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دانشگاه علوم انسانی و مطالعات فرهنگی
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Gwyneth Mellinger

Counting Color: Ambivalence and Contradiction in the American Society of Newspaper Editors' Discourse of Diversity

Of particular interest to any inquiry into the post-Kerner failure of newspapers to remedy past racial exclusion is why the industry's seemingly progressive affirmative action efforts have fallen so far short of their goals. This article analyzes the discourse surrounding a moment of crisis in the American Society of Newspaper Editors' diversity initiative to show that the organization's demographic parity project in fact continually resecures white domination and marginalizes the non-white journalists it invites to work in its newsrooms.

Keywords: media; race; discourse; affirmative action; newspapers

For journalists who are committed to the moral and ethical imperative of antiracist activism, perhaps the most perplexing question is how to interrupt the embedded, surreptitious process through which the media continually re-create racialized identities, position people of color on the margins, and reinforce the privileges of whiteness.¹ While such an inquiry must consider the agency and accountability of the individual journalists and news outlets that participate in this ritual of mass-mediated “othering,” a microanalysis that focuses only on constructions of race in news content inevitably misses the point. Simply put, raced representations circulate along a discursive continuum that precedes and informs the moment of the journalistic act. For the same reason, the media’s own well-intentioned efforts to interrupt hiring patterns that reproduce racial imbalances will always fail when they target only the point of practice and leave intact the discursively constructed system of power that undergirds structures of social, political, and economic inequality.

Such is the case with the American Society of Newspaper Editors’ (ASNE’s) ineffectual attempt to atone for a history of racism within its profession by inviting minority journalists to work in its newsrooms.² As with most

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gestures toward multiculturalism, the ASNE initiative does not reckon with the systemic nature of modern racism, which continually reinvents itself as it goes largely undetected by the dominant culture. By virtue of this internal contradiction, the ASNE project is a tidy example of what Nancy Fraser (1998, 31) identifies as an affirmative remedy for injustice, one that is “aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them.” The ASNE project is, therefore, destined not only to fail but also to reproduce precisely the effect it purports to counteract; in other words, the newspaper editors, through their minority hiring initiative, are actually further entrenching systemic racism in their newsrooms at the same time that they claim to champion its eradication.

While racism is always toxic, it seems especially pernicious in a context such as that of journalism, whose practitioners claim an authority derived from the U.S. Constitution, mediate participation in the public sphere, and routinely interpellate cultural identities. The newspaper industry has acknowledged through the ASNE’s diversity hiring initiative that it continues to fall short of its ideal of inclusiveness and that news content generated in white-dominated newsrooms continues to perpetuate racial division. Missing from discussions of newspapers’ contribution to the lingering racism in American society is recognition that they have a self-interest in maintaining unequal relations of power that position white people in dominance. Toward this end, a critique of the editors’ diversity project also must examine the role of ideology and hegemony (Williams 1977) in structuring the ASNE discourse on inclusiveness. An analysis of this discourse will reveal an inversion of the organization’s objectives, through which the diversity initiative actually privileges whiteness and marginalizes the very journalists of color whom it purports to welcome into the fold.

Theoretical Framework

The Elusiveness of Newsroom Diversity

At the New York Daily News . . . I sat for four months as the ranking African-American editor on the metro desk . . . yet I had no reporters as direct reports, no daily responsibilities. When it came time for me to offer my resignation, I was told by my supervisor, “Well, I guess there’s no need to talk about retaining you here.” I could only smile.

—Dwight Cunningham, Executive Managing Editor, Scholastic Inc.³

During its annual convention in April 2001, the ASNE announced that after seeing the number of minority⁴ newsroom employees inch upward for the previous twenty-three years, the piecemeal progress of its diversity initiative had

begun to erode from attrition, as more journalists of color left its newsrooms than entered them.⁵ Three years earlier, the organization had announced that it would not achieve its goal for the year 2000 of achieving demographic parity between the U.S. minority population and employment in its member newsrooms; now the ASNE was forced to confront the reality that despite the industry's sizeable investment in recruitment, training, and scholarships, its newspapers were losing more minority journalists than they were bringing on board. During survey year 2001, when 30 percent of the U.S. population counted itself as minority, non-white employment in ASNE-member newsrooms declined from 11.85 percent to 11.64 percent. This occurred despite those newspapers' having achieved the fourth highest number of first-time minority hires since the diversity initiative began in 1978 (ASNE 2001a). Within the ASNE's discussion of inclusion, the problem of retaining minority journalists already in newspaper newsrooms moved to the foreground, as the ASNE leadership exhorted its members to make the retention, as well as the hiring, of a diverse newsroom workforce a priority.

Unfortunately, the ASNE is unlikely to be much more effective in diversifying its newsrooms by targeting retention than it has been in more than two decades of emphasizing entry-level hiring.⁶ A review of the ongoing conversation between ASNE leaders and members, as well as between the organization and outside constituencies, reveals a deep ambivalence in the organization's overall commitment to diversity. This discussion, which is constituted by and constitutive of the broader discourse on racial power differentials in American society, has been carried out in press releases intended for public consumption and reports, commentaries, and position statements produced for ASNE members and others in the news professions. The conversation contained in these texts is at times one-sided; however, the ASNE leadership and staff routinely respond to dissension within the ranks as well as to criticism from outside the organization. What emerges in the ASNE's discourse on diversity is a sort of dialogue on affirmative action between the ASNE leadership and its detractors, both within and without, which shows the leaders and members who support the diversity initiative caught between the indifference, and even racism, of white members who do not support it, on one hand, and the growing insistence on results from minority constituencies, on the other. At the same time, ASNE leaders continually undermine their own good intentions by unwittingly acting on their self-interest in the privilege of whiteness. Their statements and actions, which frequently "other" nonwhites, frame the diversity issue in ways that valorize whiteness and transfer responsibility for persistent inequality to external causes. Thus, they feed a discourse that unmistakably fortifies dominant whiteness in the newsroom hierarchy and constrains most journalists of color on the margins of influence.

As revealing as the ASNE leadership's side of the discussion may be in this regard, it lacks any mention of the role of whiteness in the racial dynamic, either within the newspaper newsroom or in American society at large, and elucidating this aspect of the ASNE diversity conundrum will be the primary focus of this inquiry. Although the ASNE assumes that increasing minority representation on news staffs will broaden the cultural perspective of the newsroom, making news content more reflective of social reality and more palatable to an increasingly diverse subscriber and advertising base, the diversity project's narrow focus on entry-level hiring fails to recognize that minority journalists, like other employees, may be people with conscience and ambition who will not be satisfied being treated as mere statistics. The deficiencies in the ASNE project go far deeper than its blatant tokenism, however.

One of the immanent problems in such attempts at multiculturalism is that by conferring recognition on racially minoritized persons—in this case, acknowledging the value of their perspective in the process of news production—projects such as the ASNE's fall into the trap that Fraser (1998, 24) has described as “calling attention to, if not performatively creating, the putative specificity of some group, and then affirming the value of that specificity. Thus they tend to promote group differentiation.” It is against Fraser's theoretical model—which assumes that relations of power are perpetuated within capitalist structures of inequality—that I will read the discourse of the diversity initiative. Within the mainstream newspaper industry, the generative framework functions as a point of production within a capitalist economy, as an ideological apparatus in a vertically and racially structured society, and, most important for my purposes here, as a site where the privilege and dominance of whiteness are continually resecured. I contend that the intractability of this structure is a source of the alienation that chases minority journalists into other lines of work. A more genuine and democratic solution, I will argue, is to be found in the proliferation of alternative media, where racial difference is neither stigmatized nor ignored and where non-white journalists speak in their own voices, not those of white editors or publishers. First, a discussion of the ideology of whiteness and its historical context is in order.

White Like Most of Us

One of the class action plaintiffs, Samuel G. Cook, a Negro, alleged that on May 18, 1970 he tendered the photo and wedding announcement of his fiancée, Miss Sherrie Ann Martin, of the same race, to the society editor and to the publisher of *The Montgomery Advertiser*, the only newspaper of any substantial circulation in the area, with the request that the story appear on the society page and “not the

black page.” The proposed restrictions were rejected; the story and the picture were never published. The wedding occurred on June 12, 1970.

—Fifth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, in affirming for the defendant,
Cook et al. v. The Advertiser Co., Inc., et al.
(458 F. 2d 1119 [1972])

Although *Cook et al. v. The Advertiser Company, Inc., et al.* is an obscure and relatively inconsequential case in the total body of civil rights litigation, it highlights the legacy of exclusion that was once commonplace in newspaper newsrooms and demonstrates how such journalistic apartheid affected people’s lives in the most personal ways. Granted, the underlying incident occurred in a Southern city that was a battleground in the civil rights movement, but it also arose from policies that an urban newspaper had in place six years after passage of landmark civil rights legislation, two years after the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968, 383) took the media to task for its role in perpetuating the “black-white schism in this country,” and just eight years before the ASNE implemented the diversity initiative for the newspaper industry. While the Montgomery newspaper was a racist anachronism in 1970, many papers in both the North and South segregated content well into the twentieth century.⁷ Although the ASNE parity project is an effort to atone for the newspaper industry’s overtly racist past, the discourse in which the mainstream editors participate cannot be viewed apart from the historical continuum in which it developed. That the history of racism is embedded in the discursive construction of identities within the newsroom accounts for the experiences of all the journalists of color who speak in the epigraphs throughout this article.

When it began to target minorities for recruitment in 1978, the ASNE conceded that it was too white for the world in which it operated and would benefit from having a multicultural workforce in its newsrooms. Statistics released each April following the annual newsroom diversity census count the number of white employees in ASNE newsrooms as well as those who claim minority identities. This is not to say, however, that the industry leaders who embrace the diversity initiative see white employees as being racially marked in the same way as the minorities whose numbers are the real purpose of the count. Whiteness derives its power from its invisibility, from its ability to elude detection and scrutiny. George Lipsitz (1998, 1) noted, “As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations.” Journalists who signify one of the identities in the ASNE’s definition of racial minority are marked, however, but only because the center of

perception and the power to interpellate identity remain with the newspaper industry leaders, most of whom are white and all of whom function within the circuit of whiteness discourse. This power to frame the issue of race in the newsroom, and the discretion to admit non-white journalists to the profession, allows white identity to continually, if silently, reconstruct itself over and against categories of color even as the diversity initiative pursues an explicitly inclusive end.

Moreover, by focusing attention on minority journalists, how to lure them in and how to keep them from leaving, the ASNE leadership clearly is characterizing the minority journalists as the problem, as suggested by Fraser's (1998) theory of the affirmative remedy for injustice. Although doing nothing about racial exclusion in the newsroom would leave an obvious and invidious manifestation of racial inequality unchallenged, the failure of ASNE policy makers to acknowledge the role of whiteness in the racial dynamic forecloses all opportunities for meaningful and lasting change within the existing newsroom structure, where journalists of color usually have no control over the means of production.

Whiteness is an unstable identity, as demonstrated by the redefinition of whiteness throughout U.S. history, as shared understandings of who is white and who is not have shifted, usually in response to the changing status of immigrant populations and formulated in opposition to white perceptions of material threat from historically situated and exploited people, such as blacks, Mexicans, and Native Americans.⁸ As such, whiteness is a dynamic, resilient, and fluid identity that is always being contested and must continually reinvent itself to survive in changing social, economic, legal, and cultural terrain. Any challenge to the asymmetrical privileges of whiteness, even and especially when those who hold a stake in whiteness do not recognize themselves as privileged, is a threat that invigorates this process. Owing to its inherent instability, whiteness is always in motion, a constellation of subsumed identities that is continually reconfigured in a series of inclusionary and exclusionary realignments. For the ASNE diversity project, this theory of whiteness suggests that whites who are positioned in power within the newsroom, even those who most vigorously support the stated objectives of the initiative, have an unacknowledged stake in its failure; that for whites, allowing minority journalists to succeed is often tantamount to sharing or conceding the privileges that accrue with being white and is not simply a matter of creating a space governed by principles of equity.

To fully comprehend how the ASNE's conversation about diversity contributes to a discourse that reinforces the privileges of whiteness, one that reveals the organization's unacknowledged investment in the failure of the parity project, one must see racism and racialization as part of a continuous process of "othering" in relation to a white and often-unrecognized center. Richard Dyer

(1997), who has located the power of whiteness in its ability to regulate representation, described the process in this way:

White discourse implacably reduces the non-white subject to being a function of the white subject, not allowing him/her space or autonomy, permitting neither the recognition of similarities nor the acceptance of differences except as a means of knowing the white self. . . . As a product of enterprise and imperialism, whiteness is of course always already predicated on racial difference, interaction and domination. (P. 13)

In Dyer's formulation, whiteness is grounded in a white/colored binary that depends on visibly recognizable physical markers to feed commonsense notions of race yet ironically and paradoxically derives its seemingly unshakable power from its ability to remain invisible and beyond reproach.

Judith Butler (1997), in enunciating a theory of subject formation through the act of speech, placed this function of racial discourse on an historical continuum. She wrote, "The mark interpellation makes is not descriptive, but inaugurative. It seeks to introduce a reality rather than report on an existing one; it accomplishes this task through a citation of existing convention" (p. 33). For Butler, a comment on race cannot be taken at present face value, because it invokes commonsense notions about race that are inextricably tied to racist history. On this view, the discourse of whiteness in which the ASNE participates in its discussion of newsroom diversity cannot be entirely distinct from its function in previous places, times, and contexts—including the *Montgomery Advertiser* newsroom of 1970. Moreover, the surreptitious operation of whiteness in the ASNE literature on diversity complements the racializing processes inherent in news content produced in mainstream newsrooms over time.

Method

Traditional analyses of media and race, whose methods often assume racism to be an observable phenomenon that is vulnerable to empirical investigation, too often fail to take account of the slippery nature of discrimination in the post-civil rights movement United States. This construct has come to define race relations in what I call the "era of *de jure* equality," when rights are legislatively guaranteed but not uniformly experienced, and raising the grain of this irony will be the primary objective of my discursive analysis. At this historical juncture, when the ideal of legal equality is circumvented by a politics of colorblindness and denial, racism can hardly be expected to make itself visible to scrutiny. Neither can the explicit objectives of a project such as the ASNE's, which ostensibly would remedy the racial disequilibrium in newsrooms, be viewed without skepticism. The efficacy of discourse analysis lies in its disre-

gard for authorial intent, in its ability to let everyday practices speak for themselves, giving voice to a subject's unspoken and unacknowledged motives. John Dorst (1999, 31) observed, "Active discourses will 'find a way out,' showing themselves through the cracks in texts that seem to have entirely different agendas. It is precisely in those subtle gestures that hardly seem worth mentioning that a discourse operates most effectively." Discourse analysis closes the gap between stated objectives and realized outcomes by making visible the otherwise undetectable operation of power.

To isolate and interpret the function of the ideology of whiteness in the ASNE discourse surrounding the crisis produced by the 2001 newsroom census, I selected texts constructed and circulated by the organization, most of them press releases and statements to members, which are stored in a publicly accessible archive on the ASNE Web site (<http://www.asne.org>). Of particular interest to me were texts circulated in response to internal and external challenges to the aims and effectiveness of the racial parity project. The objective of my analysis was to demonstrate the ways in which discourses of whiteness maneuver within the ASNE diversity initiative to resecure the dominance of whiteness and the subordination of its others within the ASNE and its member newsrooms. My investigation will rely on a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis, examining "power at the point where its intention, if it has one, is completely invested in real and effective practices" (Foucault 1980, 97); to highlight the contradictions, "the spaces of dissension" (Foucault 1972, 152), that expose the operation of power; and to give voice to the silences, "an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies" (Foucault 1990, 27). My analysis of the operation of these discursive principles will demonstrate that

- the equalitarian ideals that ostensibly inform the ASNE diversity initiative clash with the project stewards' self-interest in whiteness;
- recruitment and retention discourses, which purport to promote inclusion, are in fact technologies of exclusion;
- the promotion of a disproportionately small number of minority employees does not effectively challenge white hegemony but resecures its dominance;
- the ASNE's ideal of inclusion advances the commodification of those who are "othered" by whiteness; and
- the lure of inclusion produces division among groups that are excluded from the privileges of whiteness.

This interrogation ultimately will show that the discursive construction of whiteness is the reproductive mechanism for relations of power within the ASNE diversity initiative and, by extension, for the overarching and ephemeral power structure of the ASNE.

Analysis

The Discursive Construction of Whiteness

One of my editors had sent me downstairs to cover a comedy troupe at the opening reception [of the ASNE convention]. . . . On stage and in the spotlight was the troupe, Capitol Steps. Dressed in costumes, the performers presented a skit concerning current Chinese and U.S. relations. They were white males impersonating a Chinese official and his translator. The Chinese official sported a black wig and thick glasses and spoke in a disconcerting version of “Chinese.”

“Ching ching chong chong,” the man shouted as he gestured wildly with his hands.

What was disturbing was not just the fact that this was happening, but that hundreds of editors, my future bosses, were laughing. I felt myself swallowed by all the loud laughter. Each time the “Chinese” voice became more jarring, the editors would laugh even harder. Despite feeling humiliated, I finished the job and turned in my pictures.

The next morning, I woke up crying.

—Amy Leang (2001), Ball State University photojournalism student

We now turn to the 2001 ASNE convention in Washington, D.C., the gathering at which the 2001 ASNE census numbers were released to the public, and to college student Amy Leang’s account of her experience there, excerpted above, which begins to demonstrate the inherent contradictions within the ASNE’s discourse of whiteness. Following the racist performance by the comedy troupe hired to entertain the conventioneering editors, which included not only the derogatory Chinese skit described by Leang but a black-face impersonation of Diana Ross as well, the ASNE came in for sharp rebuke from an Asian American journalists organization and the leadership of UNITY, a coalition of organizations representing journalists of color. Three weeks later, President Tim McGuire (2001), the white editor of the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, informed his members of his position on the controversy. McGuire also sought to explain why the incident reflected badly on the ASNE diversity mission while still insisting on the free-speech rights of the comedians and their audience. Unfortunately, his attempt to take the middle road is an equivocation that isolates the affront as an injury to one Asian American college student, and in contextualizing it within a history of racial discrimination, he opposes the dignity of Asian Americans against the editors’ most cherished constitutional right, suggesting that respect for Asian Americans comes at the editors’ expense.

Most of us saw the Capitol Steps skit as political satire and parody. We accepted it as such and that construct allowed us to laugh.

It was not until I read Amy Leang's words that I realized that skit could look profoundly different to someone who saw it as making fun of them. *I am convinced few of our members saw that skit as mocking Chinese Americans but at least one Chinese-American did* and that matters. Our critics would argue that our sensitivity antenna should have been on and they are probably right.

Another learning [*sic*] for me has been the importance of balancing *competing values*. As this situation developed, I was very intent on protecting the First Amendment right to speak out in satire and parody. Those values are important, but we can't ever lose our focus on the feelings and perceptions of those people who have historically been subjected to demonization, ridicule and stereotyping. (Emphasis added)

In his *mea culpa*, McGuire also spoke to a disconnect between the ASNE leaders who make policy and the rank-and-file members who are expected to implement it, which is a recurring theme in communication from the leadership about the issue of diversity. He continued,

I know some ASNE members will wonder what all the upset is about. Some will believe they and our organization did nothing wrong that night. I believe they will be missing the point. If people took offense then we have to ask why.

In a commentary posted on the organization's Web site, Terry Greenberg (2001), editor of the *Elkhart (Indiana) Truth*, chastised his fellow conventioners for their insensitivity to the problem of discrimination and for having "sent an embarrassing message about our commitment to diversifying America's newsrooms." Even so, Greenberg betrayed his own position within whiteness when he described the Capitol Steps skit as humorous. He wrote,

The jokes were funny, but I remember telling my wife that I wondered if *some people would be offended by the stereotypes* and, in another bit, one of the women doing Diana Ross in what appeared to be black face. (Emphasis added)

Greenberg also addressed the ASNE membership's ambivalence on the issue of minority hiring and retention:

We had almost 600 people registered for this convention and there were barely 100 people in the spacious Capitol Ballroom to hear the discussion on minorities in newsrooms. Of course, as the panel started to wind down, people started flooding in so they could hear Sen. Hilary Clinton's address that followed.

Although Greenberg called on fellow ASNE members to stop sending a mixed message by espousing a commitment to diversity while not treating the initiative as a priority, neither he nor McGuire explicitly conceded the painful irony in the skit's juxtaposition in time with the release of the negative retention numbers. Just as odd is their failure to frame the controversy as having implica-

tions for the ethical practice of journalism; for example, the Society of Professional Journalists' (1996) *Code of Ethics*, which is widely recognized within the profession, states, in part,

Journalists should: . . .

- Tell the story of the diversity and magnitude of the human experience boldly, even when it is unpopular to do so.
- Examine their own cultural values and avoid imposing those values on others.
- Avoid stereotyping by race, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, geography, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance or social status.

Notably, the Society's code does not call for balancing these ethical values against the First Amendment right accorded to racist speech.

Luring Them In

At first, I had no problem. I went in there and tried to be a team player. But I had an editor who made racist jibes to the other minority reporter, such as "Chinky Chan," across the newsroom. I found those statements to be very offensive.

—Dena McClurkin, Clark Atlanta University,
class of 2001, describing her
first newspaper internship

The ASNE leadership also activates the discourse of whiteness when it advises members on how to recruit minority journalists, when it panders to lingering racist attitudes within its constituency, and when it objectifies minority journalists as a commodity to be pursued. In a sidebar to material about recruitment on its Web site, the ASNE (2001c) lists ten "tips for minority hiring," which anticipate or respond to resistance from the membership. The last two are particularly on point:

9. DEVELOP a long-term strategy. Make contact with minority students at a local high school, even junior high, to encourage them to think about journalism as a career. Track good prospects, so when a position opens, you have a candidate ready. *Be prepared to deal with bias from inside and outside the newsroom.*

10. TREAT all applicants the same. *You don't have to lower your standards to hire a minority staffer.* You likely will have to aggressively recruit minorities through new approaches, but that's where the difference ends. (Emphasis added)

Significantly, the major thrust of the ASNE's discussion of recruitment involves hiring minority journalists for entry-level employment, with only infrequent mention of the potential for hiring and training minorities who are already in the workforce in jobs that require writing skills. Although any

chance of diversifying newsrooms overall undoubtedly depends on continually bringing new, and by extension younger, employees into the journalism workforce, the ASNE may be exacerbating the retention issue by concentrating almost exclusively on entry-level hires instead of exploring opportunities for lateral hires from outside the profession as well. The problem with lateral hires, of course, is that they have given up another position and may expect rank or authority or at least to have their skills and experience acknowledged when they arrive. This becomes problematic in a newsroom organized around the dictates of whiteness.

Within the context of the ideology of whiteness, this tension over issues of retention and promotion is to be expected. One of the functions of a discourse of whiteness is to maintain racial distinctions by constructing and policing boundaries, and the emphasis on entry-level hires and the failure to promote journalists of color in significant numbers serves this purpose. Historically, the ideology of whiteness has maintained this separation through legal and economic restrictions, as well as terrorism, all of which have been designed to keep minorities “in their place.” Antimiscegenation laws, restrictions on the vote and citizenship, job discrimination, and of course, lynching and other forms of white-supremacist violence, all have served this function.⁹ In the era of *de jure* equality, when rights are almost universally conceded but not uniformly experienced, the stakes of such boundary policing appear lower, but the principle remains in operation just the same. Most minority journalists, discursively constructed as racial outsiders within the dominant newsroom, are constrained beyond the sphere of white privilege and influence, although the boundaries now *appear* merely to enforce perceptions of merit. In its 2001 diversity survey, the ASNE (2001a) found that just 9 percent of all newsroom supervisors were members of racial minority groups, with the balance being white men and women.¹⁰

Ironically, the presence of a certain number of journalists of color in supervisory positions reinforces, rather than undermines, racial hegemony in the newsroom. Despite such promotions, ultimate control of newsroom functions remains in white hands. As Raymond Williams (1977, 113) noted, hegemony is a dynamic process that continually renews itself by incorporating external challenges to its authority. That 91 percent of newsroom supervisors continue to be white, and in many newsrooms are all white, is an example of what Lynet Uttal (1990), critiquing the dominance of the white middle-class perspective in the feminist movement, described as “inclusion without influence.” Uttal wrote, “We must continue working on issues of inclusion, but we must realize that diverse inclusion is not enough if these token voices have no impact and influence on all our ways of thinking” (p. 45).¹¹

The Commodification and Profitability of Diversity

With all the budget-cutting under way in the newspaper business today, retaining African Americans is tougher than ever. It's an old saw but true, that because so many blacks are among the last hired, they become the first fired. In a Guild newspaper, seniority rules, and I expect that other non-union newspapers apply the same standard.

—John Dotson, publisher, *Akron Beacon Journal*

Following the release of the 2001 newsroom census, which demonstrated that attrition was hampering the newspaper industry's efforts to achieve demographic parity, the ASNE began to sound the alarm for increased efforts to improve retention. Even so, by its discursive construction of the issue, the organization betrays its own ambivalence. While several ASNE leaders and spokespersons complained of a lack of commitment to diversity down through the ranks, they also evinced uncertainty as to where blame for poor retention should be placed. Tellingly, LaBarbara Bowman (2001), the ASNE's diversity director, began a commentary on the 2001 survey results by externalizing the cause of the rampant departures of minority journalists. Bowman wrote, "We are the victims of talent theft. Talented journalists are leaving newsrooms at a time when the best and brightest reporters, editors, and copy editors are the hardest to replace. We are paying in money and accuracy." Bowman's piece announced the commissioning by ASNE of a research project to determine the cause of poor retention,¹² and even listed "bad managers" and a lack of opportunities for advancement as issues that must be addressed. At the same time, Bowman gave internal causes less attention than external realities, over which newspapers have no control, such as changing demographics that have shrunk the size of the workforce, historically low unemployment rates, and widespread job-hopping in the workforce overall. The reason ASNE members should be concerned, Bowman wrote, is cost of turnover; missing from the piece is a reference to any notion of retaining minorities as a matter of social responsibility. In ASNE literature, the social mandate for diversifying the newsroom workforce, which motivated the Kerner Commission's criticism of the news media in 1968, is often eclipsed by other concerns and at times does not even receive much lip service. While it is possible that ASNE leaders take such ethical imperatives as a given that do not require restatement at every turn, their recognition that many members do not see the diversity initiative as a priority would tend to problematize such a position. Despite the embarrassment of rising minority attrition, the ASNE's diversity director still framed the need for a multicultural newsroom more as a bottom line issue and a problem of demographics than a need to be equitable and inclusive—a diversion that serves the interests of whiteness.

Construction of a narrative that presents minority hiring as an astute business maneuver has the effect of “othering” and commodifying minority readers and journalists. While this may not be explicit enough to alienate the minority journalists who are causing the newspaper industry’s retention angst, it certainly feeds the discourse of whiteness, which has a bearing on minority turnover. In 1995, the Newspaper Association of America (NAA) released a publication titled “Diversity: A Business Imperative,” which “conclude[s] that decreasing readership and advertising can be reversed only by responding to demographic shifts, which are accelerating” (Boyd 1998). In 2001, the NAA also launched a program called GOLD: Growth Opportunities by Leveraging Diversity, which “take[s] an in-depth look at how newspapers can increase market share by targeting their product to a variety of markets” (Gersh Hernandez n.d.).

Although one might expect to find more concern with the profitability of diversity in the literature of industry organizations such as the NAA, whose constituencies include publishers and representatives of the business side of newspaper operations, the members of the ASNE are not exempt from their employers’ mandate to be profitable. Giving the people what they want to read is a basic component of any program for newspaper profitability; the question for the ASNE increasingly becomes, Who are the people? Demographics were the topic of a session at the ASNE’s 2000 convention, in which media human resources consultant Hazel Reinhardt (2000) reviewed the numbers for U.S. immigrant populations (as in underserved and exploitable markets) and provided insight on literacy and education levels for various groups (as in ability to read a newspaper) and incomes (as in ability to buy newspapers and support advertisers).

Stuck on the Lower and Middle Rungs

I would send a rather strong message, saying it’s time to stop talking and start doing. And if they’re not sincere about really wanting diversity, stop talking about it. Personally, I’m sick to death of the striving and the struggling our generation of journalists has had to deal with, and in some ways we’re no better off than in the ’70s. Worse maybe, because we had our hopes up that if we worked hard and climbed the ladder rung by rung, we’d eventually make it to the top.

Well, guess what? Most of us are still stuck on the middle rungs.

—Delma Francis, associate editor/teen page coordinator,
Minneapolis Star Tribune

It is from within this industry culture of quantification and depersonalization of racial minorities that the ASNE finds itself embattled over the issue of retention. Three aspects of the ASNE’s response to the problem of retention are particularly salient for analyzing the organization’s discourse of whiteness.

First, the retention issue had been festering for several years prior to release of the 2001 newsroom census and had been part of the industry's conversation about newsroom diversity at least since the mid-1990s, when the results of a series of studies commissioned by various organizations or undertaken by independent researchers began to demonstrate that high numbers of minority journalists planned to leave the profession (McGill 2001). The issue of retention and its bearing on the parity initiative became especially apparent in studies conducted during the latter half of the 1990s;¹³ however, not until the 2001 newsroom census showed that attrition was eroding gains in minority hiring, suggesting that newspaper newsrooms are not places where minorities feel comfortable working, did the ASNE leadership consistently foreground retention as a factor in diversifying newsrooms over the long term. As long as the number of incoming employees outstripped departures and the annual census showed a net gain, however small, retention was a secondary concern.

It bears noting as well that the ASNE's initial response to the crisis triggered by the 2001 employment survey was to hire media researcher Lawrence McGill to compile data on retention that had been readily available over the past twelve years and to draw conclusions to quantify the problem. The study was published under the title "What Research Tells Us about Retaining Newspaper Journalists of Color: A Meta-Analysis of 13 Studies Conducted from 1989 to 2000" (McGill 2001). This allowed the ASNE to answer its critics, most notably the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) and the UNITY coalition, whose constituents had been sharply critical of the ASNE for allowing the hiring initiative to deteriorate. In remarks to the ASNE's 2001 convention, NABJ President William Sutton Jr. said, "Please don't make this a 'them' problem by pointing somewhere else. Either you've done your job and contributed to the solution by bringing in more journalists of color through retention, or you're part of the problem" (NABJ 2001). In November 2001, the ASNE announced that it was forming a partnership with UNITY and its member organizations representing black, Hispanic, Asian American, and Native American journalists to address the problem of retention. In announcing the partnership, however, the ASNE said that it was spurred by the findings of the most recent study by McGill, even though McGill merely recycled data that had been in circulation previously. The ASNE's take on McGill's latest report, however, was that this was new information. "These findings should end the discussion and start the action. The problem is now abundantly clear," said ASNE President McGuire in a press release (ASNE 2001b). The ASNE leadership's apparent ignorance of existing data and its willingness to "spin" the rediscovery of research that clearly should have signaled a mounting problem calls into question the ASNE's commitment to improving retention—until it became a public relations problem. Interestingly, the proposed collaboration between the ASNE and UNITY, which both organizations described in press

releases late in 2001, does not resurface in the ASNE's press releases on diversity after that initial public announcement.

The second aspect of the ASNE's response to the retention problem that is significant for the organization's discourse of whiteness is its apparent lack of attention to the issue of promotion of minorities who are employed in newspaper newsrooms and the significance of the jobs they are given to do. In his recycling of data (including his own) for the ASNE-commissioned "Meta-Analysis," McGill (2001) concluded that minority journalists are leaving the profession because of limited opportunities for advancement and/or because they are not allowed to do work that is important to them, suggesting that journalists of color believe they are not given challenging assignments. This is not a new problem, McGill reported:

So central is the assumption that advancement opportunities are key to minority journalist retention that the 1993 NABJ study focussed exclusively on that topic. In that study, 40 percent of African American journalists who expected to leave the field of journalism within five years indicated that "lack of promotion/career advancement opportunities" was a "very significant" factor in their decision to leave the business.

Nor should this have been the first time that ASNE leaders had heard that journalists of color were dissatisfied with the quality of their reporting assignments. McGill referenced his own previous study, which reported that for 50 percent of newspaper journalists of color, this would be a major factor in their decision to stay in the profession. He wrote, "The ability to make an impact on society depends, in no small measure, upon having the opportunity to cover stories that matter to journalists of color."

A third way in which the ASNE's discourse of whiteness influences the efficacy of its own retention and recruitment efforts is in its ability to fracture coalitions of those who are not admitted to its privileges. Lipsitz (1998) has argued that the allure of whiteness and its perceived benefits often has a divisive effect in the non-white realm.

The power of whiteness depend[s] not only on white hegemony over separate racialized groups, but also on manipulating racial outsiders to fight against one another, to compete with each other for white approval, and to seek the rewards and privileges of whiteness for themselves at the expense of other racialized populations. (P. 3)

Within this context, it comes as no surprise that the most pointed opposition to a proposal in 1998 to expand the definition of minority to include women, gays and lesbians, and the disabled appears to have come not from white but from minority journalists, both inside and outside the ASNE (ASNE 1998b). The

UNITY coalition criticized the change, along with the ASNE's failure to make significant progress toward its parity goal. Vanessa Williams, president of UNITY, said, "Racism is the country's most pressing issue, and we want to remain focused on ethnicity" (ASNE 1998c). Rick Rodriguez, managing editor of the *Sacramento Bee* and chairman of the ASNE's Diversity Committee, agreed: "We have a long way to go in the numerical goals with people of color. I'm not sure if we're ready to take on other goals" (ASNE 1998c).

Conclusion

[Journalists of color] leave frustrated and worn down by trying and failing to connect with managers and peers, who, for all the talk of embracing diversity, still haven't taken seriously the idea that they and their newspapers would be better off if they took some time to learn the ways of black folks and Latino folks . . . and any folks who are other than white folks.

—Phillip Dixon, deputy managing editor, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

While Fraser's (1998) concept of a generative framework could be used to analyze many affirmative action projects, it takes on a more complex meaning when applied to the ASNE initiative because a newsroom is, after all, more than a place of employment; it also represents an entrenched apparatus of racialized normativity and interpellative power. Diversity in newsroom employment, then, is not primarily a problem of economic inequity and class exploitation, as it would be in other workplace contexts, but an issue of cultural valuation and recognition as well; it is not just about who gets to be the boss but about who gets to mediate the messages that define racial reality within the dominant public sphere.

Media scholarship that interrogates racialized news content typically focuses on the message, either at the point of consumption, through some kind of reception analysis, or at the point of production, often considering the role of journalistic routines and techniques in shaping raced portrayals, thereby making deadline pressures or mandates for verbal economy out to be the culprits. While such investigations have worthy aims, they tend to isolate lingering racism within the message or at the points of journalistic practice or audience interpretation, severing it from the news industry's power structure, which ultimately is the generative framework of all news content. Such discussions of race in the newsroom often fail to recognize that news is constructed within and through a discourse of power, one that is inarguably informed by ideology and history. This was Stuart Hall's (1985) point when he asked,

Precisely how is it that such large numbers of journalists, consulting only their "freedom" to publish and be damned, do tend to reproduce, quite spontaneously, again and again, accounts of the world constructed within fundamentally the

same ideological categories? How is it that they are driven again and again, to such a limited repertoire within the ideological field? (Pp. 100-101)

In the same way, the discursive construction of the ASNE diversity hiring initiative reproduces the relations of power that structure the ideological field in which it operates.

Although newsrooms, like other sites of ideological investment, are susceptible to change, the nature and depth of their transformation is what counts. No one would argue that newspaper newsrooms have remained culturally static since the ASNE launched its hiring initiative in 1978; what has remained constant is who most often is in charge and who ultimately makes decisions. In the era of *de jure* equality, even the most well-intentioned efforts toward change can merely revalidate the status quo if the generative framework remains intact. Moreover, this subversion occurs from within and often is apparent only when one examines the outcome. In the unkindest irony of all, those who see themselves as agents for change are in fact unwitting defenders of the privileges of whiteness.

For this reason, the ownership structure of most daily newspapers, through which white individual and corporate interests reaffirm their dominance, forecloses the possibility of transforming relations of power within those newsrooms. This is not to say that those who labor for reform from within should necessarily abandon that project, only that the outcome is rigged against them. The project of antiracist activism will make meaningful gains in newsrooms only if it is acknowledged that the dominant press is but one site of ideological contestation within the public sphere of discourse. In fact, the sedimentation of the mainstream newsroom's power structure merely suggests for antiracist journalists a more democratic solution.

Of utility here is Fraser's (1997, 81) concept of subaltern counterpublics, "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs." Alternative newspapers historically have been the medium of counterhegemonic activism, and they continue to organize public discussion from "other" perspectives. The resurgence of alternative weeklies and continued presence of ethnic and non-English newspapers, as well as calls by such scholars as Ronald Jacobs (2000), who has argued for a reinvigoration of the African American press, all lead in this direction. What racial democracy requires in this era of corporate media consolidation, in which the interests of whiteness are becoming concentrated in fewer but more monolithic news organizations, is a strengthening and proliferation of other media outlets—including not only newspapers but other printed media, radio and television programming, and Internet publication as well—that embrace an antiracist, not merely a multi-

cultural, ethic. Only in such spaces of counterhegemonic news production, in which the privilege of whiteness can be contested by journalists of color who speak in their own voices and by white journalists who are committed to principles of racial equality, will social democracy govern a newsroom.

Notes

1. In the ensuing discussion, I use the term *whiteness* to indicate the operative ideology that accords hegemonic dominance to those who are admitted to its privileges. While persons who signify as racially white are most likely to benefit from the ideology of whiteness, the salience of whiteness is not as skin color but as a power differential.

In addition, I rely on the definition of dominance offered by Doane (1997, 376), who found that the dominant is positioned to create disproportionate economic, political, and institutional advantages for itself: "With respect to intergroup relations, a key element of dominance is the disproportionate ability to shape the sociocultural understandings of society, especially those involving group identity and intergroup interactions."

2. The American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE), with approximately nine hundred members at daily newspapers, the vast majority of which have white ownership or corporate ownership controlled predominantly by whites, is the core group of newsroom leaders at what generally are regarded as the "mainstream" newspapers in the United States. The organization, which has assumed leadership for diversity within the newspaper industry, draws its data for minority demographics in newsrooms from annual surveys of its membership.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, all epigraphs are from National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) (2001).

4. For the purposes of quantifying racial diversity in the newsrooms of its member newspapers, the ASNE in 1978 defined minorities as black, Asian American, Hispanic, and Native American. In 1998, the organization's board of directors added gender as a demographic category to be counted in the annual newsroom census but rejected a proposal to expand the affirmative action census to include gays, lesbians, and people with disabilities (ASNE 1998a, 1998b).

I should note that *minority* and *journalists of color* are terms employed within ASNE discussion of the diversity initiative. I reluctantly use them in this article, fully aware that such constructions in themselves reproduce asymmetrical relations of power.

5. The ASNE's 2001 newsroom census (ASNE 2001a) reported that the minority retention rate at member newspapers dropped from 96 percent in 2000 to 90 percent in 2001, at the same time that the nonminority rate fell just 1 percent. During 2000, the editors in the survey hired 600 minority journalists into their first full-time job but 698 minority journalists departed.

6. With the release of its 2002 newsroom census, the ASNE reported a net increase of four journalists of color in its members' newsrooms, accounting for a 0.43 percent increase in minority employment (ASNE 2002; Buchanan and Todden 2002). While the number of minority hires dropped from 596 in 2001 to 447 in 2002, the ASNE also was able to report a sharp drop in minority departures and a 3 percent improvement in minority retention. These results must be viewed in the context of the census for white journalists, however. For that cohort, retention dropped a corresponding 3 percent, as fewer white journalists were hired and 3,828 departed, the highest number in twenty-five years. In response to financial pressures on the industry in 2001, many newspapers cut their payrolls by laying off employees or buying out higher-paid staff members. Many minority employees apparently were bypassed in those staff reductions, but it also is likely that fewer minority employees would have qualified for seniority buyouts. Interestingly, the NABJ (2002) and the Asian American Journalists Association (2002) responded to the

2002 newsroom census results by issuing press releases drawing attention to the fact that the number of African American and Asian American newsroom employees had declined for the second consecutive year.

7. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968), commonly known as the Kerner Commission, famously addressed the issue of content segregation when it wrote,

The world that television and newspapers offer to their black audience is almost totally white, in appearance and attitude. . . . Far too often, the press acts and talks about Negroes as if Negroes do not read the newspaper or watch television, give birth, marry, die, and go to PTA meetings. (P. 366)

The issue of racial exclusion in twentieth-century newspaper content also is addressed in Myrdal (1996, 908-24).

8. This postulation on the dynamic of whiteness is synthesized from my readings of Jacobson (1998), Alamaguer (1994), Roediger (1991), Frankenberg (1997), and Hill (1997).

9. See, in particular, Jacobson (1998), Alamaguer (1994), Haney Lopez (1996), Harris (1995), Duggan (2000), and Ferber (1998).

10. The survey considers women both as a discrete category and by their racial classification. The 2001 report lists the percentage of women in newsroom employment at 37.25, up from 37.12 in 2000. Of them, 22 percent were supervisors, compared to 25 percent of men, and 14.28 percent were minorities (ASNE 2001a).

11. I am indebted to Sherrie Tucker for this source.

12. Bowman's (2001) statement here is misleading. She wrote,

The ASNE board has launched a multiyear initiative to study newsroom management and practices as they relate to retention. The first step will be to conduct quantitative research this year to establish why minorities are leaving; whether their reasons for leaving differ from whites, and whether or not certain actions and behaviors by top middle managers can help create a working environment more conducive to attracting and retaining minorities.

While she does not describe other components of the "multiyear initiative," the initial "research" turns out to be merely a review of previously conducted research. This will be discussed in detail below.

13. Retention issues have been covered by survey data at least since the ASNE's own 1989 study, "Changing Face of the Newsroom" (McGill 2001). At that time, however, journalists of color were reported to be no more likely to leave the profession than whites. Subsequent studies registered sharp increases in job dissatisfaction among minority journalists and demonstrated a widening gap between the intentions of journalists of color and whites to remain in journalism. A 1993 study commissioned by the NABJ reported that 24 percent of its members planned to stay in journalism five years or less. Other studies by independent researchers and journalism organizations showed similar, though continually increasing, disparities between the job satisfaction of white and nonwhite journalists. In 2000, however, when McGill conducted research for "Newsroom Diversity: Meeting the Challenge," a study funded by the Freedom Forum, the number of journalists of color who said they planned to make a career in newspapers had dropped sharply to just 39 percent of African Americans, 43 percent of Asian Americans, and 50 percent of Hispanics, compared to 66 percent of whites (McGill 2001).

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