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Book Review

Without Fear, Favor Or . . . Offensiveness

By Dan Seligman

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Notes from the diversity front, media division:

The New York Times runs a long, admiring article identifying Patrick Chavis, a black doctor in Los Angeles, as evidence that affirmative action in medical schools is working the way it was meant to, by bringing good doctors into minority neighborhoods. Later, after many botched operations and a patient's death, Chavis loses his license. The Times never reports it.

Matthew Shepard, a homosexual in Wyoming, is brutally attacked by two thugs and left to die, tied to a fence in sub-freezing temperature. The story is, quite properly, a nationwide media sensation. Not long after, a 13-year-old Arkansas boy named Jesse Dirkhising is sadistically raped for hours, then left to die, by two next-door homosexuals. The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, CNN, ABC, CBS and NBC ignore the story entirely. Paul Teetor, an award-winning reporter at Vermont's Gannett-owned Burlington Free Press, is covering a local forum on racism. A young white woman tries to speak and is told by the moderator, a mayoral aide, that only "people of color" are allowed to speak. Mr. Teetor agrees with the woman that this is "reverse racism" and says so in his next-day news story. The mayoral aide says he will organize a march on the Free Press if Mr. Teetor isn't instantly fired. He is indeed fired, in a 90-second meeting at which he has no chance to defend himself. In the ensuing wrongful discharge suit, it emerges that the editor who fired him is under pressure from Gannett to improve his "mainstreaming" scores. That term refers to a program where editors are supposed to meet a variety of racial targets in hiring, in the use of sources and in positive news coverage. (After a few days of testimony, Gannett caves in and settles the suit.) In a major New York Times series on immigration, readers are told that assimilation -- the traditional melting-pot model -- is "seen as a dated, even racist concept." The Times has denounced proposals for reducing immigration totals as "rude inhospitality" and "racist or at least xenophobic."

As these examples suggest, William McGowan is especially tough on the New York Times (a point he concedes) in "Coloring the News" (Encounter, 278 pages, \$25.95), his scathing report on media political correctness and its accompanying distortions of reality. But his abundant examples, drawn from many different directions, will persuade most readers -- possibly even some dug-in correctniks -- that something has gone seriously wrong in our country's newsrooms, now massively committed to the ideology of "diversity."

Mr. McGowan, a journalist who has written for several national publications, including The Wall Street Journal, tells us that the commitment was supposed to improve the quality of journalism while boosting the publishers' profits. Reporting would be better because a more diverse newsroom would come up with a broader range of stories and perspectives. And the bottom line would benefit as people of color saw that the publication was not just for "whites only."

This double-barreled theme was the dominating idea of a 1992 revival meeting (to caricature only slightly the spirit of the occasion) sponsored jointly by the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Newspaper Association of America. Arthur Sulzberger Jr., the publisher of the New York Times, was a major speaker at the meeting and in its aftermath repeatedly proclaimed that "diversity is the single most important issue" facing the Times. He pledged to hire an openly gay editor and in other ways pushed minority preferences to the limit, observing at one point: "We can no longer offer our readers a predominantly white, straight male version of events and say that we, as journalists, are doing our job."

None of the media authority figures promoting this crusade seem prepared to admit that the new version of events has been a ghastly failure, but it has certainly not done what it was supposed to do. It has filled newsrooms with partisans for minority causes, many of them activists in the black, Latino, Asian-American, women's, and gay/lesbian journalists' associations, whose pressures lead editors to self-censorship and distortion when those causes seem threatened by stories -- like, say, the Patrick Chavis disaster -- at variance with politically correct news perspectives.

So the first casualty of "diversity" is the broader coverage it was intended to bring. Circulation appears to be another casualty. The expected legions of minority news consumers never showed up, and newspaper circulation figures have trended downward in the age of diversity. Another of its unintended consequences has been the rise of talk radio. "While it may not always have its facts nailed down," Mr. McGowan observes, "this populist largely conservative medium does get out the news that mainstream journalists have long ignored or suppressed."

An interesting question is why so many media bosses remain committed to diversity

strategies. There is a genuine mystery here. Do they really believe what they're saying? Do they fear that they will be judged racist or sexist if they demand only equal-opportunity hiring and insist on objectivity in reporting? Do they fear lawsuits, or is it just that they find it hard to stand up to the new militants in the newsroom? One might assume, at a minimum, that managers would insist on retaining the right to manage. Also that publishers and senior editors would retain a fair amount of leverage over newsroom partisans clinging to what look to be some of the most desirable jobs in the land.

Mr. McGowan nowhere squarely confronts these questions. But he leaves you suspecting, at the end of this devastating critique, that many media managers are utterly sincere when they claim to be on the right track now. That is the most depressing possibility of all.

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