

Great Struggle, Little Progress:

A Case Study of the 2018 ASNE Newsroom Diversity Survey

Meredith D. Clark, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
University of Virginia  
Department of Media Studies  
2018 ASNE Newsroom Diversity Survey Principal Investigator  
Contact: [mdc6j@virginia.edu](mailto:mdc6j@virginia.edu)

The banquet hall was half-empty by the time the diversity session began during the American Society of News Editors' annual conference at the AT&T Executive Education & Conference Center in Austin, Texas, on Sept. 12, 2018.

To be fair, two additional conference sessions were being held at the same time, which may have accounted for some decline in the audience. But earlier that day, the association had published a disquieting press release about its annual newsroom diversity survey. The survey, introduced in 1978, is a tool for measuring meaningful inclusion of people from underrepresented groups — particularly white women and ethnic and racial minorities — in digital and print newsrooms across the United States. While there were some highlights in the scant data, the low response rate was alarming. Only 17 percent of the 1,700 organizations queried actually completed the survey, limiting any meaningful comparison to survey data from the year before. The lack of participation signaled something troubling - why would journalism outlets, institutions committed to transparency and holding the powerful accountable - refuse to release the demographic data about their newsrooms? The panelists looked out on a room that 30 minutes before had held dozens of journalism professionals including hiring managers, executive editors and publishers, and began to discuss the problem.

On the dais, five representatives from ASNE, including Executive Director Teri Hayt, its 2017-2018 president, Mizell Stewart, and Diversity Committee Chairperson Karen Magnuson, addressed questions about the survey and its history from an audience of the usual suspects — editors and managers committed to actively working on issues of diversity and inclusion in their newsrooms. But the panelists were grappling with a number of questions of their own: How would the association increase participation in the survey going forward? Did the survey capture *relevant* data on demographic trends in the newsroom? How should the survey adapt to become more inclusive, gathering data from journalists who identify as part of LGBTQIA+ communities without putting those individuals at risk of discrimination? How would it account for organizations producing news without the structure of a brick-and-mortar 'newsroom,' and reflect the reality of jobs that no longer maintained the divide between business and editorial work?

As the conversation progressed, the meeting’s attendees were reassured that while the *purpose* of the survey might remain the same — tracking demographic shifts in the journalism industry and using that data to support programmatic interventions — its design and scope needed to change. There was also a question held by several of the panelists in their minds, but none wanted to ask aloud: Had the Newsroom Diversity Survey reached its natural end?

### **About ASNE**

Founded in 1922, and known as The American Society of Newspaper editors until 2009, ASNE is a nonprofit entity dedicated to developing journalism leaders. □ The organization is committed to upholding ideals of public discourse as a critical component of democracy by supporting editors with training and advice related to First Amendment issues; advocating the media’s role in creating an informed citizenry; encouraging innovation and creativity in news organizations, and driving “the quest for diversity and inclusion in the workplace and in news content across all platforms.”

The organization named its first female president, Katherine Fanning, who was also the first woman to edit a national newspaper (*The Christian Science Monitor*), in 1987. Tim McGuire, who served as president in 2001, was the first person with a physical disability to fill the role. In 2004, Karla Garrett Harshaw became the first Black woman to serve as ASNE’s president. Rick Rodriguez, the first Hispanic man to act as the association’s president, followed in 2005.<sup>1</sup>

Championing diversity is the second point of the association’s mission, immediately after its commitment to the defense of First Amendment freedoms. Its commitment is part of the association’s mission, and the goal to have U.S. newsrooms achieve parity with the communities they serve has been the subject of two multi-year strategic plans. Despite a turbulent history with its own internal politics of representation and inclusion, documented in a series of articles and books by journalism historian Gwyneth Mellinger, ASNE has actively worked to encourage the U.S. press to reflect the reality of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Mellinger, Gwyneth. *Chasing Newsroom Diversity: From Jim Crow to Affirmative Action*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 2013.

country's diverse makeup among its ranks.

Despite ASNE's efforts to encourage the development of a diverse and inclusive workforce that reflects the country's demographics, the industry continues to come woefully short of the association's lofty target. The low response rate may indicate that journalism outlets are becoming more and more reticent about the issue. By refusing to release demographic data about the people they employ, some publishers, specifically those with national and international distribution, may be keeping the data private as a means of plausible deniability. But the reality of the industry's failure to integrate according to the times, and later, its reluctance to become more inclusive, has a long and well-documented history.

### **Historical context**

Following a series of race-based riots at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, President Lyndon B. Johnson convened the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, known as the Kerner Commission, to address three questions: "What happened? Why did it happen? What can be done to prevent it from happening again?"<sup>2</sup> The 11-member task force spent nearly a year researching the factors that had contributed to civil unrest, and delivered suggestions for reform in civic institutions including federal and local government, public education, law enforcement, and the news media in March 1968.

Of its recommendations to the media, the Commission suggested the following (original language has been updated):

- Expand coverage of the Black community and of race problems through permanent assignment of reporters familiar with urban and racial affairs, and through establishment of more and better links with the Black community.
- Integrate Blacks and Black activities into all aspects of coverage and content, including newspaper articles and television programming. The news media must publish newspapers and

---

<sup>2</sup> 2019. *Ncjrs.Gov*. Accessed December 12 2018. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/8073NCJRS.pdf>.

produce programs that recognize the existence and activities of Blacks as a group within the community and as a part of the larger community.

- Recruit more Blacks into journalism and broadcasting and promote those who are qualified to positions of significant responsibility. Recruitment should begin in high schools and continue through college; where necessary, aid for training should be provided.

The Commission's message was clear: The U.S. press could not realistically fulfil its mission of social responsibility without making meaningful inclusion of non-White journalists (Hughes 1950). In keeping with the industry's response to the report, and with more widespread calls for increased diversity in U.S. newsrooms, ASNE began collecting demographic data about journalism workers in 1978. In its early years, the survey (known as the Newsroom Diversity Census until 2015) targeted a list of newspapers pulled from *Editor & Publisher* magazine<sup>3</sup>. Newsroom leaders reported the census data through a series of telephone and mail solicitations from the association. ASNE released the numbers each year during its annual convention, pushing journalism leaders to meet its Year 2000 mandate of achieving racial parity in newspaper newsrooms serving geographically bound communities.

### **A moving target**

In 1998, facing the stark realisation that the journalism industry was nowhere near meeting the association's Year 2000 goal of achieving racial parity with the country, which at 281.4 million people would turn out to be nearly 23 percent non-White, ASNE's board of directors drafted the following statement:

Newsroom diversity is essential to the newspaper's responsibility in a democratic society and success in the marketplace. To accurately and sensitively cover the community, newsroom staffs must reflect society as a whole. The newsroom should be a place in which all employees contribute with their full potential, regardless of their race, ethnicity, color, age, gender, sexual orientation, physical disability or other defining characteristic.

---

<sup>3</sup> An earlier version of this report incorrectly stated that *Editor & Publisher* was defunct. The author regrets the error, which has been corrected.

ASNE pledged to continue its efforts to promote transparency in newsroom staffing, setting a Year 2025 goal for achieving parity with the country's racial and ethnic demographics (it should be noted that the United States is projected to be majority non-White by the year 2045)<sup>4</sup>. The survey continued, but in 2012, it was delegated to the Center for Advanced Survey Research at the University of Missouri. Since then, the survey has been conducted by researchers at Florida International University (2015-2017), and the University of Virginia (2018 to present).

### **Programs and partnerships**

In addition to conducting the annual survey, ASNE has taken an active role in developing and contributing to programmatic interventions to directly address the issue of newsroom diversity. Its premier offering is a comprehensive training program for mid-level managers who are members of under-represented groups.

In 2013, the association partnered with the American Press Institute to conduct two Minority Leadership Institutes, one held during its yearly conference; the other conducted during a joint conference between the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and the Excellence in Journalism convention, which united the Society for Professional Journalists and the Radio, Television, Digital News Association's joint annual meetings. The Minority Leadership Institutes continued for three years, guiding nearly 100 journalism professionals through training during eight meetings at affinity group and professional development conferences.

The program was renamed the Emerging Leaders Institute in 2016<sup>5</sup>. That year, 73 mid-level managers were trained at three sites, including Loyola University Chicago's School of Communication, which co-sponsored the project; the NABJ-NAHJ joint convention and job fair in Washington, D.C., and the ASNE-APME annual convention in Philadelphia. In 2017, Loyola University and separate NABJ and

---

<sup>4</sup> Bureau, US. 2018. "Older People Projected To Outnumber Children". *The United States Census Bureau*. Accessed February 4 2019. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/cb18-41-population-projections.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "ASNE". 2019. *Asne.Org*. Accessed February 4 2019. <https://www.asne.org/2016-eli>.

NAHJ conventions served as training sites for 64 participants in the program. All told, nearly 200 journalists from underrepresented backgrounds, including women and racial and ethnic minorities, have participated in the Leadership Institutes. Sponsors for the institutes have included the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Loyola University Chicago's School of Communication, the Scripps Howard Foundation, The McClatchy Company Foundation, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation, the *Naples Daily News* and ASNE members themselves.

In 2017, the Democracy Fund, a Washington, D.C.-based bipartisan foundation created by Pierre Omidyar, co-founder of eBay, stepped forward to provide \$300,000 to “reinvigorate” the survey. The funding is part of the Fund’s more than \$100 million commitment to strengthening American democracy, in part through strategic support and promotion of a free and fair press. The John S. And James L. Knight Foundation, a longtime supporter of ASNE, particularly its diversity mission, has also directly contributed to the survey’s continuation by providing financial and logistical support.

### **Naming the task at hand**

In journalism, the language of diversity rests on an uneasy foundation of capitalist interests and ethical imperatives. Business literature traces the term’s normative use back to the Hudson Institute’s Workforce 2000 report<sup>6</sup>, which predicted a more heterogeneous labor pool in the United States, “with new entrants comprising significantly greater numbers of women, racial minorities, and immigrants than ‘native’ white men.”<sup>7</sup> Today, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the federal agency responsible for enforcing laws designed to prevent workplace discrimination, describes workplace diversity as a concept that encompasses “race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), parental status, national origin, age, disability, family medical history or genetic information, political affiliation, military service, or other non-merit based factors.”<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> 2019. *Files.Eric.Ed.Gov*. Accessed February 4 2019. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED290887.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> “EEO Policy Statement”. 2019. *Eeoc.Gov*. Accessed January 4 2019. [https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/internal/eo\\_policy\\_statement.cfm](https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/internal/eo_policy_statement.cfm).

From a resource dependency perspective, in which a firm consider all of its assets as a means of survival, workplace diversity becomes a business strategy. People become human capital, something to accrue and account for as a means of potentially attracting more advertisers, subscribers and other revenue sources. The development of diverse teams within a business is considered a critical resource, write business scholars Renate Ortlieb and Barbara Sieben, a mechanism that contributes to the firm's ability to problem-solve and remain competitive in the market<sup>8</sup>.

Ethical concerns about the structural inequalities that kept white women and people of color out of the newsrooms in large numbers in the pre-Kerner years are of secondary concern to publishers and stakeholders concerned about the newspaper's bottom line. When the meaningful inclusion of these underrepresented groups *has* emerged as a priority, it has often been the result of external pressures, such as the Commission's findings, or external agitation from affinity groups, community leaders and other civically-minded individuals and institutions working on behalf of underserved communities to draw attention to the lack of parity between newsrooms staffs and the audiences they serve.

### **Dividing the playing field**

The advancement of Internet technology and its influence on publishing capabilities compounds these influences. In the first 20 to 30 years of the survey's existence, the demographic data reflected trends among newsrooms whose competition came from radio, television, and occasionally, a cross-town rival newspaper. But as the Pew Research Center's inaugural State of the New Media report noted in 2004<sup>9</sup>, widespread access to the web thrust journalism into "an epochal transformation," allowing communities that were historically maligned or ignored by their hometown paper to access news and information from a smorgasbord of sources — including each other. Even organizations that made noticeable progress in hiring (if not retaining) a more diverse staff were now forced to compete for the

---

<sup>8</sup> Ortlieb, Renate, and Barbara Sieben. "Diversity Strategies and Business Logic: Why Do Companies Employ Ethnic Minorities?" *Group & Organization Management* 38, no. 4 (August 2013): 480–511. doi:10.1177/1059601113497094.

<sup>9</sup> "The State Of The News Media 2004". 2004. *Pewtrusts.Org*. Accessed January 23 2019. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/research-and-analysis/reports/2004/03/15/the-state-of-the-news-media-2004>.

public's attention alongside more print and emerging digital publications that specifically catered to the consumption preferences of women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ communities.

The competition highlights the crux of the issue: Newsrooms of all types, regardless of their content focus, must be prepared to serve the information needs of the people who constitute the country's shifting demographics. This is particularly true of local news outlets where residents rely on coverage to make decisions about their everyday lives.

The paradox of quantification remains. While additive approaches to newsroom diversity that simply focus on counting the number of people who present or profess a specific identity will continue to fail, the numbers provide accountability and transparency, two essential tools for encouraging institutional change within the industry. ASNE's diversity imperative — whether considered from a business perspective or as a matter of social justice — rests at a difficult juncture.

Like the initiatives of its day, the Year 2000 and Year 2025 goals are products of the “diversity model” - a series of practices designed to “fully and equitably utilizing, integrating and rewarding workers of different racial/ethnic and gender backgrounds.”<sup>10</sup> But without structural power — such as investment capital to reward organizations that do diversity well, or a proprietary formula that can directly correlate a firm's diverse workforce with a more profitable product — ASNE has limited power to enforce the industry's integration initiative.

### **Problems with participation**

Participation in the Newsroom Diversity Census dropped from 71 percent in 2014 to 43.8 percent in 2015. The decline may have been linked to changes in the data collection process, which had been updated to reflect several industry realities, including the increased conglomeration of newsroom sites. A press release, dated July 28, 2015 noted:

Structural changes in many newsrooms have made it difficult for news organizations to fill out the census. Some of the census questions do not match the work categories of journalists in cross-

---

<sup>10</sup> Soni, Vidu. "A Twenty-First-Century Reception for Diversity in the Public Sector: A Case Study." *Public Administration Review* 60, no. 5 (2000): 395-408. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3110228>.

platform, multi-organizational and interdisciplinary newsroom settings. ... In a time when there are fewer traditional newsrooms and increased scrutiny on how media discuss race, gender and other diversity-oriented issues, the census needs to ask questions that go beyond parity in newsroom employment statistics.<sup>11</sup>

Survey participation increased slightly in 2016, but plummeted to 17 percent in 2018. Interviews with stakeholders who use the survey's data and newsroom leaders who have contributed data in the past have highlighted a number of potential factors. Privacy concerns, lack of time, worries about misuse of the data and pain avoidance are among some of the most commonly mentioned explanations.

"Some outlets just don't want to be shamed," one executive editor said. Some participants reported that the survey itself was onerous; filling it out takes away valuable time that might be spent on other management or content-related tasks.

Internally, the researchers and personnel working on the survey were privy to design flaws, including an email list in constant flux as the points of contact at participating publications change job roles or leave their companies. Distribution of the survey itself, managed through a series of automatic emails generated by the survey platform Qualtrics, had also proven troublesome. The emails were intercepted by spam filters. They disappeared into the electromagnetic ether. They were opened but not completed, triggering an automatic closure. In a few cases, phantom data filled some of the survey responses, indicating that someone had clicked through the questionnaire and spent a decent amount of time entering data, yet the system had failed to record it. And with office workers receiving between 150 and 200 emails a day (on average), it may be safe to assume many of the survey inquiries simply went ignored.

### **The transparency challenge**

The issue of non-response isn't endemic to the ASNE Newsroom Diversity Survey. Farai Chideya, program officer for the Ford Foundation, reflected on the difficulty of obtaining demographic

---

<sup>11</sup> "ASNE". 2019. *Asne.Org*. Accessed February 4 2019. <https://www.asne.org/diversity-survey-2015>.

data among journalism organizations in her 2017 white paper, “In the Shadow of Kerner: Fifty Years Later, Newsroom Diversity and Equity Stall,”<sup>12</sup> which was published by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy. Of the 15 multi-platform media outlets Chideya contacted with requests for data about the racial and ethnic makeup of their staff, four provided information about their 2016 political press corps; nine refused to provide any data at all. Some simply didn’t answer.

“Newsrooms often operate under the assumption that major civic organizations— government, nonprofits, business—should be transparent. Yet journalism does not always hold itself to the same standard,” Chideya wrote, offering suggestions for encouraging such openness.

“Transparency, however, doesn’t mean simply offering metrics to funders, but also revealing them publicly to researchers and general audiences online, in print and in annual reports,” she added.

The comment was a nod to the influence of the NewsMatch initiative, supported by the Democracy Fund, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, and the Facebook Journalism Foundation. Through financial backing from the Miami Foundation, the initiative incentivised more than 300 news organizations to submit their demographic data to ASNE’s Newsroom Diversity Survey in order to qualify for grant funding.

There were other encouraging moments in the 2018 data collection cycle. Individuals at other outlets, such as Bloomberg, took the initiative to help their companies participate for the first time. And upon hearing about the 2018 survey’s low response rate, journalism-affiliated foundation leaders banded together to issue a statement encouraging greater participation, and pledged to assist in developing strategies for promoting transparency.

---

<sup>12</sup> 2019. *Shorensteincenter.Org*. Accessed January 11 2019. <https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Kerner-Newsroom-Diversity-Farai-Chideya.pdf?x78124>.

## **Filling a gap in data collection and reporting**

Conversely, few companies that had participated in the past, including *The New York Times*, declined to complete the survey, and instead released their own reports. Others, such as ProPublica, submitted data *and* developed their own critically informed strategies for tracking the numbers and promoting transparency around newsroom diversity. This underscored another observation from the 2018 data collection cycle: Among some organizations — most of them online-only platforms including community news outlets and media startups — the Newsroom Diversity Survey was *the* data-collection process for capturing information about newsroom representation. Some entities, unburdened by federal regulations, didn't require applicants to disclose their gender, racial, or ethnic identity on their applications. Nor did they ask for it after making a hire. In some cases, when the need to collect such information finally did arise, task-addled managers looked out into the newsroom and simply made their best guess. The discovery presents an opportunity for the survey's design team to think about how it can create tools to help publications of any size and configuration build the diversity tracking practices into their everyday operations.

## **The Challenge**

After extending the survey deadline from Aug. 1 to Oct. 12, the 2018 Newsroom Diversity Survey still lacked meaningful participation from the nation's journalism outlets and newsrooms. It closed with a 17 percent response rate among 1,700 newsrooms. The dearth of data has consequences for industry stakeholders invested in the work of hiring, retaining, and promoting a workforce that more accurately reflects the country's shifting demographics in expanding categories, including race, gender identity, age, class, sexual orientation, citizenship and disability. Some supporting organizations, such as the Dow Jones News Fund, rely on the data as part of the information they use to structure their programs. For other corners of the journalism world, the lack of viable information widens the trust gap, as the Fourth Estate demands transparency from the business, technology and education sectors, but refuses to

model the same behavior itself.

A team of journalism professionals, including editors, educators, human resource managers, start-up founders and technology experts gathered at the Knight Foundation's headquarters in Miami on Jan. 28 to take the first steps to re-conceptualize effective ways to address ASNE's diversity mission vis-a-vis its data collection and dissemination strategies. Their task included thinking about the procedural, technological and personal challenges that underscore an approach to data collection that must address the needs of a diverse makeup of news organizations and the journalists who power them. Among their questions:

- How can ASNE increase participation in the data reporting effort while promoting transparency about newsroom diversity?
- How will the strategy evolve to capture relevant data on demographic trends in the newsroom, including the representation of more ethnicities, biracial and multiracial journalists, and non-binary journalists?
- How ought the strategy adapt to become more inclusive, gathering and reporting representation data about journalists who identify as part of LGBTQIA+ communities, without exposing them to risk?
- How might the strategy account for organizations producing news remotely, between non-traditional institutions such as University-embedded reporting projects, and/or without the structure of a brick-and-mortar 'newsroom'?
- How will the strategy reflect the reality of jobs that no longer maintain the divide between business and editorial work?
- How might the strategy become more flexible, allowing respondents to input data as their newsrooms change with growth and loss, rather than focusing on a fixed point in the year?
- And above all: How will ASNE and its stakeholders use this year to develop a sustainable strategy that addresses the enduring challenge of assisting the journalism industry of fulfilling

its social responsibility to report on the lives and interests of all people through the promise of increased diversity?

### **Next steps**

By the end of the meeting, the participants had created three newsroom manifestos to address concerns about structural diversity from the perspectives of three journalism stakeholders: legacy media outlets, such as the print and digital news operations that have comprised the majority for the survey's responses; digital media start-ups and non-profit groups. These memos will be published as appendices to the second case study in this series, which focuses on the role of mid-level managers in the promotion of newsroom diversity. It will be released in March. A third and final case study on the impact of newsroom culture on diversity will be released in April.

Throughout 2019, ASNE will develop a comprehensive strategy to track, measure and analyze newsroom diversity efforts as they are reflected in employment trends *and* media coverage. Proposed changes to the Newsroom Diversity Survey include the permanent incorporation of qualitative research to present contextualizing perspectives among journalists from underrepresented groups, newsroom managers and digital media entrepreneurs. This approach will be a core component of the organization's session on newsroom diversity during the first News Leaders Association (NLA) conference. NLA is a new journalism leadership organization formed by the merger of ASNE and APME. The conference is scheduled for Sept. 9 and 10 in New Orleans. In the interim year, the 2019 survey will use questions similar to those from previous years to capture demographic data about U.S. print and digital news outlets. The survey will be administered by the Center for Survey Research at the University of Virginia. Details about the survey, including tips on preparing demographic data for submission, will be released in mid-March.

The News Leaders Association is the new journalism leaders' association that will be formed when ASNE and the Associated Press Media Editors merge their organizations. NLA will meet as a combined group for the first time at the annual NLA Conference Sept. 9-10 in New Orleans. NLA's goal

is to create a new membership organization focused on serving the needs of leaders at all levels in newsrooms and on all types of journalism platforms. NLA will be committed to leading, nurturing and serving journalism and democracy by advocating for the values of a free press and free speech; engaging local communities on the value of credible news; nurturing news leaders and developing rising generations of journalists from diverse backgrounds to succeed today and lead tomorrow; and maintaining the highest standards of credible, ethical and independent journalism across platforms.