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Critical Communications

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May 8, 2019

### **Newsrooms Still So White: Why are African Americans Lacking in U.S. Newsrooms?**

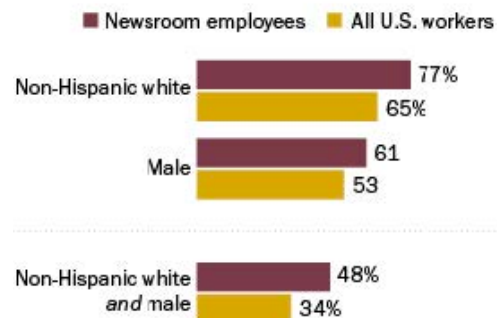
An alarming trend statistic from an analysis of 2012-2016 American Community Survey data states 77 percent of U.S. newsroom employees are non-Hispanic white men. Research shows since the 1960s, African Americans and other minorities numbers as employees in the media does not reflect the diversity present in our society as a whole. In recent years, many African Americans are leaving the newsrooms in search of other career paths. Countless articles discuss the concern of the lack of minorities in the newsroom. More specifically, African Americans. In the late 1960s, African Americans weren't welcome in the newsroom. In 1968, blacks accounted for less than 1 percent of newsroom jobs (Newkirk p. 22). In Pamela Newkirk's article, "Whitewash in the Newsroom," she addresses "The Kerner Report," President Lyndon B. Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders report, which concluded racism as the primary cause of riots during the late 1960s. President Johnson appointed an 11-member commission in July 1967 to come up with solutions and recommendations in urban areas after a number of riots and unrest due to racial tensions, which sparked the Civil Rights Movement. Among calling for expanded aid for African Americans, the report called for newsrooms to hire more African Americans, promote those African Americans who were qualified in those newsrooms, and recruit more African Americans into journalism and broadcasting. During that time, the majority of U.S. newsrooms' staff were white male.

However, newsrooms are still made up of majority white males today, more than 50 years later. In fact, the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan fact tank that provides information on social issues, public opinion, and demographic trends, notes “newsroom employees are more likely to be white and male than U.S. workers overall” (see Fig.1). According to the Pew Research Center, in the past two decades, there has been little overall change in the percentage of minorities in the newsroom. “In 1977, the first year of the American Society of News Editors’ (ASNE) census, minorities accounted for only 4% of newspaper newsroom workers. By 1994, the percentage of minority journalists had nearly tripled to 11%. Eighteen years later, however, in 2012, the figure was only about one percentage point higher, at 12%,” according to the Pew Research Center.

*Fig. 1*

### **Newsroom employees are more likely to be white and male than all U.S. workers**

*% of U.S. employed adults who are ...*



Note: Based on population ages 18 and older employed in the civilian labor force. Non-Hispanic whites include only single-race whites. For a full definition of “newsroom employees,” see the methodology.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Public Use Microdata Sample file.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

*Source: Pew Research Center*

“Minorities currently are leaving newsrooms nationwide in numbers that are significantly higher than is the case for their white coworkers” (Gayle & Meyers, p. 293). Why are African American journalists migrating away from the newsroom? In this research, I hope to provide insight into the specific reason for African Americans leaving the newsroom. There are definitely several factors contributing to the lack of African Americans in newsrooms across the nation. Some of those examples include hiring practices and disparity in pay, which are valid concerns. However, in this article, the focus will be on professional identity versus racial identity, racism within newsrooms and professional seclusion in the newsroom. After examining these specific reasons for African Americans leaving the newsroom, the research will show why the lack of African American minorities in the news industry affects news coverage of its African American audiences. Additionally, I’ll address as to why newsroom diversity overall is important to more inclusive coverage.

### **Professional Identity vs. Racial Identity**

One contributing factor to African American journalists’ leaving the newsroom centers around the divide between allowing African American journalists to develop a professional identity versus maintaining their racial identity through their work and what they report on. This issue is a common concern for many African American journalists working in the newsroom and who seek to strike a balance between covering stories and issues identified by their Caucasian, often male, superiors; as oppose to the stories matter to them personally and to members of the African American community. These journalists often question if they are covering the right stories both professionally and racially. These journalists are in a conflict because they want to do well at their job, but they also want to cover the stories that matter in the African American communities. Errin Haines Whack, an award-winning journalist who is the National Writer for

Race and Ethnicity at the *Associated Press*, wrote about some of her experiences as an African American journalist in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Whack's article, "My Life on the Race Beat: When 'minority affairs' become the center of coverage," briefly covers her years covering stories in the African American community. One of those stories where she found herself on the frontline included the emerging "Black Lives Matter" movement in Ferguson, Missouri, which gained wide-spread exposure when protests and riots began in August 2014 after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson. While covering the movement, Whack ran into one of her close colleagues, Akilah Johnson, who covers immigration for *The Boston Globe*. Whack detailed both her and Johnson's experience while covering the significant event.

"As race reporters, we always feel a tremendous responsibility—mingled with a sense of guilt—to get our stories right; the scene in Ferguson was illuminated with urgency. 'I feel like every story is a matter of life and death, and I am not being hyperbolic,' Johnson says. There, like journalists of color so often do, she reckoned with her position in relation to the story. When we spoke at the convention in Detroit, we reflected on how, as black reporters, being on the race beat means shouldering entire communities. In many ways, it can feel like we're writing for our lives, and to protect our family and friends. 'We're conditioned to say, 'This isn't about me'—but this was about us,' Johnson says. 'You carry that with you in every story you write, whether you are fully conscious of it or acknowledge it, or not'" (Whack p.7).

Both of these journalists felt a sense of responsibility to cover these stories in a way that connected with the African American community and their racially identity. Another example of this is represented in Newkirk's "Whitewash in the Newsroom," article. She argues "besides

being woefully underrepresented in the industry, particularly in news management, African Americans and other journalists of color are too often restricted by the narrow scope of the media, which tend to exploit those fragments of black life that have meaning for whites. While portrayals of African Americans are undoubtedly more varied than ever” (Newkirk p. 22). In this piece, Newkirk points to notable journalist Bryant Gumbel’s experience in the early 90s as he finally, after much persuasion, aired a week-long broadcast focused on the culture, art, social trends in Zimbabwe and other African nations. Newark stated Gumbel faced a five-year battle to broadcast from Africa and tell news stories that were not often seen on the mainstream media at the time. Gumbel argued in 1992, “We only hear about Africa when people are starving or there are natural disasters, yet there are more burgeoning democracies in Africa than in Eastern Europe,” said Gumbel, who repeatedly made just that case to NBC executives, only to be rejected. “They could always find a reason why they should not take the risk” (Newark p. 21). Gumbel continued his fight for the Africa broadcast. According to Newark, Gumbel wrote a thirty-five-page memo to NBC News president Michael Gartner, who read his proposal and then asked Gumbel how he would do it. Newark stated in her article that “months later, Gumbel dropped a thick document on Gartner’s desk that Gartner said was close to 100 pages and read like a doctoral dissertation” (Newark p. 21). Newark explained Gumbel’s experience illustrated the challenge many African American journalists face to try to present a “balanced portrait of black life in the mainstream media.” It is clear finding a happy medium between an African American journalists’ professional identity versus their racial identity is not an easy task.

The continuous fight for covering African American communities with a balance is not for the faint at heart. African American journalists who continue to report and tell our stories

should be valued and appreciated more. These are the champions who continue to seek truth in African American communities and beyond.

### **Racism in the Newsroom**

Another key factor leading to African American journalists leaving to work in other areas expertise is the racial climate permeating American culture currently as a whole. This notion is further amplified in an article by Nia Decaille featuring Dorothy Gilliam, the first black female reporter at the *Washington Post*. Decaille directly confronts the mainstream media's coverage of racism, and their preference for using less inflammatory terms, preferring to report racist incidents as "racially tinged" or "racially charged". Gilliam states in the article

I think these euphemisms are a mistake. Things should be called what they are. People are talking more about white supremacy, but they are leaving out the anti-black narrative. Racism is in America's DNA, and unless you call something what it is, we [in journalism] won't have trust from the public and, most certainly, black Americans" (Decaille p. 1).

It's a challenge for African American journalists to work in an environment where they are constantly looked to, to make decisions regarding race.

Rebecca Carroll, another career-long, African American journalist, echoes this sentiment in her 2014 article published in the *New Republic* journal titled, "I'm a Black Journalist. I'm Quitting Because I'm Tired of Newsroom Racism." In her article, Carroll stresses the challenges she's personally faced as an African American journalist. She states, "it's a strange and incredibly demoralizing time to be a black person in American media." Carroll further argues that she's leaving the newsroom because "the words 'racist' and 'racism' have cynically become clickbait, all while various newsrooms are claiming they want to hire more writers and reporters

and editors of color, but don't. What it feels like you are hearing is: We're not really trying to diversify our newsrooms, because we don't actually have to." Newsrooms have to truly want to diversify for the sake of covering news as a true watchdog and not just as meeting a quota for their human resources statistics. If the newsroom cannot address its own diversity issues, it will continue decline as a valid source for fair and unbiased information, which will appeal to all of its audiences. Carroll further notes racism is hard to fix in the newsroom because its often not familiar to those individuals.

White people often don't even recognize when they're saying or doing something that cuts their black colleagues to the bone. Or worse, they do recognize when they're being racially insensitive, but then demonstrate some semblance of regret and move on unscathed. If we can't say anything about this kind of behavior—or don't—then who will? What's more, if we do speak up, particularly if we are among the chosen few who are granted a voice in mainstream media, at what cost? (Carroll p. 2).

Continuously speaking up about racial issues in the newsroom is a battle many African American journalists eventually get tired of fighting, especially when and if there are a limited amount of African American journalists in the newsroom who share the same values. Another example of speaking out against newsroom racism echoed in Marian Meyers and Lynne Gayle's article, "African American Women in the Newsroom: Encoding Resistance." Though the article mainly explores the lack of African American women in the newsroom, the article also includes various perspectives of African American journalists' who also detail their experiences while working in newsrooms. "Most of the journalists stated that, as African Americans, they bring a certain sensibility to the table that their white colleagues and managers lack. As such, they frequently feel the need to speak up when diversity in a story is needed or when a story includes elements

that reinforce stereotypes or are otherwise racially insensitive—or even to simply educate coworkers and bosses about the black community” (Gayle & Meyers p.303). One of the journalists interviewed for the article, a TV station anchor, recalled a number of occurrences where conversations around stories that are racially insensitive are often times had after the fact. “There have been times when I’ve had to go in and let them know that they do not understand our community. They don’t understand what we deem as sensitive. You feel like you’re always explaining, always teaching—from hair weaves to church. You’re always giving these lessons. And you feel that you always have to clarify and explain the way it is and this is why” (Gayle & Meyers p. 303). Many African American journalists share this same experience. It’s a constant bout, which in most cases, leads to African American journalists having to take a hiatus or change their careers altogether for their mental sanity.

### **Professional Seclusion in the Newsroom**

With a low representation of African American journalists in the newsroom, professional seclusion in the newsroom is another concern for African American journalists. Professional inclusion is where a working professional feels isolated from their colleagues in any way. In a 2017 National Public Radio (NPR) article, “The Modern Newsroom is Stuck Behind the Gender and Color Line,” the author Tal Abbady explores the lack of minorities in the newsroom. The article explains that the American Society of News Editors stopped requiring news outlets reveal their identities in an attempt to increase participation in the yearly census. According to 2016 data from the organization, nationally, Hispanic, black and Asian women make up less than 5 percent of newsroom personnel at traditional print and online news publications. The data is interesting and tells a story of the lack of minorities. Though the 2017 NPR article is dated, the issues still remain today. The National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) is currently



conducting research to look further into whether enough minorities are being hired into newsrooms within the ranks of CNN's executive news managers and direct reports, which is interesting in itself. According to a news release from NABJ in March 2019, the organization is concerned about the findings of its preliminary research, which they say revealed the news network CNN President Jeff Zucker has no black direct reports; there are no black executive producers at CNN; there are no black Vice Presidents on the news side at CNN; and additionally, there are no black Senior Vice Presidents on the news side at CNN. With a lack of African American journalists in the newsroom, it's natural to feel alone and as if no one understands where you may be coming from when it concerns black issues when covering news. Jemele Hill, a notable sports journalist, recently came face to face with this type of seclusion at ESPN, a 24-hour sports news network. Hill found herself in the middle of controversy as she voiced her opinion on a number of injustices currently happening in America. In James Andrew Miller's *Hollywood Reporter* article, "Jemele Hill Waves Goodbye to ESPN and Hello to 'Places Where Discomfort Is OK,'" Hill discusses what ultimately led her to making a career change after being with the Disney-owned sports network since 2006. Hill explained how when she spoke out against current political issues or injustices, which did not concern sports, she was labeled as "too political." Hill stated that "the truth of the matter is that part of the reason they have been swimming endlessly in this narrative that they're too political is because of me. It's a dumb narrative, and I knew that my presence contributed to it." Hill continued, "And so while I think they would have been completely fine with me continuing to be there, and they made that known, there was a part of me that understood that if I wasn't there it would be perceived as a win for them." Hill explained in the article, being called "political" wasn't something that suddenly happened, but something she and colleague Mike Smith, another African American

journalist whom she anchored sportscasts with, encountered before. “Mike (Smith) and I specifically were called political, way before any of the Trump stuff ever happened,” she recalls. “And I always thought that was a very interesting label, because frankly, I think that most of the time it was said because we were the two black people.” Hill also recalled several other incidents that involved race throughout her career at ESPN. “It wasn’t our fault that Chance the Rapper decided to wear a Colin Kaepernick T-shirt and say that he wasn’t supporting the NFL. We didn’t have him on the show for that. We had him on the show to talk about him being in Vegas for Mayweather-McGregor. But because you have the two black people that are outspoken, with another outspoken black artist, suddenly the show is too political.” These encounters are blatant exclusion in the newsroom, which is commonplace when African American journalists feel they can’t fully express their views when covering news. This leads to exceptional journalists leaving vital roles in mainstream media. Sometimes, these journalists leave the profession entirely. For others, like Hill, it may lead to a new avenue of journalism. According to the article, Hill now writes for *The Atlantic* publication, is working on developing a sports and political show with NBA star LeBron James, and she’s also producing a podcast.”

### **Conclusion: What Difference Does It Make?**

African American journalists play a vital role in the newsroom. Hiring managers, editors and publishers need to take a hard look at their newsrooms and see what can be done to be more inclusive, not just for African American journalists, but for minority journalists as well. As Gilliam puts it, “It’s more important now than ever, because you know the country is so polarized, and so the more you have different communities represented and have people in leadership who can speak to what is going on, the stronger the news media will be. By reporting on what communities are doing, thinking and feeling, the news can inform other communities. It

might not end polarization, but it will certainly increase understanding.” Hiring journalists of color leads to diverse coverage and reporting. If everyone is represented in the newsroom, it’ll also help to alleviate embarrassing occurrences of misworded headlines, stereotypical articles and other journalistic biases. For instance, several African American journalists in Gayle & Meyers’ critique noted that as an African American journalist, they make every effort to avoid stereotypes in their news stories, something their white counterparts may not think to do. The TV reporter stated, “I would not put someone on TV who’s wearing a shower cap—I just wouldn’t.” A TV anchor also stated that she avoids interviewing those who fit negative stereotypes, despite deadline pressures: Quite honestly, if I’m at the scene of a shooting, and if there are five people standing around, and three of them are missing teeth and one of them has curlers in her hair, I’m going to skip them. I’ve done it; I continue to do it . . . I will take five more minutes to find someone else. We’re always under a deadline, and it’s not just me out there as a reporter—I also have a photographer, I have a producer back here, who’s calling, paging, texting, yelling — Where is it? Hurry up—we need it!” I need the video as soon as possible.” (Gayle & Meyers p. 301-302). These are the types of journalists who need to be in the newsroom. They are crucial to helping debunk misleading stereotypes and prejudices, which are spread through the media to all audiences. In the article, “Dorothy Gilliam confronted racism and sexism as the first black female reporter at *The Washington Post*,” the author discussed how Gilliam faced many issues as the first black female journalist at the *Washington Post* in 1961. Decaille argues how diversity is still an issue in the newsroom. She points out recent occasions where diversity could have helped with backlash concerning newsrooms. “Esquire was recently criticized for a cover story titled, “An American Boy,” featuring the photo of a white male. CBS was pilloried on social media after it tweeted photos of its 2020 election coverage team, which included no black journalists.

And increasingly, news organizations are being called out for using terms such as “racially charged” instead of “racist” to describe bigoted/offensive rhetoric and behavior. Gilliam raised such issues while she was in The Post newsroom and has continued to work on them since retiring from The Post in 2003” (Decaille p.1). Decaille further states that “Gilliam and other advocates worry that news organizations are losing ground in the area of newsroom diversity, especially at this time when people of color, women and LGBTQ individuals are raising their voices and challenging old assumptions about what it means to be an American. ‘The more you have different communities represented and have people in leadership who can speak to what is going on, the stronger the news media will be,’ Gilliam says.” With an ever-growing nation that includes individuals with different backgrounds, cultures and various heritages, it’s inevitable that today’s newsroom must change. The traditional media must practice what it speaks and include all voices that represent all of America.

Author Alex T. Williams explores “why minority journalists are more likely to leave journalism than their white counterparts” in the article, “At many local newspapers, there are no reporters of color,” published in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Williams shares similar statistics about the lack of minority journalists and also gives black journalists accounts of working in the newsroom. Williams shares a statement from Gene Demby, who “recently interviewed Scott Page, a professor at the University of Michigan who studies how diversity improves decision making at organizations, to explore the pitfalls of “being the only one in the room.”

“One question you can ask is how many people of a particular group have to be in a room for them to speak,” Page said. That is, having a woman in a room doesn’t affect a whole lot if she doesn’t feel comfortable speaking up. And while he has found that the presence of just one member of a minority group in a room can positively influence the rest of the

group to be more cognizant of their own language and behavior, that's different from actually hearing out that person's ideas.

A diverse newsroom matters because people tune in and read from those they trust. In an age where everyone has a phone, and the news can be reported almost simultaneously. Newsrooms should and need to reflect the diversity of the populations they report on and report to. The media's survival as an industry is ultimately at issue and may one day depend on it.

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