

## Media's quest for diversity fades

By ERIC DEGGANS

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ATLANTA - "Aren't you angry?"

The Rev. Jesse Jackson was looking at me, but his comment was addressed to the room, a tiny space in the basement of the Hyatt Regency packed with attendees of the National Association of Black Journalists' national convention.

In town to lead a march over expiring provisions of the Voting Rights Act, Jackson had digressed to the topic of diversity in media. Specifically, he recalled a recent visit to nearby CNN headquarters, where he noticed that a display of the cable newschannel's most prominent anchors didn't include a single black person.

"Not one black (person) leads a show on CNN, or Fox News or MSNBC," he said, voice rising in a preacherly cadence. "Doesn't that offend you?"

As a black columnist who regularly writes about media, heck yeah. Indeed, I had spent much of the week working to reverse the trend, helping the St. Petersburg Times recruit journalists of color at the convention's massive job fair and passing along news of any openings elsewhere.

As it turns out, the reverend had missed Soledad O'Brien, a member of NABJ and the National Association of Hispanic Journalists who hosts CNN's American Morning weekday news show. But I had to admit, confronted in that moment with the reverend's righteous indignation, that I hadn't thought of it in that context for quite a while.

How many shows does CNN field in a typical week, outside routine news coverage? Close to 20? And besides O'Brien and Sanjay Gupta, most anchors of color do fill-in work or helm the channel's general news reports.

The story isn't much better at the other cable channels, where MSNBC's Lester Holt and Fox's Geraldo Rivera are among the few high-profile faces of color on either channel. And despite an astonishing changing of the guard in network news that has seen Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, Peter Jennings and Ted Koppel all leaving their high-profile jobs this year, no black person has surfaced as a realistic candidate to replace any of them.

(Elizabeth Vargas, who is of Puerto Rican heritage and in contention to replace Jennings, has taken over ABC's weekend shows and often filled in during weekday broadcasts.) ABC anchor Carole Simpson, pushed off anchoring the network's Sunday news report this month, noted as much while accepting her induction into NABJ's Hall of Fame during the convention.

"I cannot believe it's 2005 and we don't have a woman in the (networks' weekday) anchor chair, we don't have a minority in the anchor chair. . . . Are you looking at this?" she said, to rousing applause from a ballroom packed with black journalists. "Who will speak up?"

And the anchor jobs are just the tip of this trend. A survey released in July by the Radio-Television News Directors Association and Ball State University found that about 21 percent of journalists working in local TV in 2004 were minorities, virtually unchanged from the year before.

A report this year by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found a total of 34 more journalists of color working at U.S. newspapers than five years ago. A study released in June by the John and James L. Knight Foundation found that 73 percent of the nation's 200 largest newspapers employ fewer minorities than they did at some year between 1990 and 2004, suggesting the industry's diversity initiatives have peaked.

Whether you blame "diversity fatigue" or simple inattention, it is obvious that modern media are slipping in their quest to reflect the diversity of America's population.

Why does any of this matter? Because TV anchors and other journalists are more than the face of any given news division. They directly affect what gets on the air.

Consider the deluge of tributes to ABC News anchor Peter Jennings, who took his role as managing editor of the network's evening newscast so seriously, he reportedly took notes on each day's broadcast even as he was battling the cancer that would eventually take his life.

Jennings may have been more actively involved in content than many news anchors, especially those in local TV. But I have little doubt that producers and news executives would think more about diversity in news coverage if anchors and reporters included more people of color.

For evidence of how an insensitivity to diversity can affect news coverage destructively, look at what I call EWWS: Endangered White Women Syndrome.

Dateline NBC recently told the story of 24-year-old Tamika Huston, a black South Carolina woman who went missing around the same time as Lori Hacking but was ignored by national media, despite a \$30,000 reward and the efforts of an aunt who is a Miami-based public relations executive (Spartanburg, S.C., police on Friday arrested a man they believe killed Huston.)

Likewise, national outlets have been slow to report on Latoyia Figueroa, a 24-year-old pregnant mother from Philadelphia who has been missing since July. In both cases, more coverage has come from stories lamenting the lack of mainstream media attention to the women's plights than any direct focus on their disappearances.

But according to Dateline, citing media analyst Andrew Tyndall, the Big Three networks in 2004 spent huge amounts of time on Endangered White Women such as Hacking (135 minutes), Laci Peterson (941 minutes) and Audrey Seiler (98 minutes), the Wisconsin college student who faked her own disappearance.

The benefits are obvious: Fox News personality Greta Van Susteren has seen ratings for her show *On the Record* rise nearly 60 percent from last year since she began focusing intensely on the disappearance of blond, 18-year-old Natalee Holloway in Aruba, according to the Associated Press.

When I asked CNN/U.S. president Jonathan Klein why cable news seems to spend so much time on trivial stories such as runaway bride Jennifer Wilbanks, he denied the trend, saying critics have been cherry-picking stories to suit their insulting theses.

"You don't want to be lazy in just slapping a moniker on something," he said. "The question is: Over a period of time of viewing, do you come away understanding the news of the day? At CNN, there's no doubt of our conviction and no doubt we are walking the walk."

Perhaps. But forgive me for wondering if we wouldn't have a better diversity of news subjects if we had more diversity in those who define what exactly is the "news of the day."

The problem even extends to Sunday morning talk shows, where black people numbered just 8 percent of guests over the past 18 months, according to a National Urban League study titled "Sunday Morning Apartheid."

The study noted that black guests made 176 appearances out of 2,100 opportunities on NBC's Meet the Press, ABC's This Week, CBS's Face the Nation, Fox's Fox News Sunday and CNN's Late Edition. Worse, 122 of those appearances, nearly 70 percent, were made by just three people: Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State Colin Powell and journalist Juan Williams, who is a regular Fox News panelist.

In truth, myriad minority journalists cover politics and national affairs for major journalism organizations. But you'd barely know it from the Sunday shows, which feature the same panels of mostly white, mostly male lawmakers, journalists and pundits, even when the subject under discussion involves people of color.

So it's no wonder news outlets these days constantly overlook the travails of minorities. Like the title character in Ralph Ellison's classic novel, people of color have increasingly become invisible to mainstream media outlets, which are not hiring, covering or consulting us as often as they used to.

And it may be a measure of my own diversity fatigue that such circumstances don't prompt the same anger in me that they sparked in Rev. Jackson.

I guess, if you're overlooked long enough, it's a condition you come to expect.

-- Eric Deggans is a Times editorial writer. He can be reached at 727 893-8521 or [deggans@sptimes.com](mailto:deggans@sptimes.com)

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