



Dizzying Dizzying change and diversity diversity

A recent report described the US First Amendment rights of freedom of speech, religion, press, assembly and petition, as “under attack”. Only 11% of Americans surveyed identified press freedom as a First Amendment right. Loren Ghiglione says press freedom is directly related to newsroom diversity. Only when people feel represented will they see the value in upholding freedom of the media.

Professor Loren Ghiglione is the director of Emory University's new journalism programme in Atlanta. From 1969 to 1995 he owned and operated Worcester County Newspapers, a group of 24 community daily and weekly newspapers. During those years he wrote or edited seven journalism books, including “The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press”. During his term as president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors he inaugurated the first study of US gay and lesbian journalists, established a nation-wide network of 16 annual diversity job fairs and created a pioneering committee on people with disabilities. He is currently studying the US newspaper industry's diversity efforts.

Though not as dizzying as change in South Africa, change characterises the America that our newsrooms hope to reflect.

I would like to outline 10 major diversity issues in American newsrooms.

1 A survey of newspaper editors shows that a variety of issues needs to be addressed. Booker Izell, vice-president of community affairs and work force diversity at the Atlanta Journal Constitution, says the three topics most discussed in employee diversity workshops are race and ethnicity, gender discrimination and hostility towards gays and lesbians. I anticipate a broadened definition of diversity for the 21st century.

2 Of US editors I queried, a majority said discrimination against people of colour (usually defined as four groups: so-called Asian Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans and African Americans) should take priority. Discrimination against US blacks, with their history of slavery and segregation, appears to be of more concern than bias against other people of colour.

The mid-1960s brought sweeping change with the civil rights movement. In 1978 the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) set a goal of achieving newsroom diversity roughly equivalent to that of the nation's population by the year 2000. While newsroom diversity has risen with glacial speed to an 11% percent representation of people of colour, the US population is now 25 to 27% people of colour and expected to reach 30% by the year 2000, and 50% by the middle of the next century.

3 Since ASNE's Year 2000 Goal for newsroom diversity will not be met by 2000, what should be the news industry's diversity goal for the early 21st century? The current emphasis on the national population of the four categories of so-called minorities should give way to a more detailed, sophisticated examination of each newspaper's community, staff and the staff's knowledge of, and sensitivity to, that community.

4 At the same time, the press cannot back away from addressing the dominant diversity issue – discrimination against blacks, especially at management levels. Too few people of colour – 8.9% – hold supervising editorships.

5 Whatever group the newspaper industry chooses to target in the 21st century, the industry should continue putting forward a specific numerical goal. A fundamental shift in priorities also has to occur. The Constitution of the South African National Editors' Forum wisely calls for not only a change in newsrooms but a “transformation of culture within news organisations as a whole”.

6 School children and college students need to be targeted especially. Some 35% of student internships go to students of colour and US editors' conferences invite college students to produce daily conference papers. Newspeople also stress supporting middle and high school news media; training and encouraging

the craft of writing when students are deciding what career to pursue.

7 Whatever efforts are made, people worry that diversity committees and formal structures are not enough. Gary Pomerantz writes from his experience on the Atlanta Journal Constitution that newspeople see themselves, inaccurately, as “more open-minded, advanced, liberal” with respect to race, but what he sees in the newsroom is “no tangible improvement in the 10 years that I've been at the paper”. People of colour make up about 20% of staff, but no one is “really trying to work at newsroom integration”.

8 Much research needs to be done about diversity issues. Possibilities include:

- Coverage – overt racism and other sins of omission. Carolyn Martindale's 1994 study of 60 years of coverage by The New York Times says most people of colour, except blacks, “have been nearly invisible”. All people of colour have been portrayed as problem people “outside the mainstream of US society”.
- Job fairs – the ASNE's regional minority group job fairs have opened the doors to internships and entry-level jobs for many minority journalists still in the business.
- Higher education – faculty diversity is still an issue. Females and students who are not non-Hispanic whites have few gender or ethnic role models as teachers.
- Newsroom culture: Too many newsrooms alternate between hostility and paranoia about minorities. Whites, male and female, do feel threatened.

9 The provincialism of US media is a diversity-related issue. In 1994, 357 news and broadcast executives surveyed by Associated Press did not list South Africa's democratic elections in their top 10 stories of the year. Robert Mong of the Dallas Morning News suggests the US media stop referring to people of colour, a majority of the world population, as minorities. “We live in a world community and our phrasing should reflect that reality.”

10 In chasing “improved demographics” and “upscale readers” the media still need to serve the public, encourage diversity and unite the press and public.

We need people to recognise the press' role as the link between them and their institutions.

Will diversity prevent politicians and pooh-bahs* from pressuring journalists for fawning, fan-club coverage? Probably not. Nevertheless, we need to achieve a diversity that may not only improve coverage but also help encourage the public and its representatives to increase their support for freedom of press, not freedom of repress.

* Pooh-bah: “pompous, self-important official holding several offices at once and fulfilling none of them.” From the Mikado.

The three top topics are: race and ethnicity; gender discrimination and hostility to gays.