

Is This a Story That Needs to Be Racialized?

Difference in Coverage Assignments and its Influences

Xinzhu Liu

*UCLA Department of Sociology, University of California, Los Angeles
Portola Plaza, Los Angeles County, USA
angieliu420@g.ucla.edu*

Abstract: Increasing awareness of lack of diversity in newsroom has been widely seen at American news media. However, studies showed that recruiting minority journalists does not guarantee diverse voices or better working environment for minorities, due to administrative decisions, including assignment of topics based on a journalist's race. In this study, the author reviews interviews with minority journalists in searching for effects of the influence of such practice, and finds that difference in topic assigning based on their races in the newsroom hinders minority journalists' performance and perpetuates racial bias in readers.

Keywords: Journalism, race, racial minority, diversity, news coverage.

1. Introduction

Lack of diversity in the newsroom has been, and still is a serious problem in United States today. According The Newspaper Diversity Survey conducted in 2018, even though 40% of US news media gained racial diversity since 2001, white are, on average, 25% over-represented compared to the census of where the news media is based [1]. In 2018, Los Angeles Times has an inordinate white journalist population—62% of all its employees, when only 35% of California's population are white. Accompanied is a disproportionally small 15% Hispanic journalists against 39% Hispanics in California. There seems to be a straightforward solution: to add to the diversity of voices in newsroom, simply employ more minority journalists. However, the problem is not so easy solved. Beside the explicit racism minority journalists might face in the newsroom, journalistic norms also perpetuate white dominance in the newsroom and news reporting in various ways. Difference coverage assignments given to journalists based on their races obstructs racial minority journalists from advancing to managerial positions, subjects them to the white gaze from their white colleagues, stops them from advocating for wellbeing of their own communities, while reaffirming white readers' racial biases and undermining racial injustice.

2. Literature Review

Researches have been done that look at minority journalists in majorly white newsrooms. Historical context is thoroughly introduced in Mellinger's *Chasing Newsroom Diversity*, which examines newsroom racial demography from Jim Crow era, to the emergence of desegregation in news industry, to

affirmative action encouraging a multicultural newsroom [2]. Overviewing statistically, McGill concludes that the gap between racial composition in American newsrooms and local population has not narrowed, despite efforts from newspapers, their editors and journalists [3]. Closer look at the “efforts” by Philips reveals that minority journalists are not given equal treatments with their white colleagues, with editors showing lack of trust, patience and respect for them [4]. Furthermore, Pritchard and Stonbely discovered a form of racial profiling in the newsroom where African American journalists mostly write stories about minority issues, while white journalists mostly report business and government related issues [5]. Gatekeeping theory by Shoemaker et al., which explains the process of how information has been filtered by editors before reaching readers, provides theoretical framework for understanding how news received by readers is predetermined by news media [6]. Framing theory put forth by Erving Goffman suggests that the way informations are presented to the readers influence the choices they make about how to process and interpret the information [7]. Collectively, they highlight the importance of researching on variances in news reporting, and the consequences of the variances.

3. Analysis

3.1. Reporting On Own Community

Racial minority journalists are often assigned to report news about their own community. Research on a Milwaukee newspaper found that the racial focus of a local public issue is strongly associated with reporter’s race [8]. Black and Latino journalists wrote 8% of stories about issues with no overt racial component, but 28% of stories about black public figures, and 100% of stories mostly relevant to minorities. The intention might be innocent: if there are more minority journalists in a newsroom, they will make sure that the newspaper provides more accurate and representative coverages of minority-related issues. However, this practice poses tremendous stress on minority journalists by exposing them to racism and violence against their community. Alex Samuels of the Texas Tribune said in a recent interview: “It’s so hard to be covering so much trauma, because there’s this idea that as a Black journalist you have to cover these Black stories” [9].

Moreover, being typecast as local minority news reporter restrains what a minority journalist can write about, and diminishes their chance to be promoted to editorial positions [10]. E.R. Shipp, former *New York Times* employee complained about being “stuck in the job of urban affair reporters or race relations reporter” [11]. Politics, business, and international relations, often regarded as more “newsworthy,” are more likely to attract readers, and thus lifting the importance of the journalist’s work. In the ANSE data, racial disparity in leadership in newsroom shows an even more drastic overrepresentation of white than journalists overall. 71% of all journalists and 77% of journalists in managerial positions at The Washington Post are white, against the 61% white population in US census [12]. According to gatekeeping theory, journalists select events to be transmitted by news media from vast array of potential news messages [13]. An editor in chief in a newsroom serves the function as a gatekeeper, selecting where to dig or what to write for the journalist, and editing written pieces of news or commentaries before final release [14]. Consequently, under-representation of racial minority in managerial positions not only suggest minority journalists are unjustly treated due to difference in assignment, it also means coverage proposed by minority reporters about incidents concerning their community may not be considered “newsworthy” by white editors following white journalistic norms, and thus the events relevant to racial minorities remain inaccessible to general public. In interviews with racialized female journalists in Canadian mainstream newsrooms, most of the journalists shared stories about rejection from their editors when pitching coverages that centered on minor-

ity communities [15]. In an interview with NPR, *LA Times* Executive Editor Norman Pearlstine admitted: “I would say in the case of black journalists, that we do not have enough journalists in positions where they are able to help us tell stories that really need to be told” [16].

3.2. Business and Politics, White Exclusively

Realms like politics and business “in which decisions are made about distribution of power and resources” are almost exclusively reserved to white journalists [17]. In their study, journalists of all races spoke of racial diversity only when they were talking about minority journalists or minority-oriented topics. This institutional racism in newsroom, stemmed from white normativity unacknowledged among journalists, sustains the hegemony of whiteness. Influenced by white normativity in the US, public realms like business and politics are thought to be white by nature. However, white figures upfront on *Forbes* and *Time* does not necessarily mean business and politics are predominantly white in real life: leaders—CEOs, CFOs, board members—may be faces and brains of a company, but capital that builds the very basis of trades is directly created by workers and service providers, which contain a much larger proportion of people of color. For example, platforms like Uber and Amazon enjoy cheap labor from full-time “independent contractors” without giving them healthcare or unemployment compensation like proper employees [18]. For white journalists, the racial injustice here might easily pass unnoticed. Rarely mentioned in news covering Proposition 22 and its impact on gig economy is the fact that 44% of African-American gig workers in a national survey reported that gig economy jobs were their primary source of income, a percentage higher than any other race [19]. This number suggests that Prop.22 effects African American community more severely than other racial communities, for they are the most likely to rely on gig work for insurance and welfare. Evidently, even though news coverage of Prop.22 is in the politics and business domains, it is closely linked with racial minorities and working class. However, without the awareness of racial disparities, news coverages do not always take notice of the demography, and thus overlook the significance of such policy on racial minority. And consequently, readers of racial minority are unable to see the implication of such policy on their own community, and white readers are not aware of the systemic racism brought with such policy.

3.3. Silenced from Breaking the Silence

To have more minority journalists writing about realms like politics and public relations would break such white hegemony. However, newsrooms are barring minority journalists from covering racial conflicts, preventing them from advocating for their community in the name of objectivity. Alexis Johnson, an African American journalist at *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, was barred from covering #BlackLivesMatter protests after a tweet she sent poking fun at the complaints about looting [20]. Managing editors stated that the tweet called into question her objectivity, and she was removed from covering any BLM protest related news for potential bias that could compromise her reporting [21]. The thought process is rooted in a misconception of objectivity, a norm hailed by American journalism. However, making a joke about people complaining about looting does not necessarily lead to bias in news reporting. Many have confused objectivity with both-siderism, believing neutrality is the essence of objectivity. Authentic objectivity, argued by Alex S. Jones, is not creating the “illusion of fairness” by pretending there is a debate about facts “when the weight of truth is clear” [22]. In a society that is systematically racist, voices like Johnson’s are quintessential for a newspaper to fulfill social responsibility of journalism with what Wesley Lowery called “moral clarity”—looking at each issue, gather facts and contexts, and work out answers before presenting them to the readers [23]. Confining oneself with “he said/she said” reporting without voices like Johnson’s essentially seeks

to attract white readers by silencing black voices and framing #BlackLivesMatter as debatable. Furthermore, the tendency to pander to white readers is evident in the accusation itself, where “biased” is concluded from a single innocuous joke, and is clearly viewed from a white standpoint, which leads to a burning question: what about white journalists biases? By barring racial minority journalists from covering national news concerning both their own and white communities with the excuse of being biased, newspapers abandoned their responsibility of informing their readers of historical background and significance of the protest, and instead reaffirm their racial biases [24].

3.4. Extra Workload

Difference in assignments also puts extra workload on minority journalists. Because local issues mostly relevant racial minorities are often assigned to racial minority journalists, with managing editor’s belief that minority journalists are more adequate at covering their own community, newspapers spend little effort on educating white journalists on historical and contemporary racial relations. Consequently, educating their white colleagues becomes an extra workload for minority journalists. Especially in the wake of protests against racism, white journalists gain the awareness of potential racism in news coverage. As a result, they increasingly seek help from their racial minority colleagues. “And, to be clear, almost every black reporter I’ve ever encountered is eager and happy to help on the front end,” says Wesley Lowery, “but also, I think there is very little appreciation” [25]. Undoubtedly, white journalists’ raising awareness is a good sign of more responsible coverages of race issues, and helping them is meaningful work for minority journalists, but consulting, on top of normal workload, for every white person in the newsroom can be repetitive and tiring. Furthermore, the helping is sometimes takes for granted. Being treated like walking encyclopedia and dictionary, some Latino journalists voices frustration in an interview: “I’m not a translator, I’m a reporter, and if you want me to go cover the story because they are speaking primarily in Spanish, then I’ll go cover the story as a reporter. But don’t send me as someone’s translator” [26].

4. Conclusion

This research suggests that, while it might be true that minority journalists bring authenticity to local news about their own communities, limiting them to this topic can have detrimental effects on both minority journalists and readers. The result implies that simply adding more minority journalists to a newsroom is not enough if a newspaper truly encourages diverse voices. This research does not provide a plausible solution to the question it raised, but a few suggestions can be considered and evaluated in future studies: more racial minority are needed in not only news writer positions, but also editorial positions, to ensure minority voices can be heard; education for every employee of the newspaper is quintessential for responsible reporting on issues about races other than one’s own, and is the foundation of equality in coverage assignments; moreover, minority journalists also need support from a more effective union to protect their rights. It’s a long way to go.

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