



How Long Must We Wait?

The Fight for Racial and Ethnic
Equality in the American
News Media

**By Juan González and
Joseph Torres**



The research for this article was conducted over the past two years by Juan González while he served as President of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) and by Joseph Torres, NAHJ's Deputy Director for Policy and Programs. The opinions expressed here, however, do not necessarily reflect official NAHJ nor UNITY: Journalists of Color policy, nor was this publication commissioned or funded by either group. It is our intention to produce in the near future a more extensive version of this essay for public consumption, thus we welcome any comments or criticism from readers.

Useful Resources

The following Web sites refer to organizations working on media reform.

American Federation of Television and Radio Artists
<http://www.aftra.org/aftra/aftra.htm>

Center for Digital Democracy
<http://www.democraticmedia.org/>

Common Cause
<http://www.commoncause.org/>

Communications Workers of America
<http://www.cwa-union.org/>

Consumers Union
www.consumersunion.org

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting
www.fair.org

Future of Music Coalition
<http://www.futureofmusic.org/>

Independent Spanish Broadcasters Association
<http://www.spanishbroadcasters.com/>

Media Access Project
<http://www.mediaaccess.org/>

Minority Media & Telecommunications Council
<http://www.mmtconline.org/>

National Association of Black Owned Broadcasters
www.nabob.org

Newspaper Guild
<http://www.newsguild.org/>

Prometheus Radio Project
<http://www.prometheusradio.org/>

Reclaim the Media
<http://www.reclaimthemedias.org/>

The Benton Foundation
<http://www.benton.org/>



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HOW LONG MUST WE WAIT?

Introduction

These words are addressed to the thousands of journalists of color and news executives from around the United States who will gather in Washington, D.C., from Aug. 4 to 8, 2004, for UNITY 2004, the largest convention of journalists in American history.

It is our hope that this essay will provide a fresh perspective and spark a much-needed debate on the status and the future of newsroom diversity. The mere existence and growth of UNITY and the other minority journalism associations is a testament to the disturbing reality that the news media industry, which has so often exposed racial and ethnic inequities in American society, has so far failed to fully remedy such inequities within its own ranks, whether it be in newsroom staffing or in news coverage of racial and ethnic minorities.

For close to 40 years, the nation's major news organizations have repeatedly espoused the goal of greater ethnic, racial and gender diversity in their newsrooms. Individual companies, foundations and industry groups have devised and implemented numerous programs aimed at bringing more minorities into journalism and training them for management ranks. Many white executives have expended considerable personal effort toward that goal. But given the enormous expenditures of money and energy, the pace of progress has been woefully slow, especially when compared to the phenomenal growth of the minority population.

Various reasons have been advanced for that slow progress. Among those given: an insufficient supply of trained and qualified minority journalists graduating from universities; market pressures from intense competition, which periodically lead to newsroom cutbacks; too many minority journalists leaving the industry; an unstable employment landscape due to rapid technological change; public and court opposition to affirmative action policies that were fashioned beginning in the late-1960s.

Legacy of Exclusion

In our view, none of these explanations adequately explains the industry's poor record over many generations in fully integrating the nation's newsrooms. None, for example, draws important lessons from the news media's own history – the rarely-examined story of wholesale exclusion of people of color from newspapers, radio and television stations until only a few decades ago, and how the legacy of that exclusion is still felt today. None identifies the market forces within our industry that continue to pose obstacles to full newsroom diversity and improved coverage of minority communities. None touches on the pressing need for the news media – now such a powerful institution in their own right – to be held more accountable to the public that they serve.

To deepen our understanding of the root causes of the industry's failings on diversity, we have spent considerable time this past year unearthing a more complete historical picture of the long struggle by minority communities and journalists of color to win acceptance by American journalism, to participate in writing their own first drafts of history, to achieve full integration of newsrooms and to ensure more balanced coverage. We have also examined the practices of news organizations and those government policies that either accelerated or thwarted such efforts.

In the process, we reached several conclusions, some of which are bound to stir controversy and debate. We welcome that debate. We felt, however, that the UNITY convention was so historic an event that it was the only proper venue to release an article of this type, even if it proved to be incomplete or flawed.

That said, the key conclusions that we attempt to explain and document in this article are as follows:

1. *There have always been qualified people of color in this country who sought to work as journalists; but, for nearly 150 years (from the 1830s to the end of 1970s), the news industry practiced wholesale exclusion of minorities from its ranks.*

2. That historic exclusion assured that the press would routinely misrepresent, distort and stereotype the role played by people of color in U.S. society; it reinforced racist views in the white European immigrant population; and it led to the creation of a *separate but unequal* “ethnic or minority press.”
 3. *The American news media have never operated in a purely free market environment.* They have always depended on the government and the taxpayers through direct public subsidies for their operations. Such subsidies include discounted postal rates for newspapers and magazines; federally-funded research into new communications technologies such as radio, satellite broadcasting and the Internet; and government protection or regulation, such as copyright and anti-trust laws, and the creation of the Federal Communications Commission to allocate and oversee use of the public airwaves. In other words, Americans subsidized the rise of various mass communications technologies with their taxes, but people of color have never enjoyed equal benefit from the press services those new media and companies were required to deliver in exchange for that government assistance.
 4. *If the trend of media ownership concentration continues, where a handful of giant firms run almost exclusively by white investors and managers dominate the market, **minority media ownership will virtually disappear in the United States, and we will soon face a de facto apartheid media system.*** Given that people of color currently comprise more than 30% of the U.S. population and will become a majority by 2050, any media system where a white minority controls virtually all major news production and dissemination would be inherently undemocratic. Thus, programs that merely seek to train, employ and promote minority journalists will not, by themselves, fully remedy past discrimination. *Only government policies that aggressively promote greater racial and ethnic diversity in media ownership can assure the full range of viewpoint in news coverage that citizens of a multi-ethnic and multi-racial state like the United States will need in the future.*
 5. Journalists of color, through our professional associations, must become the primary proponents within our industry not only for greater newsroom diversity and for better quality of news coverage, **but also for more diverse ownership of the media companies themselves**, because ownership is the ultimate form of job advancement for minority media professionals.
 6. The quest by journalists of color for full racial and ethnic integration of the nation’s newsrooms and for fairer news coverage of communities of color has become, whether we realize it or not, part of a vast and growing new movement within U.S. society for greater democratic accountability of news media companies to the public. This is essential for the very preservation of democratic discourse.
- Even within our own ranks, some have forgotten that all of our professional associations of minority journalists were born as by-products of the civil rights movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. The handful of minority journalists who entered all-white newsrooms during that era faced both overt and subconscious hostility from white colleagues.
- Recruited largely as a response by the industry to the civil rights movement and inner-city riots, minority journalists quickly realized they could only survive that hostility by pulling together into organizations that provided mutual support. They never forgot they were professional journalists, but they also realized that in some strange way, without their asking for it, *they had become the civil rights movement within the news media.*
- Less than two years ago, a new and powerful movement for media reform was born. It already

counts millions of ordinary Americans from across the political spectrum in its ranks, and it may yet prove to be as important to our current era as the civil rights movement was in the 1960s and 1970s. This new movement was initially sparked by the attempt of the Federal Communications Commission to drastically deregulate broadcast ownership rules. The members of this movement are deeply disturbed by the concentration of ownership in the media. They are frustrated and angry over the endless hyper-commercialism, infotainment and obsession with violence and sex that dominate our contemporary media. They worry that a handful of the largest communications companies today exercise enormous control over the production and dissemination of news and entertainment, yet those companies display too little accountability to the public. They fear that such concentrated power over the press and public discourse by these conglomerates is eliminating local voices, driving out diversity of viewpoints and undermining our democracy.

“In our opinion, for any journalist *but for journalists of color in particular*, it would be a dereliction of duty to remain silent while our media system effectively eliminates the chance for people of color to own and direct their own news media companies or for divergent and dissident views to flourish.”

Rethinking Old Beliefs

At the same time, there are some in our industry who claim that our associations of minority journalists – that professional journalism organizations in general – have no business taking stands on major market trends within the media or on private and public media policy. But too often such trends and policies directly affect our jobs, our ability to practice good journalism and, most importantly, they directly affect our responsibilities to the public as members of a free press.

With the growth of media conglomerates, hyper-commercialism and trends like convergence and synergy, many executives in our media companies have been quick to suggest that the old wall between the news and business sides of journalism is no longer as

relevant. Well, perhaps it is time as well, given this new media climate, for journalists to rethink old beliefs about the limits of our permissible activity as citizens.

In October 2003, the Ford Foundation and the Aspen Institute sponsored a forum in Wye, Maryland, on the topic “The Role of Journalists as Activists in Journalism Business and Policy.” Some two dozen

journalists, veteran media lawyers and scholars were invited to participate, including several presidents of the UNITY alliance organizations. The entire group concluded in the final report of the forum that “the concentrated might of media conglomerates, a sameness in social points of view, the preponderance of ‘entertainment’ over ‘news’ – coupled with governmental restrictions on access to information in the name of homeland security – are pushing journalism toward a precipice.”

The participants agreed, furthermore, that “the gravity of the forces aligning against journalists

require them to rethink their traditional opposition to activism,” especially when it comes to issues like freedom of the press, access to government records, or media business policy.¹

We would add, as well, the need for greater advocacy when it comes to diversity in the news media.

Dereliction of Duty

In our opinion, for any journalist *but for journalists of color in particular*, it would be a dereliction of duty to remain silent while our media system effectively eliminates the chance for people of color to own and direct their own news media companies or for divergent and dissident views to flourish.

Unfortunately, too many of us have been struggling so hard to break into the industry, to get promoted, to avoid the latest round of company staff cuts, or so busy chasing the latest big story that we

rarely get a chance to sit back and examine our social role and our responsibility as journalists.

There is no place more important to discuss and debate that big picture than right here at UNITY. After all, demographic trends all indicate *that people of color are the future of the United States. In the same way, journalists of color are the future of the news media.* We believe it is time for the broad membership of our UNITY alliance, not just its leaders, to begin to define what kind of future we want in this industry. If we do not, others will decide that future for us.

Newspapers and People of Color: Setting the Historical Record Straight

We often hear the claim that news media executives “can not find enough qualified minority journalists.” Yet the practice of journalism among communities of color in the United States is almost as old as among the original European settlers.

So why such a scarcity in our modern newsrooms?

Any serious effort to understand the problem must begin by examining the American media’s long and largely unreported history of racial discrimination. For nearly a hundred and fifty years – from the early 1800s to the late 1970s – journalists of color were routinely excluded from U.S. newspapers and relegated to working in a separate but unequal “ethnic” or “minority” press.

Publick Occurrences, Both Foreign and Domestic is often celebrated by journalism historians as the first newspaper in the British colonies of North America. Published in Boston by Benjamin Harris in 1690, the paper was closed after one issue by the governor of Massachusetts for criticizing his administration. It was not until 1704 with the birth of the *Boston News-*

Letter that a newspaper began to publish with any regularity in the thirteen colonies.

In 1541, the first news report in the Americas was printed in Mexico City about an earthquake and a storm that destroyed Guatemala City. In 1693, Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora, a scientist at the University of Mexico, founded *Mercurio Volante*, the first news periodical, while Mexico’s first regular newspaper *La Gaceta de México* (the Mexico Gazette) was launched in 1722.

Less than a century later, newspapers spread to the Northern Spanish territories to what is now U.S. soil, with *El Misisipi* (1808) and *El Mensajero Luisianés* (1809) in New Orleans. *La Gaceta de Texas* and *El Mexicano* were both published in Nacogdoches, Texas, in 1813. *El Telégrafo* de las Floridas was founded in 1817, and Felix Varela, a Catholic priest and Cuban exile, founded *El Habanero* in Philadelphia in 1824. Two papers flourished in New York City around the same time, *El Mercurio de Nueva York* (1829-1830) and *El Mensajero Semanal de Nueva York* (1828-1831).²

Our nation’s early newspapers, whether in English or Spanish, were hardly models of objectivity and balance. “Throughout the fifty years after 1776 newspapers were usually outrageously partisan... (and) exacerbated all the lines of cleavage in the early Republic,” notes journalism historian David Paul Nord.³ The *New York Evening Post* was typical of the era. Founded by Alexander Hamilton in 1801, it immediately became a mouthpiece for Hamilton’s Federalist Party aligned against President Thomas Jefferson.

By 1835 there were seven daily newspapers in New York City with an average circulation of only 1,700 copies. The largest, the *Courier and Enquirer*, sold a mere 4,000. They principally served the merchant and political elite since each paper cost six penny and one had to buy a year’s subscription in advance – a sum only affordable to the upper classes.⁴

Rise of The Penny Press

That fledgling press depended almost exclusively on the federal government's postal system for its survival and profitability. Congress created the system in 1792; and, within two years, delivery of newspapers accounted for 70% of postal traffic, a figure that rose to 90% by 1834. Those deliveries, moreover, were performed at highly discounted rates. Federal newspaper subsidies became so large in the early 19th century, notes media historian and critic Robert McChesney, that for a while they represented the largest single expenditure in the national budget.⁵

Then along came a 22-year-old journeyman printer named Benjamin Day who sparked a communications revolution in 1833 when he launched the *New York Sun*, the nation's first penny newspaper. Day's paper was not only far cheaper than those of his competitors, he hired young newsboys to hawk single copies each day on the streets, making it the first publication accessible to the city's artisans and workers. The *Sun* was also dramatically different in style. It pioneered crime reporting, crisply written feature stories and coverage of sensational scandals. Within three years its circulation had mushroomed to 20,000, the largest in the world. Other publishers quickly imitated Day's approach, the most successful being James Gordon Bennett and his *New York Herald*. Thus, the modern mass circulation urban newspaper was born.⁶

Racism in Newspapers

New York's free blacks, who comprised 10 percent of the city's population at the time, also felt the impact of the nation's newspaper renaissance, but blacks remained excluded from any mainstream publications. White publishers and journalists saw little need to report on African Americans except for stories about the continuing national conflict over slavery. And they certainly did not hire any blacks to write for them, except for those rare examples like William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, which often featured black leaders like

Frederick Douglass in its pages. When the major newspapers did report on racial and ethnic minorities, the coverage too often reflected the prevailing notions of manifest destiny and racial superiority that allowed white Americans, even recently arrived immigrants, to justify slavery and territorial conquest over Native Americans and Latin Americans.

Examples abound of such racism in newspaper accounts, even from publishers and journalists who otherwise opposed African slavery. Take, for example, Horace Greeley, legendary publisher of the *New York Tribune* and a staunch abolitionist. In his accounts of a trip through the West in 1859, Greeley wrote: "I have learned to appreciate better than hitherto...the dislike, aversion, contempt, wherewith Indians are usually regarded by their white neighbors, and have been since the days of the Puritans. [One] needs but little familiarity with the actual, palpable aborigines to convince any one that the poetic Indian – the Indian of Cooper and Longfellow – is only visible to the poet's eye."⁷

Media historian John Coward, in a study of coverage of Native Americans, has argued that newspapers were "a significant force in the creation and promotion of a powerful set of Indian representations that dominated the nineteenth-century imagination and endure in popular culture today."⁸ American newspaper accounts about Indians were "more threatening and violent than actual Indians," Coward notes, thus "producing 'deviant' native identities that served the needs of a land-hungry nation..." Stories about peaceful Indians or the noble savage that showed concern about their expulsion from their lands, were "much less common."⁹

Similarly, press coverage of Mexicans too often focused on violence and banditry or portrayed them as lazy, shiftless and less than human.

A Corpus Christi correspondent for the *Galveston Weekly News*, for example, wrote this chilling account of a lynching of Mexicans in 1855: "Eleven Mexicans, it is stated, have been found along the Nueces, in *hung up* condition. Better so than to be left on the ground for the howling lobos to tear in pieces, and then howl the more for the red peppers that burn his insides raw."¹⁰

Many West coast newspapers in the 19th century often published racist views of Chinese. An 1878 account in the *San Francisco Chronicle* on the growth of that city's Chinatown, for example, talked of "how the Mongolian octopus developed and fastened its tentacles upon the city." And a study of newspaper articles published in Astoria, Oregon found statements like: "It is just as natural for a Chinaman to steal as it is for a sponge to absorb water," and "They are alien in spirit, thought, language, tradition, education, religion, morality and humanity."¹¹

Rise of Ethnic Press

From the very beginning, U.S. newspapers too often misrepresented and distorted the role of Native Americans, African Americans, Latinos and, later, Asians. Given that in the early 19th century there were few full-time professional reporters, with newspaper publishers mostly collecting and printing dispatches from unpaid correspondents, the failure of those publishers to print articles by people of color is especially glaring.

Communities of color thus had to resort to the small individual African-American, Native-American and Hispanic presses, which emerged on separate but parallel tracks with the major media and were never regarded as legitimate parts of American journalism. We have already mentioned the early Latino press, but similar patterns developed among other communities of color. In 1827, six years before Day launched his *New York Sun*, New Yorkers John Russwurm and the Rev. Samuel Cornish founded the nation's first black-owned newspaper. They called it *Freedom's Journal*, and in its inaugural issue they addressed the plight of blacks and the press:

"We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us.... From the press and the pulpit we have suffered much by being incorrectly represented."¹²

Scores of black-owned newspapers were soon operating throughout the country, among them the *Weekly Advocate* and the *Colored American* in New York City; *The National Reformer* (1838-39) in Philadelphia; *The Mystery* (1843-47) in Pittsburgh;

The Alien American (1852-60) in Cleveland, Ohio; and the famous *North Star* (1847-50), edited by both Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany, in Rochester, New York. Mary Ann Shadd Cary, the nation's first black female journalist, published an article in *The North Star* in 1849, then went on to found her own newspaper *The Provincial Freeman* in Canada in 1859.¹³ All of those newspapers opposed slavery. They differed editorially only on the tactics they favored for black emancipation, whether through emigration to Africa or Canada, peaceful advocacy or open rebellion.

As for Native Americans, they did not even have a written language at the beginning of the century, but they soon harnessed the power of the printed word. *The Cherokee Phoenix*, the first Native American newspaper in North America, was founded by Elias Boudinot in 1828 in northwest Georgia. Like *El Misisipi*, it was a bilingual newspaper printed in English and Cherokee. The birth of a Native American press was the product of one of history's most extraordinary literacy campaigns. That campaign owes its origins to Sequoyah, a disabled Cherokee veteran of the War of 1812, who spent years developing an 86-character syllabary for the Cherokee language. After perfecting it in 1821, he persuaded Cherokee leaders throughout the South to officially adopt it. Virtually all Cherokees, young and old, men and women, had mastered the alphabet and learned to read by 1828. An astonished contemporary of Sequoyah who observed the literacy movement wrote: "That the mass of people, without schools or books, should by mutual assistance, without extraneous impulse or aid, acquire the art of reading, and that in a character wholly original, is, I believe, a phenomenon unexampled in modern times."¹⁴ Once the Cherokee were forcibly removed from the southeast to the Oklahoma territory, they founded the *Cherokee Advocate*, which published weekly from 1844 to 1906. Other tribes began newspapers of their own as well.

The Rise of the Telegraph

By mid-century, an invention that greatly aided

the spread of newspapers proved to have a devastating effect on how those papers covered Indians and Mexicans in the West. Samuel Morse, the inventor of the telegraph, convinced the federal government to award him a \$30,000 contract in 1843 to construct the first telegraph line between New York and Washington. Morse's dream that his invention would supplant the nation's postal system was never realized. But once the war against Mexico broke out, eastern publishers and businessmen recognized the telegraph's potential for boosting news delivery and commerce. A vast network of electric telegraph lines sprang up almost overnight.¹⁵

The spread of the telegraph, along with the birth of the Associated Press in 1846, gradually made it possible for the penny press of the East to secure news reports from a growing coterie of correspondents all over the western frontier and the California gold fields. But the need for brevity in those telegraphed dispatches also meant that many stories that dealt with frontier conflicts between white settlers and Native Americans, Mexicans or California's new Chinese immigrants lacked much context or nuance. All too often, they were one-sided accounts of Indians slaughtering white settlers.

Even out West, however, the ethnic press began to flourish. San Francisco's *Golden Hills News* (1854) was the first of some 26 Chinese newspapers published in eight American cities during the 19th century. One of them, Sacramento's *Chinese Daily News* founded in 1856, was actually the first Chinese daily published anywhere in the world! By the turn of the century, Chinese newspapers in the U.S. had largely turned into organs of various homeland Chinese political parties or exile groups. They included the *China Daily News*, *China Daily Times* and *Young China Morning Post*.

Other Asian immigrants had a somewhat later start in journalism than the Chinese. The first Japanese-language newspaper, *Shinonome (Dawn)*, was published in 1886 in San Francisco, as was the first Korean-language newspaper, *Shinhan Minbo (New Korea)* in 1905. By the 1920s, there were Japanese papers in Los Angeles, Seattle, Salt Lake City and Denver, and Hawaii alone boasted ten

separate papers.¹⁶

Given this long tradition of reporting and publishing by people of color, it is apparent that there existed a considerable pool of minority journalists even during the 19th century -- if only American newspapers had cared to look for them. But recruitment of minorities was almost non-existent before the 20th century. Among the few exceptions were Miguel Teurbe Tolón, a poet and publisher in his homeland of Cuba, who worked in the 1850s as Latin American affairs editor for the *New York Herald*, and Thomas Morris Chester, a former editor of the *Star of Liberia*, who was the first and only African-American correspondent for a major American daily during the 1800s. He wrote for the *Philadelphia Press* during the final years of the Civil War.¹⁷

Even as late as the 1960s, people of color were exotic rarities at major daily newspapers. It was not until 1920 that the first African American journalist, Lester Walton, was hired for a full-time job at a white newspaper, the *New York Post*. Walton later worked for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and in 1935 President Franklin Roosevelt appointed him U.S. envoy to Liberia. The most famous black journalist of the first half of the century was Ted Poston, who worked for many years as a correspondent and columnist on Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and later at Dorothy Schiff's *New York Post*. When the legendary Heywood Broun began organizing the Newspaper Guild in the 1930s, Poston, who was then a reporter at the *Amsterdam News*, became one of the Guild's earliest leaders. In 1935, he and Broun directed a Guild strike at the Harlem newspaper that became a celebrated battle throughout the city.¹⁸

It would take the civil rights movement and the urban riots of the 1960s to finally force the American news media to launch serious efforts to integrate their newsrooms. By then, people of color had been practicing journalism in the United States for nearly 150 years.

Broadcasting's Hidden History of Racial Discrimination

The rise of radio during the early years of the 20th century provided a fresh chance for our nation to fashion a more inclusive and diverse media system.

Unfortunately, that chance was quickly squandered.

African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics and Asians were shut out of access to radio licenses until the late 1940s, and they were largely denied the chance to work as journalists, first in radio and then in television, until the late 1960s. Many broadcast companies openly practiced discrimination, yet the Federal Communications Commission in those early years ignored or refused to address such practices by its licensees. Thus whites who went into broadcasting enjoyed more than a generation's head start over people of color.

Marconi first proved the feasibility of radio transmission in 1895, but until World War I there were few commercially viable uses for the new technology except for communication between ships at sea. Those early years of radio were hauntingly similar to the birth of the Internet, as thousands of amateurs, captivated by the revolutionary new medium, threw themselves into broadcasting. A 1910 issue of *Electrical World* estimated that in Chicago alone there were "not less than 800 amateur radio stations," compared to only three commercial stations.¹⁹

Just as with the modern newspaper renaissance of the 1830s, African-Americans were involved in radio almost from the start. An all-black army unit in Richmond, Virginia, the 325th Signal Battalion, received wireless telegraphy training during World War I.²⁰ At least two ham radio clubs were established by young blacks before the 1920s, one in New York City and one in Baltimore, according to media historian Donna Halper, and Howard University was teaching courses in radio engineering as early as

1918. Black performers were also among the first to be heard on amateur radio.

"One early experimental station, run by a white amateur named Victor H. Laughter, sent out a concert by the 'Father of the Blues,' W.C. Handy, in Memphis in November of 1914," Halper notes.²¹

The first World War, however, brought a sudden end to the amateur radio movement, when the federal government seized control of the radio industry and shut down all private broadcasting. Army-funded research during the war greatly enhanced radio technology. Once the war ended, the Navy moved to prevent foreign domination of the radio industry by forcing the American division of Marconi, then the largest private owner of radio stations in the country, to sell its holdings to the General Electric Co. The new company, patriotically called the Radio Corporation of America, was thus born with the help of federal war research and direct Navy backing.²²

Unlike newspapers, however, broadcasting quickly became a government-regulated industry after President Coolidge signed the Radio Act of 1927, which created the Federal Radio Commission to license broadcasters and assign use of specific frequencies. The new act required station owners to operate in the "public interest, convenience or necessity" in return for their free licenses to use the limited public airwaves.

Radio and The Public Interest

As a result of the radio act, public interest obligations of broadcasters became enshrined as a key aspect of federal media policy. Over the years, there were numerous attempts by industry groups to remove or weaken those requirements, but Congress and the courts have repeatedly upheld them.

Soon after its creation, however, the Federal Radio Commission knocked off the air 150 of the 732 stations then in existence – many of them educational stations – and forced other stations to less desirable frequencies.²³

The larger, more influential stations quickly snatched up the vacant frequencies. From 1927 to 1934 – (the year the Federal Communications

Commission was founded), the number of network affiliated stations soared from 50 to 300.²⁴ CBS and NBC emerged as the dominant companies in the industry. During that time, not a single minority received a radio license. Some English-language stations, on the other hand, did begin selling airtime during off-hours to brokers of Spanish-language programs.²⁵ Radio pioneer Pedro Gonzalez, for instance, began producing Spanish-language programming in 1924, and by 1941 there was an estimated 264 hours of Spanish programming a week in stations around the country.²⁶

Despite occasionally leasing off-hour slots to Spanish and other foreign-language producers, the radio networks created virtually no programming geared to people of color in those early years. Too often they produced shows that reinforced racist and stereotypical images of blacks and other minorities – a practice that turned out to be extremely profitable. *Amos n' Andy*, for example, was one of the most popular shows in radio history and played a significant role in the rise of commercial radio. Born on the NBC Blue Network on Aug. 29, 1929, the show featured Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, two white men playing the title characters. The program depicted the characters of Amos and Andy as two lazy, timid, simple-minded buffoons from Harlem. The show attracted up to half of the country's radio audience during the Depression – more than 40 million people a week. Like all success stories, it spawned a host of imitators on local radio stations.²⁷

But while white listeners howled at the antics of Amos and Andy, many in the black community were outraged. *The Pittsburgh Courier*, a black-owned newspaper, collected 740,000 signatures in a campaign calling on the FRC to remove the show. The commission rejected the petition and even refused the NAACP's request for a public hearing on the matter. At the same time, the networks rarely produced programs that explored the nation's racial inequality, mostly for fear of offending white audiences or advertisers. Even their public affairs programs rarely discussed issues such as segregation.²⁸

The 1940s produced new attempts to strengthen the public interest obligations of broadcast companies though here again minorities did not immediately benefit from those efforts. In 1943, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the landmark *Associated Press* case that the First Amendment “rests on the assumption that the widest possible dissemination of information from diverse and antagonistic sources is essential to the welfare of the public.”²⁹ While not directly involving the radio industry, the court's opinion in that case would become a central argument three decades later for increasing minority ownership in broadcasting.

The year following the *Associated Press* decision, Henry Luce, founder of the Time-Life empire, created the Hutchins Commission, a blue-ribbon panel of leading American intellectuals, to examine the role of a free press in a democratic society. The Hutchins Commission report, issued in 1947, called on the press to adopt five ethical standards that it defined as hallmarks of good journalism. One of those standards urged the news media to project “a representative picture of the constituent groups in the society.”³⁰

Meanwhile, the FCC released its first public service guidelines for broadcasters in 1946, known as the *Blue Book*. In it, the agency noted numerous cases where station owners had received licenses after promising to establish educational or public service programs for their local communities. Many of those stations, the FCC noted, had ignored their promises, had turned to virtually all network-generated entertainment formats and were saturating their broadcast hours with advertising. In 1940, for example, the four national radio networks (NBC, ABC, CBS and the Mutual Broadcasting System) “provided listeners with 59 1/2 daytime hours of sponsored programs weekly,” the *Blue Book* reported. “Of these, 55 hours were devoted to soap operas.” The commission accused the networks of permitting advertisers “to destroy overall program balance.” It reiterated the need for more local and public service programming and reminded broadcasters that they “must serve significant minorities among our population...”³¹

But the *Blue Book* also revealed how broadcasters were raking in profits by opting for cheaply produced

network soap operas and evading their public interest and local programming requirements. Between 1937 and 1944, the commission reported, industry revenues more than doubled from \$114 million to \$275 million. *But income on that revenue nearly quadrupled, from \$22 million to \$90 million.* The amount the industry spent on broadcast costs plummeted from 80 cents on the dollar in 1937 to 67 cents in 1944. At the same time, operating profit rose from 20 to 33 cents on the dollar.³²

A few years later, in 1949, the commission adopted its famous Fairness Doctrine mandating that station licensees must broadcast opposing viewpoints on controversial issues of public importance. The doctrine, vehemently opposed by industry lobbying groups, was eventually eliminated during the deregulatory years of the Reagan Administration.

Despite the Supreme Court's *Associated Press* decision, the urgings of Luce's Hutchins commission and the *Blue Book* admonishments, integration of the broadcast industry was slow in coming. In 1945, Raul Cortez became the first Hispanic radio owner when he launched KCOR-AM in San Antonio. Ten years later, Cortez also became the first Hispanic television station owner with KCOR-TV, Channel 41.³³ In 1949 Jesse B. Blayton became the first African American owner of a radio station, WERD in Atlanta.³⁴ It would take twenty more years before the first African American owned a television station.

The first Native American-owned stations did not begin operating until the early 1970s at the height of the American Indian movement. WYRU-AM, a tribal-owned station, began broadcasting in Red Springs, North Carolina, in June 1970 though it featured a general audience format. In May 1971, KYUK in Bethel, Alaska, became the first non-commercial station affiliated with a tribe. And Navajo station KTDB, long considered the nation's premier Indian-only broadcaster, was launched in Pine Hill, New Mexico, in April 1972.³⁵

FCC Ignores Discrimination

The paucity of minority owners as late as the 1970s was no accident. A review of FCC licensing records amply demonstrates that in awarding and renewing licenses the FCC ignored or failed to impose sanctions against broadcasters who practiced racial discrimination. In 1955, for example, the agency granted Shreveport Television Co. a construction permit for a new television station even though one of its owners, Don George, owned and operated segregated movie theaters. The FCC concluded that George was only following the Jim Crow laws of Louisiana.³⁶

The agency went even further in 1963, threatening to revoke the construction permit of a radio station in Broward County, Florida, after the station owners announced their intention to adopt an all-black format to serve the area's African American community. The agency eventually forced the station to give up the all-black format and provide programming for the entire community, that is, to the *white community*. Sadly it did not require other stations around the country to meet the same standard.

So in commercial broadcasting the FCC routinely provided licenses to known racists and people who practiced segregation. Even in the colleges and public radio, the same thing happened. Minorities were barred by many state laws in the South from colleges operating the only FCC licensed educational stations. For example, Arkansas State University was licensed by the FCC in 1957 to operate a campus radio station. The University of North Carolina's WUNC-FM was licensed in 1952, and KUT-FM of the University of Texas was licensed in 1958. These were all FM college stations licensed by the FCC at a time when those colleges admitted no blacks or minorities. The average sign-on year for stations at the 28 historically black colleges and universities was 1980, while the average sign-on year for college stations licensed at the predominantly white state colleges in those same states was 1970.

That means that the college students who went to the white schools received a government-supported head start in learning broadcasting at those radio sta-

tions, while thousands of students at black colleges were set back 10 years on average just on having access to education in radio. And radio, of course, was the precursor to television, with most early television owners starting their careers as radio broadcasters. Today, there are more than a few white media executives who are the second or even third generation in their family to work in the broadcasting business – something almost unheard of among broadcast journalists of color.

Civil Rights and Mississippi TV

One of the most important battles over news media bias evolved over nearly two decades in the state of Mississippi, where the United Church of Christ and Reverend Dr. Everett C. Parker, the head of the church's office of communications, waged a pioneering effort to force the FCC to integrate television in the South.

A major focus of that battle was WLBT-TV, Channel 3, in Jackson, an NBC affiliate, and two radio stations owned by the same company.

While 45% of the population in the station's signal area was black, no blacks were employed at the station except as janitors, and blacks were rarely shown on television. From 1955 on, the church filed periodic complaints with the FCC about racist programming. That year, the NAACP and the church protested to the agency that an NBC program featuring Thurgood Marshall, then the organization's general counsel, was deliberately cut off by WLBT, which substituted a sign saying "Sorry, Cable Trouble." The station's owner later admitted in a news report that he had deliberately cut off the program.

The watershed moment in that struggle came in 1962, when a white mob tried to prevent James Meredith from enrolling as the first black student at the University of Mississippi. Rioting erupted against hundreds of federal agents sent by President Kennedy to escort Meredith on to campus. Two people were killed, 28 marshals were shot and 160 were injured.³⁷

After complaints from black leaders and the FBI, the FCC reprimanded eight Mississippi radio and television stations for biased coverage of the mob vio-

lence, but it resisted calls for stronger sanctions. In 1965 it renewed the licenses of WCBI radio and WCBI-TV in Columbus, Miss., even though FBI documentation had alleged that both stations played a role in inciting the riots.³⁸

The commission also renewed the license of WLBT, even though the station had broadcast a series of paid editorials before the riot by the Jackson White Citizen's Council that urged local residents to defend segregation and oppose the federal courts, and it broadcast no opposing views – a clear violation of the Fairness Doctrine. The station aired the spots after previously assuring the FCC, in response to earlier complaints, that it did not broadcast any local programs having to do with segregation, thus showing not only bias but duplicity in its actions. Judicial arguments in the case by the United Church of Christ lasted until 1969 when an appeals panel in Washington, D.C., overturned the FCC decision and ordered WLBT's license revoked.

The court decision was a pivotal victory for public accountability in the U.S. media. It finally established the right of citizens to sue before the FCC over a station's failure to fulfill the public interest requirements of its license.

But less overt resistance to integration by many newspapers and broadcasters continued.

The Civil Rights Movement Hits the News Media

In 1967, as the civil rights movement gained momentum and urban riots by blacks and Hispanics erupted around the country, President Lyndon Johnson appointed Otto Kerner, the governor of Illinois, to chair a newly-created U.S. Commission on Civil Disorders. The new commission was charged with investigating the causes of the riots and providing recommendations on how to prevent further inner-city violence.

The Kerner commission's final staff report strongly criticized the role played by news media in cover

ing both the riots and racial problems in America, warning:

“The absence of Negro faces and activity from the media has an effect on white audiences as well as blacks. If what the white American reads in newspapers and sees on television conditions his expectations of what is ordinary and normal in the larger society, he will neither understand nor accept the black American. By failing to portray the Negro as a matter of routine in the context of the total society, the news media, we believe, contributed to the black-white schism in this country.”

The Commission called for immediate steps to increase the numbers of minorities in the newspaper and television industries as well as in journalism training programs. “Along with the country as a whole, the press has too long basked in a white world, looking out of it, if at all, with white men’s eyes and a white perspective,” the commission concluded. “That is no longer good enough. The painful process of readjustment that is required of the American news media must begin now. They must make a reality of integration – in both their product and personnel. They must insist on the highest standards of accuracy – not only reporting single events with care and skepticism, but placing each event into a meaningful perspective.”

By then more than 40 years had passed since the Radio Act of 1927 and more than 130 years since the rise of the modern newspaper and the black press.

Integration of Our Nation’s Newsrooms

The Kerner commission report finally awakened the industry and the federal government to begin their first conscious efforts to integrate both our nation’s newsrooms and media ownership. In 1969, the FCC passed its first equal employment opportunity regulations, making it illegal for broadcasters to discriminate on the basis of race, color or national origin. The Radio and Television News Directors Association began in 1972 to keep track of minority newsroom employment at local broadcast outlets. Daily newspapers started making their first serious efforts to hire

minority journalists. Philanthropic foundations began funding special programs to create a pipeline of trained journalists of color. The American Society of Newspaper Editors initiated an annual newsroom census in 1978 to track the progress by individual newspapers in their employment of women and minorities, and it called for the nation’s newsrooms to reflect the general population by the year 2000. (When it became apparent that ASNE’s target date for newsroom parity would not be met, the group later postponed its goal to 2025).

The 1970s and early 1980s also witnessed the creation of a new force in our industry -- minority journalist associations. The death of television KMEX news director and L.A. Times columnist Ruben Salazar while covering the Chicano Moratorium in 1970 led to the creation of what would later become the California Chicano News Media Association in

Minority journalists working in U.S. English-language newsrooms, 1985-2004

	TV	Radio	Newspapers	Minority population
1980				20.2%
1985	14%	9%	5.8%	
1990	17.8%	10.8%	7.9%	24.8%
1995	17%	14.7%	10.9%	
2000	21%	10%	11.8%	29.4%
2004*	21.8%	11.8%	12.9%	

*There were 54,000 newspaper jobs and 24,000 radio and television jobs in 2004. Also there were 6,000 network news jobs not reflected above.

1972. CCNMA, in turn, later sparked the creation of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists in 1984. The National Association of Black Journalists was founded in 1975, the Asian American Journalists Association was founded in 1981, and what would later become the Native American Journalists Association was founded in 1984.

When those groups began forming, there were so few journalists of color in the news media that no one even thought of counting them. Minorities owned only 10 of the approximately 7,500 radio stations in the country. Blacks did not own a single TV station. As for as the FCC, despite its new EEO employment

rules, it was still putting up obstacles to increased minority ownership.³⁹

The commission had outlined new criteria in 1965 to award licenses when there were competing applicants. One of the criteria gave a comparative credit for greater diversification of ownership. But the same year it promulgated the new rules, the commission denied a comparative credit to Comint Corp., a company in which two African Americans held a 14% share of stock. “The Communications Act, like the Constitution, is color blind,” the agency said in its ruling. “Black ownership cannot and should not be an independent comparative factor, rather, such ownership must be shown on the record to result in some public interest.”⁴⁰

Once again the commission met defeat in the courts on the issue of diversity. A federal appeals panel overturned the Comint Corp. decision in 1974. Minorities should receive additional merit considerations, the court ruled, “when minority ownership is likely to increase diversity of content, especially on opinion and viewpoint.”⁴¹

Opening Up the Broadcast Industry

It took until 1978 for the FCC to finally get serious about racial integration of broadcast ownership. That year, it adopted a policy of using minority credits in comparative hearings as well as in a little-known procedure called distress sales of stations. At the same time, the commission implemented a tax certificate program whereby white owners who sold their licenses to people of color could gain tax breaks.

“Unless minorities are encouraged to enter the mainstream of the commercial broadcasting business, a substantial proportion of our citizenry will remain underserved and the larger, non-minority audience will be deprived of the views of minorities,” the com-

mission’s minority ownership report concluded.⁴²

At the time the policy was adopted, minorities owned only 1 percent of all broadcast stations. The next two decades witnessed considerable growth in minority ownership. Between 1978 and 1995, the FCC issued 359 tax certificates, including 285 for radio, 43 for television and 31 for cable stations. In addition, the commission approved 15 distress sales to minorities between 1978 and 1991.⁴³ The Supreme Court upheld both the minority credit and distress sale policies in a 1990 decision, *Metro Broadcasting v. FCC*, ruling that “enhancing broadcast diversity” met an “important governmental objective.”

At the same time, however, the Reagan and Bush administrations were pressing to remove overall limits on broadcast ownership. In 1984, the number of TV, AM and FM radio stations a single company could own increased from 7-7-7- to 12-12-12. That sparked a media buying spree that drove up station prices and made it more difficult for minorities to enter the industry as owners.

Then in 1995, the Supreme Court ruled in another pivotal case, *Adarand v. Peña*, that federal race-based programs must be “narrowly tailored” to serve a “compelling government interest.” The decision partially overruled the Court’s previous *Metro Broadcasting* decision and placed into question the constitutionality of all federal affirmative action programs. Prior to the *Adarand* ruling, for example, the FCC had issued a notice of proposed rulemaking on increasing minority and female ownership. To this day, the proceeding remains unresolved. A few weeks after *Adarand*, the Republican-controlled congress did away with the most effective policy to date for increasing minority media ownership: the tax certificate program.

During that brief period of intense media reform from 1978 to 1995 the actual number of minority broadcast owners climbed dramatically, from 40 to

Today, most minority-owned radio stations are AM stations and are located on less powerful frequencies. Minority-formatted stations, regardless of their market rankings, are also less likely to attract as much advertising revenue as non-minority owned stations.

350, and the percentage of radio and television stations owned by minorities increased from 1 percent to 3 percent. But the period of reform would soon come to an end.

The Decline in Minority Ownership

Minority ownership and newsroom representation faced twin setbacks in the late 1990s

Minority Ownership of Commercial AM Stations, 1992-2000

	Minority Stations	Overall Stations
1992	189 (3.6%)	4,969
1994	190 (3.7%)	5,044
1998	189 (4.0%)	4,724
2000	248 (5.3%)	4,685

Source: National Telecommunications and Information Agency and FCC

with the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and a federal court decision in 1998 that declared the FCC's EEO regulations unconstitutional. Initially hailed by the commercial media as a victory for consumers, the Telecommunications Act led to massive deregulation of the broadcast industry. It removed the national ownership cap for radio, further increased the number of TV stations a company could own and relaxed regulations prohibiting common ownership of radio and TV stations in the same market.⁴⁴ This resulted in a wave of mergers that has reshaped our nation's media landscape.

Clear Channel, the largest radio company in the country, increased the number of stations it owned from 40 to more than 1,200. Huge mergers between entertainment and news media companies became the order of the day.

Such consolidation made it harder for minority owners to compete in the marketplace. Many sold out to white firms or to other black-owned firms, as consolidation occurred even among minority owners. Thus, the number of minority-owned stations increased, but the number of minorities who owned

private radio stations declined from 173 in 1991 to 149 in 2001.⁴⁵

Meanwhile, the number of minority-owned TV stations fell from 38 in 1996 to 23 in 2000.⁴⁶ Today, most minority-owned radio stations are AM stations and are located on less powerful frequencies. Minority-formatted stations, regardless of their market rankings, are also less likely to attract as much advertising revenue as non-minority owned stations.

Meanwhile, the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals in 1998 struck down the agency's EEO regulations. The court questioned the federal government's authority to establish race-based programs to increase minority employment. The agency then issued new rules in 2000 that the court also threw out. In a final effort, the commission then adopted less stringent rules in 2002 calling only for broadcasters to widely disseminate notices for job openings. Minority employment at local radio and TV stations declined sharply in the first two years after the rules were struck down. The percentage of people of color working at local TV stations dropped from 24.6 percent in 2001 to 18.1 percent in 2003. For radio, the percentage dropped from 10.7 percent to 6.5 percent during the same time frame. In 2004, the percentage of minorities increased. Despite the gains recorded this year, the minority newsroom work force in broadcast has shown no significant change since 1990.

Minority Ownership of Commercial FM Stations, 1992-2000

	Minority Stations	Overall Stations
1992	107 (2.1%)	4,723
1994	121 (2.2%)	5,044
1998	116 (2.1%)	5,591
2000	178 (3.0%)	5,892

Source: National Telecommunications and Information Agency and the FCC

Minority Ownership of Commercial TV Stations, 1992-2000

	Minority Stations	Overall Stations
1992	33 (2.9%)	1,142
1994	22 (2.7%)	1,115
1998	32 (2.6%)	1,209
2000	23 (1.9%)	1,288

Source: National Telecommunications and Information Agency

At the same time, major white-owned media conglomerates have been buying up independent minority media. Viacom, for example, purchased Black Entertainment Television; Time Warner purchased the popular Web site *Africana.com*; and Harper's Collins purchased *Amistad Press*.

Spanish Television, An Exception?

At first glance, Spanish-language media companies, which have exploded in number and size in recent decades, seem an exception to the picture presented here so far. But appearances can be deceiving. The *Telemundo* network and stations group, of course, is now owned by NBC, which is investing heavily in Spanish-language programming.

Univision, which owns both the *Univision* and *Telefuturo* networks and recently acquired the Hispanic Broadcasting Co.'s chain of radio stations, is by far the largest Spanish-language media company in the nation.

Univision, however, is a distinct case when it comes to minority ownership. A minority of the shares of company stock, or two big groups of shares, are held by the Cisneros Group of Venezuela and the Televisa Group of Mexico, Latin America's two biggest media companies, but top management of Univision is in the hands largely of white American executives. The company's employees are no doubt overwhelmingly Hispanic, and the network has been a pioneer in providing full service news and entertainment in Spanish. But to say that Mexican capital or Venezuelan capital can be substituted for Hispanic American capital is tantamount to saying that Australian or Canadian or British entrepreneurs who own a company in the United States somehow qualify as American owners because they speak English. Our concern here is for Hispanic Americans, of which there are 38 million in this country, and their role in the media. Hispanic Americans do not own Univision. They do not own the majority of shares in the stock of the company and they don't have a majority control of its board of directors. Clearly, therefore, Univision does not qualify as a U.S. Latino-owned company.

As major mainstream media companies increasingly purchase or create Spanish-language subsidiaries, whether in broadcast or print, the question of the future of independent Hispanic-owned media must be confronted. Will Hispanic ownership of major news companies disappear? Even within our own associations, some would argue that it does not matter who owns a company, that the main question should be how well the news and information produced by that company serves the public.

Several years ago, the FCC commissioned five studies in response to the *Adarand* case that examined minorities and their exclusion from broadcast ownership. Those studies found that a clear connection existed between minority ownership and diversity in content and staffing. For example, one survey found that 73 percent of minority-owned stations did live broadcasts of community events, compared to 55 percent of white-owned radio stations. Minority stations were also more likely to broadcast programs about issues of concern to senior citizens (60%) than white-owned stations (30%), and they were more likely to produce shows geared to women (81%) than white stations (57%). In addition, 66 percent of minority owners reported that they played a direct role in the radio station, compared to only 32 percent of white owners. Minority owners were also far more likely to be involved in producing editorials and attending station news coverage meetings than white owners. And, as one might expect, minority-owned stations were far more likely to hire minority staff and on-air talent than white-owned stations.⁴⁷

Other studies in the series found that minority broadcasters had a more difficult time securing capital from financial institutions and had to pay higher interest rates on their loans. They also found that the FCC had failed to take into account the impact of its policies on minority ownership. Unfortunately, none of the reports commissioned by the agency have yet been utilized as part of the record of any proceeding to formulate new policies to promote minority ownership.

The Public Revolt Against Media Conglomerates

In September 2002, the future of minority ownership in broadcasting was suddenly challenged once again when Michael Powell, President Bush's Chairman of the FCC, announced plans to conduct the most extensive review and deregulation of the broadcast ownership rules in our nation's history.

The proposed rules would allow one company to own up to one newspaper, three TV stations and eight radio stations in the biggest markets. In Powell's 68-page notice of proposed rulemaking, only one paragraph addressed the issue of minority ownership. It simply asked whether diverse ownership should be considered as a goal in the proceeding.⁴⁸

As it has done historically under both Democratic and Republican administrations, the FCC then gave only marginal consideration in its proceedings to how an industry that has historically been white-controlled should or could meet the news and public service needs of the nation's 30% minority population.

Most industry experts predicted the new rules would sail through the commission just as the 1996 Telecommunications Act had sailed through Congress: with very little fanfare or public attention. Powell's initial plan was for the FCC to pass new rules by the spring of 2003 without even holding a public hearing. Many corporate media executives were already planning new mergers, deals and swaps of properties that the rules changes would make possible.

By early January 2003, a public revolt had begun to brew. That revolt was sparked in part by growing distrust among ordinary Americans with the news media and their enormous power.

A 2002 study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that media believability showed sharp drops since 1985 for all mediums. The believability of local TV plummeted from 34% to 26% and that of newspapers dropped from 28% to 20%. All major TV networks experienced similar drops.

FCC Commissioner Michael Copps, a critic of media consolidation, urged the commission not to rush to a decision. Copps insisted that the commission had not conducted enough study to understand the impact of existing consolidation on our society, including its effect on people of color and minority ownership. He urged Powell to hold public hearings and seek greater feedback from the public.

Powell refused, claiming that the public had ample opportunity to make its voice heard by submitting comments online. But after much pressure from consumer groups, the chairman agreed to hold a single public hearing in Richmond, Va., in February of 2003, an easy two-hour drive from Washington, D.C.

In response, Copps took part in several hearings and town hall meetings organized by non-profit organizations and other institutions in cities throughout the country. At many of those hearings, he was joined by fellow Commissioner Jonathan Adelstein.

In October 2002, at his first full meeting of the NAHJ board of directors after his election as the association's president, Juan Gonzalez urged the NAHJ board to pay close attention to this issue. Joseph Torres and Gonzalez both recommended that NAHJ, as an organization of journalists concerned about diversity and quality journalism, should take an immediate stand against the dangers of further media ownership consolidation. We argued that this was the single most important issue facing journalists in our country today, that existing consolidation had already had a negative impact on both minority ownership and journalistic standards.

But several board members were unprepared to take a stand at that time. Some felt they needed more time to study the issue, others that journalists should not be involved in media ownership issues, while a few clearly disagreed with our assessment. The board did agree, however, that the NAHJ staff should submit a series of questions to the FCC about its proposed rules.

A Vibrant New Citizen's Movement

In January 2003, NAHJ thus became one of the first journalism organizations in the country, other

than industry unions like the Newspaper Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, to file comments on the proposed media ownership rules. In those comments we urged that before adopting any permanent rules, the agency should determine what impact further consolidation might have on Latino citizens and residents, on prospects for minority ownership and on diversity and quality of news. A few weeks later, NAHJ President Juan Gonzalez participated in a hearing organized by community groups at New York's Columbia University. Four of the five FCC commissioners attended, including Chairman Powell and Commissioner Copps. He summarized data from NAHJ's annual Brownout Report, which documents the continued failure of our national network broadcast companies to fairly and accurately portray Latinos and of the industry to employ them in sufficient numbers.

Opposition to the regulations began to grow, but the general public still knew very little about the pending rules changes. In February 2003, the Project for Excellence in Journalism and the Pew Research Center released a poll which found that 72 percent of Americans had heard nothing about the FCC's plan.⁴⁹ The reason for that was simple – our own media companies were not covering the issue. Media watchdog group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting revealed in January 2003 that only one network had bothered to report on the proposed FCC changes. The story aired at 4:30 a.m. in September of 2002, shortly after the agency announced its proceeding. As for local newspapers, when they did cover the story it was almost always buried in their business sections.

Following the release of the PEJ and Pew poll, the NAHJ board of directors passed a second resolution at our next meeting in February of 2003. We called on the FCC to postpone issuing new regulations until it had held more public hearings and sought greater feedback from the Hispanic and other minority communities. Our resolution also called on other journalism organizations to join our appeal, and it publicly criticized news media companies for failing to adequately cover the story.

In the weeks that followed, the California Chicano News Media Association, the National

Association of Black Journalists and UNITY: Journalists of Color joined in petitioning the FCC to delay its proceeding. "We believe more time is needed to study the issue to ensure that consolidation will not reverse gains made toward making the news media workforce more diverse, and that they do not skew coverage, particularly in communities of color," UNITY President Ernie Sotomayor wrote in his letter to Powell. Later, the National Gay and Lesbian Journalists Associations and the Society of Professional Journalists also urged the FCC to adopt a more transparent policy and seek more public input.

For the first time in memory, professional organizations of journalists had spoken out publicly on an issue that involved industry business practices and national media policy.

Despite the failure of our nation's news organizations to cover one of the most important media stories since the creation of the FCC itself, more than two million Americans eventually filed comments with the commission, and more than 99% of those comments were opposed to greater media consolidation.⁵⁰ We believe that the timely challenge to the FCC's decision-making process by our journalism organizations contributed to greater public attention being focused on the issue.

Opposition to the rules mushroomed during the the spring and soon crossed partisan lines. Liberal organizations such as MoveOn.org and Common Cause mobilized against them, as did many conservative organizations such as the National Rifle Association and the Family Research Council. Bi-partisan opposition sprouted in Congress as well, with Democrats such as South Dakota's Sen. Byron Dorgan uniting with Republicans like Mississippi's Sen. Trent Lott. Even media moguls Ted Turner and Barry Diller and conservative *New York Times* columnist William Safire spoke out against Powell's plan.

As the FCC decision drew near, several news organizations finally began to cover the issue for the first time. An *American Journalism Review* article found that while "some newspapers produced a respectable flurry of stories in the weeks prior to the FCC's action, the major networks – where most people get their news – acknowledged the issue only

after protests in Washington had grown impossible to ignore.”⁵¹

Despite that overwhelming opposition, the FCC on June 2, 2003, voted 3-to-2 along party lines to pass the new regulations. Congress reacted swiftly. By the end of the summer, lawmakers voted to rescind the national station ownership cap but compromised, under White House pressure, to raise the cap from 35 percent to 39 percent. This allowed both Viacom and Fox, which had been over the old cap, to be in compliance. Meanwhile, the Senate resorted to a rarely-used procedure to reverse the FCC’s decision, but House leaders have so far refused to allow the legislation to receive a floor vote.

A second poll by the Project for Excellence in Journalism and Pew, released in July of 2003, found that as Americans learned more about the FCC plan, they concluded by an astounding 10 - to - 1 margin that it was going to have a negative impact.⁵²

In September of 2003, a panel of the Third Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia temporarily blocked implementation of the new rules after the Prometheus Radio Project challenged the FCC’s decision.

The same appeals panel further stunned the industry in June of 2004 when it remanded the rules and ordered the commission to retain the old ones while developing a better record to support its effort to loosen them. The court’s decision thus guarantees that the public debate over media consolidation will continue through the presidential elections and into 2005.

We believe that this vibrant new citizen’s movement should be supported by all organizations of professional journalists but especially by the organizations that represent journalists of color. The movement’s goals, after all, mirror the missions of our organizations: greater diversity of voices and viewpoints in the news and greater responsiveness by local media companies to the information needs of local communities. The movement’s broader goals – less concentrated power and more democratic accountability by giant media companies, less emphasis on maximizing profit through hyper commercialism and more emphasis on the public responsibilities of the press in a free society – must also become the goals of all working journalists, white and non-white. Just as the

civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s gave birth to our minority journalism organizations and finally awakened government and industry to pay serious attention to integrating the mass media, so too will this new movement for media reform strengthen and energize the quest of communities and journalists of color for a fair and equitable news media system in the 21st century.

A Program for Action

If you do not understand how a problem developed you, will never be able to solve it. We have thus devoted much space here to studying the history of racial and ethnic exclusion in the news media in order to learn lessons about the best way to finally end it. The great weakness of most past efforts to achieve newsroom diversity was that they failed to systematically analyze our industry’s history on matters of race and ethnicity.

A review of that history shows we are making progress; painful, slow and unsatisfactory progress, but progress nonetheless. The growing size and strength of our individual organizations of minority journalists and of our combined UNITY alliance is a direct reflection of that progress. The greater attention being paid by major media companies to hiring and promoting people of color is another sign of that progress.

But the pace of progress, as we all know, must qualitatively increase if our newsrooms and our news coverage are to adequately reflect our society within our lifetime.

To that end, we offer several concrete recommendations. Some are already part of the new strategic plan the current UNITY board adopted this year, but others go beyond that plan:

1. *We should press the industry for more complete, more inclusive and more scientific data on minority employment.* Information is the life-blood of journalists. Without comprehensive information on news media hiring practices, we cannot gauge or analyze

progress toward integration.

A. Currently, ASNE publishes an annual newsroom census for the nation's individual papers. While it is the best survey available, it still needs improvement. For example, the survey collects but does not report the percentage of employment of separate minority groups at each newspaper, e.g., African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans. However, it only reports national industry employment by group and a total minority-employment percentage by individual paper. We need the group breakdowns by newspaper. ASNE also does not count in its census the growing number of independently-owned Spanish-language dailies but does count those Spanish-language dailies owned by major media companies. We urge consistency and inclusiveness in the ASNE survey.

B. The annual Radio and Television News Directors survey of minorities and women in broadcasting does not include employment figures for the one-fourth of the television news professionals who work in network television. NAHJ and UNITY have asked the networks to make their minority newsroom employment figures public. But the networks have refused the groups' request. We must continue to press the networks to make these figures public.

C. No survey exists of minority employment by major wire services such as Associated Press, Reuters and Bloomberg. We must urge those companies to develop one. We must also urge the huge magazine industry to develop

an annual minority and women employment survey.

2. *UNITY should become more of a research, policy and advocacy arm of our minority journalism organizations when it comes to diversity.* It should leave the development of student, professional development and employment programs to the individual associations. And those associations, in turn, must develop more imaginative and innovative approaches that work hand-in-hand with media companies and industry groups to rapidly increase minority hiring.

3. *We must place more emphasis on building ties with and educating white reporters and editors on the importance of greater diversity for better journalism.* In too many newsrooms, white reporters today feel victimized or ignored by the industry's recent emphasis on diversity. Most of them never received any diversity training in journalism school to begin with. (The diversity standard of the accrediting council on journalism education, for instance, has been the most frequently failed standard in accreditation reviews of journalism programs for many years.) When those white colleagues rise into management they end up as weak proponents of diversity. While many of the fears of our rank-and-file white colleagues are not founded in reality, they nonetheless create divisions in many newsrooms. UNITY and our alliance organizations should develop programs in concert with journalism schools to win more white converts to the importance of diversity.

4. *We must begin to regard increasing minority ownership as part of the mission of our organizations.* UNITY should urge the FCC and Congress to reinstate incentives like the tax certificate program that encourage white-owned broadcasters to sell stations to minorities. We should support the development of

internship and professional development efforts for minority-owned and minority-run media companies. We should also challenge newspaper owners to fashion programs to increase the number of minority-owned daily newspapers.

5. *Our individual associations should provide education and information programs to communities of color on how to hold media companies more accountable for their news coverage.* Journalists of color are uniquely positioned to both understand the news media and communities of color. And those communities, once educated on ways to hold the media more accountable, can become important allies of our associations for full integration of newsrooms.
6. *We should advocate for opening up more opportunities to minorities in non-commercial and low-power broadcasting.* At the end of 2002, there were 2,300 public and community radio stations, 380 full-power public television stations and 2,100 low-power commercial television stations in the United States. Any plan for diversifying news media must include this sector of the mass media.
7. *We should support the principle of universal access on cable systems.* The technological convergence of various forms of mass media, combined with the economic reality that a handful of cable providers will soon control distribution of data and information into the average home either through digital broadcast satellite or municipal cable systems means that these cable systems will become the gatekeepers to the dissemination of vast amounts of information and entertainment. Thus, universal access to cable systems by providers of information and entertainment must become a part of any future regulation of broadcasting in the public interest.

In Conclusion

Our principal aim in this article has been to encourage more systematic study, analysis and debate by journalists of color about the future of the industry in which many of us will exert major leadership in the not-to-distant future. We welcome feedback and criticisms from our colleagues since this article is a work in progress and since we hope to expand its contents in the future.

If there is one lesson to be learned from the long struggle of journalists of color in this country, it is that we should never acquiesce to a media system that fails to adequately inform and represent all sectors of American society.

As Joseph Pulitzer warned nearly a century ago: “Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself.”

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