

Tackling Diversity and Inclusion in the Newsroom

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Introduction

It should come as no surprise that the Global Future Council on Media, Entertainment and Sport would choose to address the issue of diversity and inclusion in the field of journalism. The Council, which is comprised of media practitioners and experts from around the world, has spent its term identifying critical threats that undermine the development of healthy and productive information systems. These are the systems that establish the facts and shape the debates that impact a society, allowing members of that society to make sense of an increasingly complex world. Without the integrity of information and a high level of public trust in that information, societies cannot operate from a shared fact base. Responding to social and political challenges becomes extremely difficult; finding a harmonious and equitable solution to those challenges becomes nearly impossible.

As this report will highlight, there is a clear business case for diversity and inclusion within newsrooms. In addition to that, however, fundamental trust and legitimacy is also at stake. Ensuring diversity and inclusion is critical to a news organization's standing in the years to come. The Poynter Institute, a non-profit journalism education and research organization, reports that trust in the media is particularly low in communities that have long felt ignored or misrepresented by mainstream news outlets. News outlets cannot expect to hold or grow the attention of a diverse group of readers without accounting for their diversity in the newsgathering and news reporting process.

Diversity is also a practical imperative for organizations that purport to fully and accurately cover complex stories. Without a diverse and inclusive team, a newsroom does a grave disservice to this mission and mandate. It will inevitably miss out on critical angles, perspectives and voices. The deliberative process by which news stories are chosen, refined and edited will also suffer, minimized by the lack of diverse views around the table. This is true in urban environments where

newsrooms must account for diverse racial and ethnic perspectives. It is also true in overseas bureaus and international coverage, where local and indigenous perspectives must play an integral role in reporting the news of the day. News media can no longer expect to be seen as reflecting all of the relevant facts if it is not taking in a range of relevant voices.

The #MeToo movement in 2017, the George Floyd killing and societal reckoning that followed brought attention to the lack of both racial and gender diversity in news management, and made newsroom culture a public concern. It clearly established that newsrooms, which do not ensure the fair participation, physical safety and psychological security for all employees, will be unable to fulfill their public mandate. A culture of minimizing or abusing minority voices compromises an organization's public legitimacy; a news outlet cannot tackle the ills and injustices of a society while failing to account for its own. In addition to a public backlash, it risks calling into question the organization's effectiveness in making merit-based decisions around which stories get told and who gets the opportunity to tell them.

Diversity is both a current signal and progressive force within a newsroom's culture. Doing better by that metric is a sign that newsroom management is taking a dynamic, sustainable and responsible lead in resolving ongoing challenges.

This paper begins by outlining the ways that building more representative – and therefore more diverse – news organizations can support them in key challenge areas: improving public trust and increasing revenue. It then turns to specific strategies the news industry can employ to build the norms and systems needed to become truly diverse and inclusive, thereby ensuring that newsrooms, and the news they produce, comprehensively reflect the reality of the communities they serve.

1

How diversity builds trust in media

Changes are the natural consequence of the news industry meeting its own professed mission and ideals.



News organizations are currently facing a well-documented and deepening loss of public trust, undermining their ability to serve as effective watchdogs for society. For example, an Ipsos study of 27 countries found that over a five-year period from 2014-2019, public trust in newspapers and magazines dropped by an average of 16%;¹ in the United States and Great Britain – two countries traditionally seen as home to model independent media systems – public trust in print media dropped by 26% and 27%, respectively.² Likewise, trust in radio, television and online news outlets also dropped in nearly every country surveyed. In late 2020, a Gallup poll of American adults found that only 9% of them had a “great deal” of trust in the media to report the news “fully, accurately and fairly.”³ By contrast, 27% have “not very much” trust and 33% have “none at all” – meaning that fully 60% of US adults have little to no trust in the media.

The good news is that in 2018, 69% of Americans who said they had lost trust in media in recent years believed it could be restored,⁴ but the news industry clearly needs to work deliberately and transparently to do so. Research indicates that rebuilding public trust in media will involve changing practices that, to many journalists, may seem outside the bounds of journalistic concern. Yes, improving trust in news means demonstrating credibility in reporting every single day, but it also means being explicit

and transparent about the organization’s mission, financing, and reporting process and policies,⁵ many of which are either informal or currently kept from public view.

In light of this, building diverse newsrooms is even more important to establishing trust with communities of colour and other underrepresented groups, where “the challenge is often not about rebuilding trust, but about building a relationship from scratch.”⁶ Unless newsrooms are willing to cede editorial decision-making to written rubrics, creating a media landscape where the news fairly represents the lives, interests and concerns of everyone will require that newsrooms themselves are representative of everyone.

While it would result in a demographic shift within newsrooms, such changes are the natural consequence of the news industry meeting its own professed mission and ideals. “Although traditional conceptions of the press often include references to challenging powerful interests,” write scholars Sue Robinson and Kathleen Bartzen Culver, “We must recognize that ‘power’ includes the systems and structures through which reporters themselves might have been trained and are still rewarded.”⁷ In their recent research on coverage of race by White reporters, Robinson and Culver found that “what has served the press well in terms of

establishing itself as an authority to tell societal stories – objectivity, accountability, evidence – has not benefited communities of colour. In fact, these standards have been used as crutches for the status quo...[resulting in] a narrative of ignorance, stereotyping, racist framing and other problems in the mainstream, 'objective' press, which ignored key topics and people in coverage of reparations, affirmative action, and other racial issues.⁸

The marked failure of the journalism industry to live up to its own standards, particularly with respect to diversity, equity and inclusion, is evidenced in a 1979 pledge by the American Society of News Editors (ASNE), where the organization committed to matching the percentage of racial and ethnic minorities in the newsroom with that of the population at large by 2000. More than two decades past the target date, however, news organizations “have failed spectacularly at achieving that goal,” writes Gabriel Arana in the *Columbia Journalism Review*. Almost two decades beyond the original target date, “racial and ethnic minorities comprise almost 40 percent of the US population, yet they make up less than 17 percent of newsroom staff at print and online publications, and only 13 percent of newspaper leadership.”⁹ This

persistent and yawning gap between the newsroom population and the population at large not only erodes trust in media at a perceptual level, but it sharply limits the ability to cover crucial news events in an informed and even-handed way.

Even for local news organizations, which in the US enjoy vastly more trust than national outlets, trust levels lag behind other local institutions, such as libraries. This may be partly attributable to a correlation in exposure: the institutions awarded the most public trust – such as libraries and schools – are also those with which the public has the greatest level of direct interaction.¹⁰

Yet even when it comes to US local news, the sources contacted by journalists tend to be substantially richer, older, whiter and more educated than the community at large.¹¹ Media organizations seeking to improve public trust, then, also need to consider how to better reflect the communities they serve in terms of sourcing as well as staffing. By building organizations and processes that reflect the diversity of the population and genuinely include all of its members, news organizations have the opportunity to build and rebuild public trust.



2

Diverse businesses perform better

The most diverse companies are now more likely than ever to outperform non-diverse companies on profitability.



Across sectors and around the world, genuinely diverse companies and institutions see better performance in a range of financial indicators, including more consumer revenue, better brand perception and broader advertising opportunities. Recent analysis reaffirms the strong business case for gender diversity and ethnic and cultural diversity in corporate leadership, and shows that this business case continues to strengthen. The most diverse companies are now more likely than ever to outperform non-diverse companies on profitability.

For example, a 2019 analysis by McKinsey shows that companies in the top quartile of gender diversity on executive teams were also 25 percent more likely to experience above-average profitability than peer companies, up from 15 percent just five years earlier. Even more striking was the finding that an increase in gender diversity also increased the likelihood of outperformance, suggesting that every additional diverse hire actually improves companies' bottom lines. As a result, there is a substantial

performance differential – 48 percent – between the most and least gender-diverse companies. The case for ethnic and cultural diversity is equally compelling, as the most diverse 25 percent of companies outperformed the 25 percent least diverse companies by 36 percent in terms of profitability in 2019, according to McKinsey.¹²

Unsurprisingly, some of these benefits derive from improvements in employee satisfaction. For example, research by Deloitte indicates that employees feel their organization is committed to diversity and personally includes them, they report being better able to innovate, respond to changing customer needs and collaborate with their teams. Given the degree to which media organizations rely on the ability of all their staffers to effectively connect with sources, audiences and each other, there is little doubt that a more diverse newsroom can be more productive, and therefore a more profitable one.

3

Best practices from and for newsrooms

While creating a more equitable, inclusive, diverse news industry will require similar levels of commitment and change.



Even for organizations that recognize the benefits of diversity, the path to improvement is not always clear. Part of the challenge, says Francesca Scott, a broadcaster and diversity and inclusion officer with the European Broadcasting Union, is that “we tend to focus on success rather than failures, and the lessons learned from those failures. If you don’t know what hasn’t worked, you don’t know how you can improve it.”¹³

For less diverse newsrooms, the fear of public failure and backlash – if diversity and inclusion efforts do not produce the anticipated result – can lead to stagnation and defensiveness. According to Scott, however, often the real failure is not bringing a design thinking approach to outlining both the goals and the processes of diversity, equity and inclusion. “People think they know what others need,” says Scott. “But they’re not listening to what they *actually* need.”

In their research, for example, Robinson and Culver found that communities of colour wanted journalists to spend more time with them, to better understand

their context and lived experience. Journalists, by contrast, felt it was sufficient that they be “accessible” if members of those communities wanted to reach out. Rather than acting on what they had been told, White journalists instead insisted on their preferred method of “listening” to communities of colour.

Truly listening and responding to the concerns and interests of both newsroom employees and community members to achieve meaningful diversity, equity and inclusion can feel risky for organizations used to benchmarking their activities against those of peer institutions. Yet experience shows that bold moves in this area are often rewarded, while meek or follow-on efforts can backfire because they are perceived as insincere. Likewise, organizations with limited resources and hiring pools may resign themselves to the idea that improving diversity, equity and inclusion is beyond their reach. Realistically, however, there are opportunities at every level to improve diversity, equity and inclusion, no matter the size or situation of your organization.

To support the industry in identifying and taking advantage of these opportunities, the Global Future Council on Media, Entertainment and Sport has reviewed research and case studies, and also spoken directly with experts. Based on the findings, there are four major ways that news organizations can work towards improving diversity, equity and inclusion:

- Create a culture that recognizes, supports and advances diversity

- Ensure effective representation in news coverage
- Build diversity within the newsroom at all levels
- Engage with marginalized parts of your community

3.1 Culture change: be bold

The transition from analog to digital platforms demanded fundamental cultural changes in news organizations. While creating a more equitable, inclusive, diverse news industry will require similar levels of commitment and change, the accompanying benefits will be at least as significant: the world is growing more diverse, and it is not going back. For media institutions to remain relevant, newsroom culture must reflect and embody that diversity.

In this context, the term “culture” means the informal norms and traditions that exert a strong influence on an institution. These are often unspoken rules that govern how individuals in an organization will act. The importance of this cultural change was examined in the recently published book, *Did That Just Happen?! Beyond “Diversity” – Creating Sustainable and Inclusive Organizations* by Stephanie Pinder-Amaker and Lauren Wadsworth. They stress that “diversifying our workforces requires a two-part commitment: not only is it necessary to hire more employees with rising identities, but we must also transform the institutions themselves to make them inclusive and sustainable.”

Despite changes in both the profession and population, however, newsrooms continue to perpetuate a legacy culture that treats discussions of emotional health as “a sign of weakness or personal failure,”¹⁴ highlighting how historically White male traditions of mainstream journalism are still defining the newsroom experience for everyone.¹⁵ While taken for granted in many newsrooms, several journalists of colour have pointed out how this culture specifically disadvantaged them personally and professionally during the racial reckoning that began in the summer of 2020.

The strength of the implicit association between whiteness and objectivity has been made *extremely* explicit in several newsrooms around the US. In Pittsburgh, for example, *Post-Gazette* reporter Alexis Johnson was barred from covering protests after the murder of George Floyd following a sarcastic Tweet about property damage complaints.¹⁶ This illustrated the presumption

that Martin G. Reynolds, co-executive director of the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, highlighted in an interview with Wesley Lowery: “One issue that emerged last year during the [George Floyd] protests was some journalists of colour being pulled off stories...because there was the perception that they would be biased, which as I mentioned before is ridiculous, because by that logic, white people shouldn’t be able to cover anything.”¹⁷ Asian American journalists also faced discriminatory accusations of bias after a mass shooting in the US in Atlanta that targeted Asian spas. As the Asian American Journalists Association called out, these journalists were “uniquely positioned, sourced and skilled to cover the unfolding news.”¹⁸

At other times, the implicit whiteness of newsroom culture manifests not by who is allowed to report, but who is reported on. For example, following one of the deadliest hate crimes ever perpetrated against the Latinx community in the United States in 2019, newspapers’ front pages featured quotes from then-president Donald Trump, but few or no voices from the Latinx community. As Esmerelda Bermudez, a journalist for the LA Times, tweeted: “From Chicago to Houston to Boston to New York and Washington DC, how so many editors and writers managed to let the voices of Latinos fall off the news grid this fast is incomprehensible. Do better. Too many lives depend on it.”

Other journalists have written about the issue of white culture serving as the professional norm in newsrooms.

“Black journalists are hired and told, sometimes explicitly, that we can thrive only if we don’t dare to be our full selves. Frequently, when we speak out about coverage that is inaccurate or otherwise lacking, we are driven from newsrooms, which results in fewer experienced Black candidates in the room when it comes time to hire for senior editorships,” journalist Wesley Lowery wrote in a guest column for The New York Times.¹⁹

Asian American journalists report feeling invisible and unseen to the point of being called by names

of other Asian employees. This erasure of individual identity continues to make it difficult for Asian American journalists to distinguish themselves for opportunities or promotion and advancement.²⁰

The New York Times itself acknowledged the need for cultural change as the primary finding in its 2021 “Call to Action” report following the social reckoning around race sparked by George Floyd’s killing. “The report found that we have made progress in diversifying the company in recent years – and that work will continue,” the report wrote. “But its central finding is that The Times is too often a difficult place to work for people of all backgrounds, particularly colleagues of colour, and especially Black and Latino colleagues. It calls for us to transform our culture.”²¹ The company is starting with clearly defining

behavioural norms and expectations that determine employee success, as well as those that do not.

Culture change is an ambitious task for any organization, and it is too early to measure the results of the apologies, recommendations and pledges made by newsrooms in 2020. But change at such a fundamental level to an institution requires boldness. It requires moral clarity. The executive editor or news director who wants to do the right thing, but refrains from saying anything they are afraid to make a mistake, is as ineffective as the leader who does not care at all.

As The New York Times said in its report: “We must be bolder in making The Times more diverse, equitable and inclusive.”



3.2 Representation in news coverage

The new millennium brought a surge of research uncovering the gender disparity in news stories and sources. Research started making plain the truth; news media showed a disheartening dearth of diversity in its stories. Not just when it came to gender, but racial and ethnic diversity as well. Many newsrooms, and individual journalists, responded and through a series of trial and error found a collection of best practices to help themselves from contributing to negative stereotypes and better reflect the makeup of the world they report on.

Begin by counting

One recommended first step is to back track, and critically look at the work already produced through a source audit.²² A source audit allows newsrooms to know the true state of diversity in their stories by retroactively counting a few key demographic markers of those that appear in news stories, including age, race, gender, etc., and comparing them to the same demographic makers for a given area.

In the US, public media has led the way with conscious auditing of source diversity at public television and radio at KQED in California’s Bay Area. KQED, which finished an extensive source

audit²³ of their content in November 2020,²⁴ said of the necessity of the exercise: “Despite our best intentions, we won’t know who is in our stories until we count them.”

The station audited its sources across 16 programmes in television, radio, its website and podcasts using five measures: gender, race/ethnicity, age group, geographic location and profession.²⁵ Once a source audit has established the problem, it can be used as a roadmap. For instance, as a result of its source audit, KQED pledged to increase the sourcing of women as experts and to pursue greater representation of Asians/Asian American women and Black and Hispanic/Latinx men.

The KQED case study is a management-supported, organization-wide effort that sends a clear message to all employees. But grassroots efforts that start small and then expand across the whole organization have also been successful.

In the United Kingdom, the BBC’s 50:50 Project to achieve gender equity in its sourcing now spans 500 teams. Forty non-BBC news organizations also

joined the project, including The Financial Times, ABC Australia and YLP in Finland.²⁶ But it began as a grassroots effort on one show to achieve gender equity among sources. Ros Atkins launched the effort on his show in 2017 as a daily effort and shared source lists with other programmes, and created friendly competition with other programmes as they joined the project. In 2020, the BBC expanded the project to include ethnicity and disability.

The Atlantic writer, Ed Yong, who committed to gender balance in his stories in 2016, found the simple act of counting and tracking to be key.²⁷ He used a simple spreadsheet to count his sources, and found the practice so vital, he called it the “vaccine against self-delusion”. He announced to his twitter followers that after a year of counting his sources, he was able to raise the number of women who made an appearance from 25% to 50%.

“How do you even know who your sources are if you’re not tracking it?” said Doris Truong, director of training and diversity at the nonprofit Poynter, a US journalism institute. “If you’re not asking someone for their pronoun because you think you know it, how do you know it? If you don’t ask someone their race because you think you know it, how do you know it? If you just presume Kamala Harris is Black, you might be wrong.”

These examples make clear that you do not have to design and implement one “perfect” tracking process throughout the newsroom, or even that everyone in your organization needs to approach it the same way. While organizations like the BBC have found great success in supporting teams that do not know how to get started, “we don’t police them,” says deputy editor and 50:50 Project evangelist Angela Henshall. “You have to kind of trust that people are doing it well, because that’s why they engage in the project.”

Similarly, everyone should accept that it is not always possible to achieve proportional representation of sources and experts in every individual story. “What we don’t accept,” says Henshall, “is that you can’t balance that out over the month.” Making sure that tracking is a shared responsibility – even the most senior team members should be part of the rotation – and that teams are sharing their data with the organization at the end of the month are also key to ensuring accountability and success.

Truong from Poynter said management accountability is key to any broad effort to measure source diversity. “It only matters if managers hold them accountable because that manager is being held accountable to diversify their reporters’ sources.” Otherwise, she said, it is just another task reporters do not have time to do.

Take advantage of source databases

Also important is taking organizational steps to make finding diverse sources and freelancers easier. The largest organizations will want to start shared databases of diverse experts – an area where the BBC found, through a hack day dedicated to building its internal resource, even normally tight-lipped reporters were willing to share their resources. For smaller organizations, meanwhile, resources like the Online News Association’s Information Equity Database can help bridge the gap. For help getting the tracking process started, KQED has also shared a sample tracking script that reporters, producers, fact-checkers and copyeditors can all use to help compile data about their sources and stories.

Bring in the audience

In addition to source audits and databases, newsrooms can cue readers into inclusion efforts, which allows readers to both be a part of the process and hold newsrooms accountable.²⁸ The Jefferson City News Tribune sometimes uses a pull-out box to highlight the different perspectives included in story. This is one method that lets readers know an effort is being made to show diverse sources in stories.

Once inclusion efforts have been explained to readers, they can become a great resource and accountability partner in and of themselves.²⁹ One online news site, WITF, highlighted their push for diverse sources and voices in stories by adding the following to the top of some web stories: “WITF strives to provide nuanced perspectives from the most authoritative sources. We are on the lookout for biases or assumptions in our own work, and we invite you to point out any we may have missed. Contact us on our Trusting News page.” This simple disclaimer turned their inclusion efforts into a two way partnership with their readers and community.

Directly asking readers to participate in diversity efforts has the additional benefit of being an effective way for them to engage and build trust.³⁰ The Iowa Gazette took this more direct route by asking “Have a question about this story? Do you see something we missed? Send an email to...” at the end of a web story. These short, simple questions alert readers that the writer is striving for the best possible story and for the story itself to best serve the community. They help form trust by having the reader provide the journalist with the benefit of the doubt for the story. They also help the journalists by providing space to welcome new voices, sources, and perspectives for their story and future stories.



3.3 Diversifying the newsroom

Newsrooms must reflect the communities they serve. Journalists from underrepresented backgrounds must be empowered and work with the same agency as majority populations.

Recruiting for diversity depends heavily on the financial strength of newsrooms because newsrooms that are growing can hire journalists from underrepresented groups. Newsrooms that are not growing have few chances to make hires that will change the racial makeup of their workforce. This is the situation for most US newsrooms: only able to hire through attrition, or more likely cutting staff, due to market forces facing the news industry.

Whether or not they have the capacity to hire more diverse staff, all media organizations can take a good, hard look at their internal diversity, as well as their hiring, retention and promotion practices. Though few organizations have been bold enough to share their best practices, diverse journalists have long been articulating concrete ways that newsrooms can improve. In a recent OpenNews' column,³¹ for example, Emma Carew Grovum provided a list:

- Close any gender or racial pay disparities
- Match staff with a mentor (internally or externally)
- Make career coaching available
- Compensate staff who serve on diversity, equity and inclusion committees
- Offer your sponsorship to a junior staffer
- Remove known abusers from power and management

- Develop and promote internal talent of color to leadership and executive roles
- Offer mental health days separate from existing vacation or sick days
- Make trauma counseling available to staff, at a low cost or free

Organizations might also consider reassigning staff in order to develop expertise in diverse topics. “No one thinks twice as news outlets hire audience editors in the 21st century,” writes Isabel González Ramírez for IJNet. “It’s a position that has a specialized language, its own metrics and specific parameters...[but] to demand a gender editor is far less widely accepted, although both positions give the media outlet guidelines on how to behave within a reality that is not easily understood.”

Moreover, while diversity across all departments in an organization is important, it can be tempting for leadership to “game the system” in an attempt to sidestep unflattering realities. Diversity in leadership and editorial positions, in particular, is essential to moving the needle when it comes to improving coverage and reaping the benefits enjoyed by more representative organizations. Without this, diversity work is too often added to the responsibilities of those who are already marginalized by pay gaps and representation burnout. “In times of crisis, leadership turns to the most marginalized folks within an organization, invites their participation and wisdom, and then silences them,” write Stephanie Pinder-Amaker and Lauren Wadsworth in *Did That Just Happen?! Beyond “Diversity” – Creating Sustainable and Inclusive Organizations*.³² In other words, true diversity, equity and inclusion work must *include* the perspectives and experiences of diverse newsroom employees, but its success or failure rests with newsroom leaders.

3.4 Engaging the community

Newsrooms must engage with all communities within their markets, with strategies to seek out stories, voices and feedback from communities that have been traditionally underserved. This engagement must be long term and must begin with listening.

Media organizations can also improve the accuracy and representativeness of their work by analysing their coverage of communities more broadly. For example, are members of certain communities showing up disproportionately in particular kinds of stories? Are they predominantly characterized in certain ways? Are women consistently portrayed

as victims, for example, or are people of color frequently depicted as disenfranchised?

Because trust in media often correlates with whether and how people see themselves represented in it, media organizations can find ways to improve by listening to and learning from the communities they cover in order to identify the many stories they may be missing.

Strategies for “engaged journalism” abound; one interesting toolkit can be found with the Listening Post Collective’s Playbook. Every strategy begins with listening.

Conclusion

As the foregoing sections have highlighted, improving diversity, equity and inclusion in the newsroom is not only a profitable, but an achievable goal. Advancing this goal also promises to turn around the devastating decline in trust for the news media, which has deepened in recent years.

The report makes clear specific measures that newsrooms should take to achieve this goal; boldly look for culture change that can be embedded throughout the organization, ensuring representation in news media stories, first by identifying the problem with counting, using source databases and then bringing in readership for accountability, and finally, by diversifying newsrooms themselves.

Finally, White newsroom employees and managers in particular need to start approaching diversity, equity and inclusion as they would any other newsroom assignment: with research, reporting and writing. In many cases, this will mean flipping the script and asking questions that make the journalist – rather than a source -- uncomfortable, and learning to sit with that discomfort. As Doris Truong wrote in June, 2020, White journalists need to engage with diversity issues not just when they seem pressing, but they need to do the work even when the crisis seems to have passed.



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