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### color blind

In this excerpt from his new book *Coloring the News*, the author interviewed reporters and editors from *USA Today* to *The New York Times* and discovered that, far from cornerstones of the modern "enlightened" newspaper, politically correct diversity programs have only harmed the minorities they purport to help — in addition to alienating readers, demoralizing newsrooms, and being inadvertently responsible for the Fox News Channel.

BY WILLIAM MCGOWAN

Asked to account for why there has been so much bad reporting about diversity, many of the reporters and editors I approached simply blamed the restrictive conventions of the news-gathering process: daily deadlines, reportorial ranks stretched too thin, the difficulty in finding an acceptable news peg to make a story complex and alive. Yet the reporting and re-reporting I have done show me that a new taboo against the skepticism that is supposed to be a journalist's greatest asset has been a more significant factor.

Moreover efforts to expand newsroom representation by ethnicity, gender, and race have not been accompanied by any corresponding effort to expand or enhance intellectual or ideological diversity or an appreciation for it. Diversity, it turns out, is only skin deep. Surveys done over the course of the last two decades consistently show that journalists on the whole are today more liberal than the average citizen, and that the influx of women and minorities has only accentuated that imbalance since these groups are measurably more liberal than others. At some news organizations, especially those most committed to diversity, having liberal values has practically become a condition of employment. People with more traditional or conservative views have a hard time getting through the door, and if they do get through, they are wary of revealing their views.

The problem is not an active liberal conspiracy. Rather, it is one of an invisible liberal consensus, which is either hostile to, or simply unaware of, the other side of things, thereby making the newsroom susceptible to an unconscious but deeply rooted bias. The answer is not affirmative action for conservatives, but rather a recognition that this bias exists and serves as an invisible criterion affecting the hiring process.

Journalism is a process that prides itself on its maverick outspokenness and its allergic reaction to preconceived notions. Yet in today's media climate, some notions are considered beyond scrutiny—including the merits of the diversity agenda. "I deplore the fact that the issue is so sensitive that reporters don't want to talk by name," one Washington bureau chief told me, hastening to add, "I don't want to contribute to that, but I would rather not be noted by name either." Indeed, in many ways, news organizations have become the same kind of dysfunctional cultures as those found on the multicultural university campuses, where transgressions against the dominant line of thought can result in hostility and ostracism.

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Another important reason why the diversity agenda has been inimical to sound journalism is the way the search for distinct minority view points and voices has opened the door to ethnic, racial and gender cheerleading. Most minority journalists have no problem upholding the goal of professional detachment and nonpartisanship, but many younger journalists, particularly members of minorities, see objectivity as a reflection of "white" cultural values. This scorn for objectivity has encouraged a form of relativism in which facts lose their currency, and concerns about feeding anti-minority stereotypes, or undermining community self-esteem, triumph over candor and factuality.

While the political preoccupations of Latino, black, or gay reporters vary sharply, the sense of advocacy they share is often animated by the same concerns. One of them is a sense of obligation to protect and uplift the group. This can create a conflict of interest between being a good journalist and being "a loyal brother" working to advance "the liberation of an oppressed people," as black columnist Jack White of *Time* magazine described his own dilemma to a group of students at a 1997 Columbia School of Journalism seminar. Minority journalists tend to exert a tremendous amount of peer pressure on each other, chastising those who are seen as airing dirty laundry in public or offering ammunition to the enemy. They are also guilt-baited by black political figures

and activists who like to scold them for having become "an elite class" which has forgotten that "we are still in a racist nation," as a Dallas city councilman put it at the 1994 convention of the National Association of Black Journalists.

Inside the newsroom, the activist impulse has sometimes translated into obstructionism by mid-level minority editors who either discourage racially sensitive pieces, or sidetrack, gut, or kill them once they are further into the pipeline. Outside the newsroom, that activism has fed the increasing politicization of the various minority journalists' associations. In recent years, all of them have taken explicit stands on political issues, and often sponsor workshops at their annual conventions where activists advise attendees on the best way to spin various political issues back in the newsroom.

The fear of being labeled racist, sexist, or homophobic makes many white reporters reluctant to challenge this newsroom advocacy. As a *New York Times* reporter told a writer for *Esquire*, "All someone has to do is make a charge of racism and everyone runs away." And instead of taking hard-line stances against racial and ethnic cheerleading or the prickly hypersensitivity that mistakes rigorous editing for prejudice, many managers respond with solicitude because they don't want open ethnic conflict on their staff or they are worried about jeopardizing their careers. One of my *Los Angeles Times* sources said that "a large responsibility lies with the fifty-year-old white males who find it easier, as a company, to give in to these groups than to deal with the real problems."

Not to be ignored in assessing the impact of diversity doctrine is the false perception reigning in the profession that this cause is the moral successor to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Many top editors who cut their teeth as young reporters covering the civil rights in the South seem still to be fighting the last war in their effort to reconfigure the newsroom, ignoring today's more complicated ethnic and racial picture.

Among other things, the conflation of civil rights with diversity has extended the shelf life of the outdated paradigm of white oppression and nonwhite victimization, which the media invokes to justify a compensatory system of group preferences. It has also allowed diversity supporters to rationalize and excuse their own excesses and failings. When asked about complaints that the diversity campaign encouraged news organizations to go easy on minority groups, *The New York Times'* Arthur Sulzberger Jr. told *Newsweek's* Ellis Cose, "First you have to get them on the agenda."

Most significantly, though, seeing diversity as the next phase of the civil rights movement has also given the whole media debate about it an overly righteous, moralistic air. This has made it difficult to discuss more subtle issues with the dispassion they require, and has also tended to encourage racial McCarthyism toward critics of the effort by dividing the world into "an enlightened us and unenlightened them," as one *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter put it. As a result, "The whole debate gets lowered to a grade school level of oversimplification," with little effort expended to see the other side, complained former *Los Angeles Times* reporter Jill Stewart.

Such moral preening makes it hard for supporters to accept criticism too. When their diversity effort was disparaged in a lengthy *New Republic* exposé, *Washington Post* editors went into a frenzy, attacking the integrity of the writer and the racial bona fides of the magazine. *Post* publisher Donald Graham sneeringly offered *The New Republic* his suggestion for a new motto for the magazine: "Looking for a qualified black since 1914." Reacting in similar fashion, editors at the *New York Times* have dismissed criticism of the paper's slanted coverage as "unhealthy and unhelpful," "just pathetic," and ideologically motivated "drivel" tinged with implicit racism.

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Supporters of the diversity agenda promised that it would benefit minority groups that have long been marginalized or maligned, and that it would encourage the formulation of policies needed to accommodate the changing demographics of multicultural America. But when you look at the political effects such a journalistic agenda encourages, you can see the law of unintended consequences in full operation.

Are new Americans really helped by journalism that bolsters bilingual education, depriving immigrant children of the ability to speak and read English, in order to maintain traditional identities? And are immigrants, who are disproportionately victimized by alien criminals, really better off when newspapers shy away from hard-hitting reportage about crime out of deference to "community sensitivities"?

There are also many legitimate questions to ask about the impact of journalism that indulges the antisocial behavior of the black underclass as a romantic rejection of "white norms" and holds black leaders to a lower standard than

whites. After all, blacks are usually the ones harmed by such antisocial behavior, and by the political corruption of black officials. Is the goal of black inclusion really enhanced by reporting that sees racism everywhere, or does this reporting in fact encourage such an incapacitating sense of victimization and alienation that true inclusion and integration have become impossible?

And what about the thousands of gay men who became infected with the AIDS virus while journalists fretted about feeding pernicious stereotypes of gay promiscuity, failing to report on the dangers of bath houses and sex clubs as aggressively as they should have? *Newsday* columnist Gabriel Rotello told an audience at the 1995 National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Convention: "It has gotten to the point that we [gay men] are the biggest consumers of [these] mistruths and misconceptions about the AIDS epidemic, and it is us who are dying."

The diversity crusade has had other unintended consequences too—some affecting the media. Research suggests that besides driving down morale and encouraging attrition, the diversity effort has not become "the cornerstone of growth" its supporters said it would be. Much to the chagrin of news organizations who thought they could leverage diversity to bolster sagging readership and viewership, the new minority readers and viewers never really materialized. In fact, the push for diversity has driven away many white, middle-class readers and viewers who often find the ideologically skewed reporting on diversity sharply at odds with their sense of reality. Many in this alienated white middle class have embraced the alternative news of conservative talk radio—arguably the Frankenstein monster created by the PC press—as well as the upstart Fox News Channel, increasingly seen as a breath of candor and balance in comparison with its network rivals.

In the end, though, the press' diversity crusade has performed its greatest disservice to the country's broader civic culture by oversimplifying complicated issues and by undermining the spirit of public cooperation and trust without which no multiethnic and multiracial society can survive. Instead of making public discourse intellectually more sophisticated, the diversity ethos has helped to dumb it down. Instead of nurturing a sense of common citizenship, the emphasis on diversity has celebrated cultural separatism and supported a race-conscious approach to public life. And instead of enhancing public trust—a critical element in the forging of consensus on the thorny social issues we face—the press' diversity effort has manufactured cynicism through reporting and analysis distorted by double standards, intellectual dishonesty, and fashionable cant that favors certain groups over others.

The task of building a workable multiethnic and multiracial society is daunting, but by coloring the news, the diversity crusade has made it even more problematical. As one perceptive reporter at the *San Francisco Chronicle* reflected: "The ultimate goal is a society with as much racial and ethnic fairness and harmony as possible, but we can't get there unless we in the press are ready to talk about it in full."

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