

A Preliminary Survey of Newspapers  
in Four Midwestern States:  
A Grassroots Approach to Minority Recruiting in Journalism.

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Increasing the employment of minority journalists at newspapers is a real problem. There is a lack of diversity in newsrooms that does not adequately reflect growing homogeneous readerships or society-at-large. This seems to be especially true for small circulation newspapers. Newsroom hiring for 1990 increased the number of minorities in journalism only marginally. The total percentage of minorities in the newsroom rose only three-tenths of a percentage point to 7.86 percent(ASNE,1).

With this report I hope to open doors for the study and resolution of the problems which small daily newspapers face in hiring and retaining minority journalists. However, I hope that what is discussed here will be applicable to all newspapers and communication media, benefiting the profession of journalism as a whole.

After reading the report containing the findings of the American Society of Newspaper Editor's annual minority employment survey and other literature about their programs to help solve the problem, I decided to conduct my own survey. This survey would gauge the general awareness of the problem, and also each newspaper's awareness of and participation in nationwide programs such as job fairs, employment networks and internships organized by such associations and corporations as APME, ASNE and Dow Jones.

However, the emphasis of my survey was on each newspaper's perception of local minority populations and the newspaper's receptiveness of possible solutions involving direct interaction with minorities in the community. By

taking a grassroots approach more specifically to a community or region, perhaps solutions can be found that better meet the editorial and employment needs of individual newspapers and the educational and socio-economic needs of minorities.

### **The Problem At A National Level**

A look at the results of ASNE's 1990 survey will help to understand the magnitude of concern over the small percentage of minorities in the newspaper industry.

the survey found that of the 56,900 newsroom employees in 1990, those who were minorities numbered 4,500. Minorities here is defined as "blacks, Hispanics, Asian Americans and Native Americans." The total number of newsroom employees grew by 700. Minority reporters, copy editors, photographers, artists and supervisors made up 300 of these new hires. Thus, minorities accounted for 19 percent of all entry level hires, an increase of one percentage point from 1989. These findings were based on 1,027 responses of 1,576 daily newspapers(65 percent of all U.S. dailies). The figures are weighted to reflect all daily newspapers(ASNE,1-2).

The ASNE report also found that minorities hold 4.6 percent of the supervisory positions, up one-tenth of a percentage point from 1989. Of the 4,500 minority journalists at daily newspapers, 14 percent are in management. Twenty-four percent of all white newspaper journalists have management jobs(ASNE,1).

In a letter from March 1990 announcing these findings, Loren Ghiglione, then president of ASNE, made this comment. "My guesstimate is that the percentage of minorities in the general population increased five-tenths of a percentage point last year. So a three-tenths percent increase in the newsroom population really represents a decrease"(ASNE,1).

The same report quotes Merv Aubespain, then chairperson of ASNE's Minorities Committee, as saying that the marginal gains in [minority] employment are "not only unfortunate but embarrassing for our industry which prides itself on putting the spotlight on the ills of society. Newspapers' survival depends on serving a changing constituency and minority journalists are essential to that effort"(ASNE,1).

In 1978 ASNE set its "Year 2000" goal of achieving racial representation in the newsroom equivalent to the racial composition of American society. Although ASNE and other organizations put much effort, planning and money into programs designed to meet this goal, the overall results are somewhat disheartening. This is true in the area of education as well as employment.

ASNE has implemented programs such as the "Professional-in-Residence" to bridge the gap between journalism education and the real world of newspapers. In addition to its programs, the ASNE Foundation provides scholarships to minority students entering college in the fall after their high school graduation(Minorities in the Newsroom-ASNE, July 1990).

Yet in 1989 as minority enrollments in journalism programs increased, those graduating with journalism degrees de-

creased. At 395 accredited journalism and mass communication programs in the United States 15.6 percent of undergraduates were minorities, but only 11.8 percent of the bachelor degrees in those same journalism programs were awarded to minorities. This is a drop from 12.6 percent in 1988(Becker,14).

Minorities are not choosing careers in the communications field. Reasons why they are not attracted to newspaper jobs are numerous: few role models, low pay compared to other careers, lack(or perceived lack)of language skills and confidence with those skills, feelings of isolation and poor advising at high schools(Guimary,1009).

Perhaps the roots of this problem are half-hidden in reports such as those put out by ASNE. First, the 1990 findings show that 54 percent of daily newspapers currently employ no minorities, with no change in this figure from 1989. The report states "as in the past, newspapers with no minorities tend to be **small circulation** newspapers." To be more precise about this, only 21 percent of newspapers with circulations of 10,000 and under, and only 43 percent of the 462 with circulations between 10,000 and 25,000 employ minorities. The problems of these smaller newspapers is underscored by comparing them to the newspapers in the 50,000 to 100,000 range, 89 percent of which employ minorities in their newsrooms. All of the 100,000 and over circulation newspapers responding to the survey employed minority journalists on their editorial staffs(ASNE,2).

Second, several places in ASNE literature it is mention-

ed that the association focuses its sponsorship of educational efforts on "historically black colleges and universities" with sizable minority enrollment (Minorities in the Newsroom-ASNE, July 1990). Also, the main ASNE program aimed at bringing minority youth into journalism, Project Focus, encourages newspapers to hire minority students for internships during the summer between their freshman and sophomore years at college, and provided for only 54 such students to participate in 1990.

These two points of interest may actually hinder the efforts to reach the "Year 2000" goal in several ways. By concentrating on major universities with large minority populations, whether historically black or not, a significant portion of minority students interested in media careers may not be receiving the full attention and encouragement which their peers at other institutions may benefit from. Left on the fringe of such programs and perhaps not receiving adequate advising and encouragement from their own institution of study, these minority students might turn to other areas of study and career interests.

The lack of programs for high school students suggests that a sizable body of evidence pointing to the need to work with students during this time and maybe even earlier, is being ignored. Decisions made while at high school are of vital importance because most students have a career preference before entering college. Although up to a third may be undecided (Burgoon et al., 435). I will return to the topic of finding innovative approaches to the educational aspect of

involving minority students in communication careers later in the report.

### **Problem Summary**

It stands to reason that if such a high percentage of daily newspapers , particularly smaller ones, employ no minorities, there will be some problems which arise from the conditions in which small circulation papers operate, and which in turn affect the entire industry, or vice versa. In this light, there are two inter-locking problems which seem to contribute to the minority employment situation currently facing most newspapers. First, larger metropolitan papers generally hire reporters who have had about five years of experience and training at smaller newspapers. Approximately two-thirds of the nation's dailies are small-to-medium sized and this is where the larger papers have traditionally hired from. Second, minority journalists are reluctant to look for employment at the smaller newspapers, most especially in rural areas(Guimary,1009-1010).

If there is a small percentage of minority journalists to begin with, and they follow the traditional route of moving to newspapers with larger circulation, then the small papers will be left in the lurch. With little return for their investment, these newspapers will most likely not go out of the way to hire minority journalists. The time and effort that is needed to attract and train newsroom employees is great, but to attract minority journalists, it takes even more time

and effort simply because they are harder to find. Thus the decreasing rate of minority journalists graduating from college compounds the problem. Furthermore, if minority journalists truly are hesitant to work for small town newspapers there will be less of them for the big papers to hire unless those newspapers and the industry put more stock into hiring directly out of college and invest in more on-the-job training and internship programs.

While it may be true that many of the smallest newspapers serve little or no minority readership because their circulation areas don't include minorities, many small cities and larger towns do have growing communities of racial or ethnic minorities which most likely play an important role in the local economy in terms of the work force. This is rapidly becoming a problem which cannot be confined to the large urban centers or dealt with by blanket nationwide policies. The fact that minorities are becoming more important to our society in general, and to the demographic composition of readerships suggests that a serious solution must bring into account the specific needs of newspapers everywhere to service their constituencies.

A solution focused on the smaller circulation newspapers would go a long way towards increasing awareness of non-white populations in the community and developing better coverage of minority affairs. It might also bring the newspaper industry closer to meeting the racial representation in the newsroom goal of ASNE. Efforts to address educational and social issues involved in solving this problem before



students reach college age might be viable solutions to the dilemma faced by the newspaper industry, especially for the smaller circulation daily papers.

### **Survey of Newspapers In Four Midwestern States**

As indicated before, I undertook this survey of small circulation newspapers to determine the general awareness of the problem, the participation in job fairs and internship programs, and the attitudes towards not only minorities in the newsroom but also in the community.

I used the **Editor and Publisher(International)Yearbook 1990** to choose all the daily newspapers in Indiana, Illinois, Kentucky and Ohio with circulations of 20,000 or more. My target public was a total of 76 dailies, breaking down as follows: Indiana-20, Illinois-23, Kentucky-7, and Ohio-26. Each survey was mailed out with a cover letter and a no-postage-necessary business reply envelope provided by the Ball State University Department of Journalism. Several faculty members of the department provided valuable input and criticism as I developed the survey content and format. It was designed on a computer and printed in a booklet form, three pages in four parts.

Part one contains nine questions about minority employment pertaining to the individual newspaper, its policies and preferences. The last three questions in this section are designed to determine their responsiveness towards the general idea of implementing programs which would involve direct inter-

action with minorities and educational institutions in their area.

Part two has four questions about the newspaper's perception of minorities in the community, the racial diversity of the community, and the newspaper's attitude about the creation and implementation of programs by the private sector to encourage minority involvement in local business and community affairs.

Part three includes four questions aimed at determining how the newspapers perceive their own coverage of minorities and the effect or contributions which minorities may or may not make in the newsroom.

Finally, part four provided for an open response to voice any concerns or comments about minority hiring in the media and to qualify any answers.

At the beginning of the survey a brief definition of minorities was given with the instructions. They were defined as African-American, Hispanic, Asian and Native American. There was also a survey respondent information section at the top of page one which included: name of newspaper, city and state, circulation, percentage of minorities in the community, approximate number of minority subscribers, total number of news-editorial employees and the title of the person completing the survey.

Before going into a breakdown of the results, I want to convey my dismay at the low rate of replies. Only 23 of the newspapers surveyed returned the questionnaire, a rate of only 30 percent. Recalling that the actual number in the

target public was only 76, these findings are not too significant. Although this survey was intended to be a preliminary testing of the waters and not to provide a statistically significant or reputable sample, the response rate is still discouraging. One cannot help but wonder to what extent editors of this region and the greater Midwest are concerned with the issue of minority employment and by implication, better serving their entire constituency. I was disappointed to receive no replies from most of the Chicago area newspapers and from only one Indianapolis newspaper. I don't fault editors for being pressed for time. Often editors must sift through mountains of paper work and are solicited from every quarter. However, sometimes an issue or task must take precedence, and certainly this is an issue of importance to both society and the newspaper industry. Research into this and other problems might best be undertaken by individuals at universities and colleges through various programs, with or without the sponsorship and grants of professional organizations or government aid. These efforts should be encouraged not stifled.

#### **Results Summary**

1. These 23 newspapers employed a total of 121 minority journalists.

\*60 of this total were employed at the Cleveland Plain Dealer. The next highest number employed at any single newspaper was 12.

2. Approximately 103 minority students interned at these

newspapers in the last five years. Some respondents indicated they did have minority interns in the past but did not provide a number.

3. All 23 were familiar with literature about programs to attract and train minority journalists.
4. 18 newspapers participated in job fairs and conferences to attract minority employees.
5. Almost half of the respondents, 10, cited that they did have some type of plan or informal program to attract and maintain minorities from the community on their editorial staffs.
6. 14 answered yes, and one no, to this question: If you were provided with a program you could implement to inform minorities about careers in journalism, would you sponsor such programs?  
\*there were 7 maybe responses, and 1 did not answer
7. 14 also responded yes and one no to this question: Would you be interested in working with an educational institution in your community to develop a program for minorities in journalism?  
\*there were 4 maybe responses and 3 did not answer

Also of interest, only **two** newspapers specifically mentioned working with high school students in their replies to this questionnaire. These were the Evansville Courier and the Kentucky Post. However, the latter indicated that its program was on hold due to economic factors.

While only these two cited efforts to work directly with high school students, several others indicated that they did have connections with local colleges and universities in regards to minority journalism students.

Encouragingly, as indicated on item number five above, almost half had some type of organized interaction with minorities in their community to bring them into careers with newspapers. Although this is only ten newspapers because

of the low response rate, it warrents further, more extensive research to determine what is being done out there and how that might be encouraged and developed. These figures might be a tiny indicator of willingness to go farther in addressing the problems of bringing in minority journalists than just participating in job fairs. The possibility that this figure could be the tip of the iceberg helps to counteract the negative influence of the low response rate, but just slightly.

### **Possible Solutions**

Earlier it was mentioned that a large body of research indicates the need to focus attention on minority students in high schools and perhaps even earlier if more are going to be brought into the communication and newspaper fields. In the mid-eighties the Associated Press Managing Editors Minorities News Committee commissioned a study of minority high school seniors. The project was funded by a grant from the Gannett Foundation and conducted by the University of Arizona in cooperation with the American College Testing Service. An interpretation of the resulting findings was presented in written form in the summer/autumn 1987 issue of Journalism Quarterly. The article gives a good overview of the various influences which impact a college seniors career and educational decisions, and especially for minorities.

The national data which the ACT helped to provide underscored other research suggesting that a majority of students

are certain about their choices of major and occupation by the time they enter college. Interestingly, however, minorities are more likely than whites to say they are certain of these choices. Only 2-4 percent of the students indicated any communication related fields as their first choice of major. Furthermore, although 5 percent of the minority students cited communication-related fields as their first choice of majors and career, only five-tenths of a percent specifically mentioned journalism. Accordingly, more minorities express interest in journalism as an occupation than as a major(Burgoon et. al.,437).

Once again we return to the issue of education. Becker points out that the number of minorities entering into journalism programs is increasing, but the number graduating from those programs is decreasing. However, in the APME report Burgoon et. al. indicate that while choice of college major and career may change during the college years, these changes tend to be limited to within the major area of study(435). This could indicate that those who change from journalism may still be interested in communication-related fields of study and occupation. If this is the case they could conceivably be recruited back into the field of journalism. It also suggests that steps to retain minorities in journalism programs and address their specific needs should be taken.

The APME report also indicates several other reasons that minorities may lean towards fields of study and occupation other than journalism besides the oft cited theories of poor communication skills and low pay. For instance, nationally

in 1987 not even half of all Hispanic and African-American students were in college preparatory programs in high school. Among those leaning towards journalism in the APME report of the ACT findings, almost two-fifths did not have the benefits of a college preparatory curriculum(437). In other words, it is not just language related skills these students may lack, but rather, it is an adequate preparation for higher education in general.

The APME report also makes some interesting observations about why minority students might lean towards journalism. It indicates that as many as 72 percent of those students with journalism orientations want help to improve their math skills. This may make journalism and communication fields the "beneficiaries of math apprehension and avoidance"(438). Thus some minorities may chose journalism or communication as a career even though they are not particularly strong in the skills necessary to pursue them, or well prepared to pick up those skills in college because they lack preparation from the high school education. However, it should be noted that an apprehension of math and science could very well influence the choice of major and occupation for students regardless of race and may simply be a peculiarity of our education system.

Much more important than this are the conclusions about important job characteristics and other influences on the choice of major and career for minorities. The single most important job quality is the opportunity for professional advancement. The report concludes that intangible rewards are more important than the more tangible rewards of salary and

vacation time. Also important is the need to help others and satisfactory, friendly personal relations on the job(439).

Students accepting journalism as a career choice are more likely to find educational preparation, work experience, personal enjoyment and preparation in communication skills to be important influences on their career decisions. Prestige, job availability and salary are less likely to have and influence on those choosing journalism(440-441).

From this research it is clear that high school is the place to begin recruitment and get minorities interested. In general, this would mean that high school publications and advisors play an integral role in involving minority students. This could also be an important time for the local newspaper to get involved and help to provide work experience and preparation in communication skills. Exposure to the work environment should be an important aspect of recruitment. This would give students opportunities to interact with professional journalists, use basic skills and perhaps even dispel any commonly held misbeliefs or apprehensions about a career in journalism. It would also impress upon students the need to learn and hone basic skills and their applications, as well as the need to acquire an adequate background in communication, both of which ideally could be learned in journalism schools.

When newspapers interact with minority students from the community it may also serve to impress upon them the importance of newspapers to the community. Many minorities may feel that mainstream publications, both nationally and locally, do not offer anything for them and are not sensitive to their place



in the community. In smaller communities especially, minorities may not have high enough feelings of efficacy to reinforce any impulses to pursue an education and career in journalism. Furthermore, such feelings of inefficacy in the community might add to inclinations to avoid areas with small populations of minorities in which these feelings of isolation and inefficacy seem likely to occur. Therefore, if minorities are needed in journalism, and especially at newspapers with smaller circulations, they should be made to feel welcome. This does not mean special treatment on the job, but it does mean that minorities should be made aware they are important to the job. The best way to do this is to show them that their contributions as individual journalists are important not only to the newspaper, but also to the community and its non-white population. Where better to learn this than in high school while they are still more or less involved in the community, before they go off to college.

While professional organizations seem to be continuing their emphasis on college, research and program development for the high school level is being conducted and to some extent applied by the faculty of journalism and communication programs across the country. It is important that such developmental thinking be supported and recognized by professional organizations and also by such groups as the Journalism Education Association and the National Association of Black Journalists. It is also important that such research and program development be put to use. This might best be accomplished by cooperation between institutions of higher education, high schools and

newspapers in the same community.

The efforts of the Department of Journalism at Ball State University, collectively and by individual faculty, provide a good example of the resources and interest that is out there waiting to be tapped and put to use by the journalism profession. The department has a Minority Advisory Committee which consists of three faculty and three students. Together this committee is responsible for publishing a minority newsletter highlighting internships, scholarships and job opportunities, conducting a journalism minority seminar for high school students and advisors, and also implementing a special long-range plan over the next six years. In addition to this, the Journalism Workshops Office puts on an annual high school journalism day which includes sessions dealing about minorities in journalism.

Activities such as those mentioned above help colleges bring minority students into journalism programs. It is feasible for newspapers and local colleges to cooperate and provide similar functions for minority students interested in journalism. Local high school publication advisors can also work with newspapers to conduct special workshops and/or student internships.

The Evansville Courier for instance, provides internships for several minority students chosen however the community high schools see fit. Each student has the opportunity to work in the newsroom with the staff, writing bulletins and news capsules as well as the occasional story. The program has been run for three years now. Tom Tuley, editor and president, stated that the basic idea behind the program is to develop an early inter-

est in journalism, keeping minorities in the community and on the newspaper's staff.

One such student who interned at the newspaper, Deirdre Wilson, has indeed gone on to major in journalism at Ball State University. Although a freshman, she became involved with the student newspaper as a columnist. The only negative response she had towards her internship at the Courier was the high level of stress in the newsroom. She indicated that another student who had begun the internship with her dropped out. She also is undecided about whether or not she would like to remain in Evansville or return to work at the newspaper there.

It is important that while minority interns not be shielded from the stressful atmosphere of the newsroom, at the same time they should be encouraged and given challenging and worthwhile assignments. Typing in community briefs and obituaries is not enough to encourage any student to pursue journalism as a career. Not only should minority interns be given challenging assignments, but they should be provided with a meaningful experience at the newspaper. By this I mean that they should be made to feel that they can make unique contributions to the newspaper, have a sense of individual achievement and be exposed to the many positive aspects of journalism as a career.

One of the best ways to expose minority students to the field of journalism is by beginning in high school. Before students can become really aware of journalism they must first be recruited onto the high school publication staff. Minority recruitment, in a sense, begins at high school, not after graduation from high school or college.

The high school publication advisor becomes the recruiter, and should actively seek out and encourage talent instead of waiting for students to come to them. Fred Woodress, an assistant professor of journalism at Ball State University, has written that advisors are important links in the process of encouraging minority students to consider careers in the communications field. He also writes that minority recruitment is part of the mission of teaching, encouraging and inspiring students on high school publications(J communique-May/June 1990,5).

Another member of the department and a former reporter with the Los Angeles Times, Tendayi Kumbula, thinks that it is necessary to strip away the veneer that journalism is an impossible career for minorities. He is researching into when in life minorities are turned off to language related skills. He thinks that perhaps it is too late to recruit in high school because they have already been turned off. His theory is that during the primary grades they begin to realize or receive the message that because they have their own dialect and speak a slang form of language, they are inferior in regards to the utilization of the proper language taught in the classroom. He thinks that teachers should curb tendencies to emphasize the negative and instead should encourage the development of language skills. Teachers should be sensitive to the messages they may be conveying to minority students when they criticize them. He has finished preliminary research and is in the process of beginning to test his ideas.

These are just examples of the kind of interest which many journalism educators have shown in the area of minority employ-

pent, not only at Ball State University but at institutions across the country. The challenge is to apply these ideas in the way they will be most successful. It is my belief that the best way to utilize such research is through a cooperative, grassroots effort between newspapers, high schools and colleges in individual communities. Creativity, innovation and a real desire to change the status quo are the key elements needed to boost the recruitment of minorities into journalism. These elements are best applied by focusing them on the small circulation newspapers and their role in the community. It is time to get to the root of the problem.

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