EXTRA

Unfit to Print?

Why are journalists afraid to debate the excesses of diversity?

By William McGowan

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"How did your colleagues respond to your book?"

In the scores of radio and television interviews I did during the publicity campaign for "Coloring the News"--an examination of diversity programs and their often corrupting impact on news coverage--this question was the one most frequently asked. And it's natural to see why. Diversity is one of the most controversial issues in the press today. No nerves are quite so raw as those attached to the issues of race, ethnicity and sexual orientation, and discussion of them has long been surrounded by considerable discomfort and taboos.

Many news organizations demand a pronounced commitment to diversity as a requirement for career advancement. Failing to show such a commitment, or asking too many questions either about its animating premises or its execution in the newsroom, can "dramatically narrow" one's career options, as New York Times publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr. phrased it. Indeed, stepping over the party line on this subject can result in ostracism, opprobrium and banishment to career Siberias.

My experiences with "Coloring the News" confirmed that there are sanctions for speaking out too candidly about this subject. Traveling through the intersection of journalism and our nation's racial tensions requires a hard head, if not a helmet. Though some reviewers gave the book's arguments and evidence fair treatment, there were many instances when the unacknowledged ideological leanings of a news organization or professional groups made constructive dialogue all but impossible.

Many journalists were all too ready to read racial ill will into the book's critique of the diversity crusade or to dismiss it as a "right wing" screed and describe me as some kind of conservative ideologue with an agenda. While some critics showed an almost religious attachment to the concept of diversity, frustrating rational discourse, others did their best to discredit it with blithe dismissals or unfounded charges about the book's "dubious scholarship." With some I sensed that the distancing they did from the book

was to avoid coloring their own career prospects.

I had been told to expect such treatment, and while it certainly did not outweigh the positive responses, something about the abusive tone and inaccuracies of these broadsides was disturbing. They seemed to say something profound about the way our journalistic culture debates--or stifles debate--about its coverage of one of our most vexing national issues. And they demonstrated the need to vilify those who step out of line and articulate a complex, dissenting view.

In the book's first chapter I write that efforts to enhance "diversity" in newsrooms and in the news "product" are "worthy, historically necessary and overdue." I also note how this has led to turmoil in some news organizations and explore accusations of racial double standards in hiring, assignment and promotion policies, though I don't lay blame or validate any side in discussing such accusations.

The vast emphasis of the book, however--almost 200 of the book's 250 pages--is devoted to an examination of a more important issue: the impact that diversity efforts have had on news coverage, with particular attention focused on diversity-related issues of race, gay rights, affirmative action and immigration. These issues reside at the red-hot center of the nation's culture wars and had been the focus of many who claimed that the media had a left-wing bias.

The evidence I found and presented showed a disturbing level of ideological conformity in the press with coverage of these issues and favoritism to various politically correct causes and protected "PC" constituencies. Although diversity purported to celebrate a multiplicity of viewpoints, certain unfashionable voices were overlooked or muted for a variety of reasons. Certain groups felt more empowered in the journalistic shouting match than others.

Why had well-intentioned diversity efforts run off the rails? I cited clumsy bureaucratic initiatives that encouraged "reporting by the numbers," and showed how this led to bias. I wrote about a climate that allowed activism and ethnic and racial cheerleading to eclipse neutral observation as well as the ideal of objectivity, and about a kind of wishful thinking that caused too many journalists to see "the world as it ought to be, not as it really is," as Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen has put it.

The book closes with an exploration of the consequences this kind of politically correct journalism has had on our political culture and on the media's health and credibility. I also argued that "PC" journalism hurt the credibility and financial health of mainstream news organizations and fed the growth of right-wing broadcasting backlash.

My goal in writing the book was not to condemn attempts to expand the ranks of minority journalists and enhance newsroom sensitivity to minority issues. I wanted to ask probing questions that few people in the profession

seemed to be willing to ask, at least out loud, and, by doing so, to spark a debate. If the book had an agenda, it was to reassert the values of intellectual rigor and honesty and to affirm a real diversity of opinion and experience--whether or not it was deemed "progressive."

I felt then and still do that we're at a demographic and cultural crossroads, when the need for honest and unbiased information is critical. Journalism needs to renew its appreciation for the ideal of fair and detached reporting--"armed neutrality in the face of doctrines," as a pragmatic philosopher put it.

"Coloring the News" was commended in many reviews--some from surprising sources--for its careful research, its moderate tone, and for sparking an overdue debate. The review in the Washington Post, a newspaper that took a few hits in the book, noted that there were things in the book that many reporters and editors would not want to hear, but said it essentially was a liberal-minded book written in the spirit of George Orwell. Village Voice and Editor & Publisher columnist Nat Hentoff put it in a league with the work of George Seldes, I.F. Stone, Murray Kempton and Jimmy Breslin and said that if he were still teaching journalism, "one book would be mandatory: 'Coloring the News.' "

Unfortunately, however, too many news organizations with heavy investments in the diversity crusade either read my arguments wrong or preferred not to review their investments. Several influential news organizations simply blacked the book out, even when legitimate news pegs existed and not reviewing it exposed institutional self-protection and a lack of integrity.

The New York Times refused to review my book, and in several exchanges with book editors at the Times, it became clear that my book was too critical of some of the diversity efforts at the newspaper--and their impact on news coverage--for a review to be assigned. The Times was not exactly covert about this. Asked on the record about the decision not to review my book by a media reporter for the San Francisco Chonicle, the Times' book review editor, Chip McGrath, essentially confirmed the suspicion.

Not reviewing "Coloring the News" was, in my view, the journalistic equivalent to the "blue wall of silence" that the Times often decries. A newspaper's job is to get past such walls and hold public institutions accountable: My book was attempting to hold the newspaper accountable. Not being willing to respond to this scrutiny seemed a negation of the paper's mission and a decision that ill-served readers who depend on it.

This silent treatment from the New York Times put "Coloring the News" on a lengthening list of books (considered to be "right wing"), including former broadcast journalist Bernard Goldberg's "Bias," which have not been reviewed by the Times Book Review, despite contributing to a vigorous debate among journalists (and in Goldberg's case, achieving the No. 1 position on the Times's own bestseller list.)

At National Public Radio, talk show host Tavis Smiley essentially told me on the air that "black people don't need a white journalist to tell them what's good for them." Juan Williams had prepared a package with Bernard Goldberg and me, but it did not reach the air for more than six weeks. The reason? Higher-ups at NPR's "Morning Edition" mandated a rather odd second segment to follow the next day with two pro-diversity figures who are not known for scholarship on the subject. This "balance" seemed to be happening to appease those at NPR who thought giving airtime to us would validate our arguments. This concern seems less apparent when the liberal perspective is voiced without a counter-balancing conservative one.

Sometimes the response to the book has had a vaguely comic or self-parodying quality. Some delegates at the Society of Professional Journalists' 2002 convention tried to pass a resolution condemning the book, until someone pointed out that it might look a bit hypocritical for people in the First Amendment business to condemn an exercise in free speech.

As these experiences suggest, "Coloring the News" has become a hot potato--and I a bit of a pariah. Shortly after the book was published, I was invited to be a keynote speaker for a panel during the prestigious Law and Society Seminar, an annual conclave sponsored by a consortium of Kansas City-based insurance companies, with support from the Kansas City Star. (Some of the law firms sponsoring the event do First Amendment work.) Fliers for the event with my picture were printed up, but then I was disinvited. According to one event organizer, a lawyer with a firm with ties to the Kansas City Star put the kibosh on the invitation, saying he was concerned that the newspaper, where diversity is a top priority, might pull its sponsorship. Another member of the organizing committee, whose wife worked at the Star, agreed. Curiously, the motto of the man's employer is "We insure free speech."

By far the sharpest and ugliest rebukes have come from minority journalists, particularly officers and members of the National Association of Black Journalists. Critics from the NABJ blatantly misrepresented the book's main points. They claimed that I was against the hiring of minority journalists and that I singled out journalists of color for newsroom political correctness and the miscoverage it had generated. Their reviews contained the worst kind of racial McCarthyism, as writers threw mud on my name and credentials.

Writing in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, columnist and local NABJ president Eugene Kane said "McGowan strikes me as one of the white journalists who long for the days of all-white newsrooms, all-white society pages, and no black faces in the newspaper unless they were charged with a crime." St. Petersburg Times media columnist Eric Deggans (another NABJ officer) wrote that I seemed to be consumed with anger and rage: "Anger that so many news organizations seem committed to hiring and promoting minorities. Rage that other sensibilities, besides those of the white male

power structure, are now helping shape the nations' news agenda." The Maynard Institute's Dori Maynard had problems with the book's "scholarship," though she offered no specifics whatever. On television, Les Payne of Newsday said that my politics were "from the gutter."

It was not surprising when the NABJ reacted strongly to the National Press Club's decision to give "Coloring the News" its 2002 award for media criticism. Mr. Deggans wrote Press Club president John Aubuchon that it was "amazing that the NPC would honor a book that so blatantly twists and bends the truth to attack such a simple obvious and honorable goal." (A few months after this event, when I had agreed to debate NABJ about my book, the NABJ pulled out.) The Washington Post's Richard Prince said "Coloring the News" is "simply a continuation of the angry white male backlash we have been contending with since we landed on these shores." The National Association of Hispanic Journalists piled on too, calling the book "insulting" and "poorly argued." That group went on to say that I had "a hostile attitude toward journalists of color." The National Press Club resisted the pressure to rescind their award, but its president and board of governors issued statements--without letting me know their content or timing--finding various faults with the book's core argument and its research, though once again specific charges were lacking.

"Coloring the News" enjoyed sales far more robust than expected and did, I think, help to jumpstart a debate that had been stalled for too long. It also set the stage for my next book, "Gray Lady Down," which uses the Jayson Blair scandal as a window onto the decade-long slide of the New York Times under publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr.

But the overall experience has left me a bit ambivalent. While I gained a more clear-eyed view of today's corporate media realities, it was somewhat sad to lose the illusions I had harbored up until then. Call me naive, but despite my own research and reporting on the subject, I still had a vague confidence that American journalism's maverick streak, which values iconoclasm and intellectual honesty, would help me overcome established notions about what public conversations can happen and which can't.

This I found was wishful thinking, a version of "the world as it ought to be, not as it really is." As a friend who works at the New York Times said in explaining his paper's blackout of "Coloring the News": "We're gutless careerists. What can I say? The treatment your book got dramatizes the power that liberals have to dominate the discourse and to shut down--or try to shut down--dissidents or those who have alternative points of view."

William McGowan, author of "Coloring the News," is under contract with Encounter Books to write a book about the New York Times and Jayson Blair. This article appears in the Fall issue of Niemen Reports.