because of the programs they sponsor, that advertisers will consequently be quite willing to attempt to tie their willingness to advertise to the content of the programming, and that the producers of broadcast and cable entertainment have been willing to take advertiser concerns into account in determining program content.

Not only is there little systematic research on the actual extent of this phenomenon, but there is also even less on the extent to which it might be effective for news reporting rather than entertainment, for print rather than broadcast, and for questions of coverage of racial and ethnic minorities rather than for questions of the sexual content of broadcast entertainment. Still, the analogy suggests that it is hardly self-evident that the way to change press behavior is to concentrate on complaining directly to the press. More likely to be effective is a strategy that identifies the forces to which the press is most responsive (advertising, for example, although this is not the only force), identifies the factors that are most important to those forces (threats to stop buying the product, for example, although this is not the only factor that is important to advertisers), and then seeks to apply its greatest pressure at just that point. If the leaders of minority communities were to operate in that way, it is quite possible that the rate of change in minority hiring and in coverage of minority issues would be accelerated. And if those who are now at the forefront of the move to increase racial and ethnic diversity in the press were to analyze the issue in the same way with respect to the problem of mobilizing leaders of minority communities to put the issue of racial diversity in the press at the top of their agenda, it is again possible that there would be a greater degree of success.



## VI. CONCLUSION

---

As originally conceived, this report was directed to news organizations, and, to a lesser extent, to individual journalists and to editors and managers within those organizations. But as those who were involved in this project delved deeper into the politics, the economics, and the sociology of diversity in the American press, it became apparent that there was no shortage of solutions to the problem of the lack of racial diversity in the American press, nor was there a shortage of concrete recommendations. What there was a shortage of, however, was careful attention to the reasons why those solutions and recommendations had not been acted upon, or, more accurately, why the rate of acting upon those recommendations had been slower than many of the people who had proposed them had both desired and expected.

In the face of this, it appears that there are areas in which further research is needed, but not further research on the way in which minority issues are covered, and not further research on minority staffing in America's newsrooms. On these issues, and on related ones, there is a great deal of important data, and the existence of that data has helped to produce the changes that are now taking place. Yet for further changes to take place, and for the rate of change to accelerate, there needs to be a careful attention to identifying the individuals, institutions, and structures within the press who have the power to produce those changes, to locating the forces to which those individuals, institutions, and structures are most responsive, and then to examining the ways in which those forces themselves might be mobilized in the service of greater responsiveness of the American press to the needs of America's racial and ethnic minorities.

This is not primarily a problem of research, nor is more research likely to be the solution. Tempting as it is for a research center such as this one to

suggest that more research is the key to change, such suggestions are often exaggerated, and are unlikely to be true in this case. Although the Shorenstein Center believes that it has identified areas in which further research is likely to bear fruit, the primary aim of this report is to suggest an increased attention by those actively involved in the issue to the obstacles that have stood in the way of sufficient responsiveness to the calls for change that are now widely publicized, and to the incentives that might lead to the removal of some of those obstacles. In an ideal world, good ideas prevail by their own force. In the non-ideal world we inhabit, the implementation of good ideas is as much of a problem as their generation. On the issue of increasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the American press, and of increasing the responsiveness of the American press to the needs of America's racial and ethnic minorities, the good ideas are now widely understood. What remains is the task of understanding why their implementation remains problematic, and the task of using that understanding to secure the implementation of the goal that so many accept.

# APPENDIX

---

THE HARVARD TASK FORCE ON RACE AND THE PRESS  
Sponsored by the Joan Shorenstein Center  
on the Press, Politics and Public Policy  
and the Ford Foundation

## MEMBERS

William M. Boyd II, Poynter Institute for Media Studies

Mark Carter, CNN

Carol B. Conaway, College of the Holy Cross

Louis DeSipio, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Anne Hull, *St. Petersburg Times*

Sonia R. Jarvis, George Washington University

Marion Just, Wellesley College

Lincoln Millstein, *Boston Globe*

Pippa Norris, Associate Director for Research, Shorenstein Center and  
Lecturer, Kennedy School of Government

Richard Parker, Senior Fellow, Shorenstein Center

Jorge Quiroga, WCVB-TV

Keith Reeves, Assistant Professor of Public Policy, Kennedy School of  
Government

Frederick Schauer, Frank Stanton Professor of the First Amendment,  
Kennedy School of Government

Daniel Steiner, Harvard University

Janet Wilson, Nieman Fellow, 1995-1996

Linda Yueh, Kennedy School