

Imus controversy highlights need for greater media diversity

by Marc_H._Morial

Back in April, the controversy over racially and sexually insensitive remarks made by radio shock jock Don Imus toward the Rutgers University's women's basketball squad made all too clear the lack of sensitivity accorded people of color over the nation's airwaves and the lack of diversity among the broadcast media's ranks.

In a nation, where 33 percent of the population is of color, that has seen the civil rights movement open doors for minorities in corporate America, government and the halls of academia, the picture being reflected on the broadcast airwaves is less than realistic.

"Cable news remains an overwhelmingly white and male preserve. The Don Imus controversy put a momentary dent in this pattern as a result of the increase in appearances by African-Americans over that week - but only a dent, and not a particularly large one at that. When an issue involving gender and race/ethnicity dominates the news, the cable networks do bring on a more diverse lineup of guests than they ordinarily do. The question, then, is why their guest lists are so overwhelmingly white and male the rest of the time," concluded a report by the Washington, D.C.-based media watchdog Media Matters.

The group, which monitored cable news network shows in April for their minority representation, found that even during the week of the Imus controversy, whites - especially men - tended to dominate. They accounted for from 54 percent (CNN) to 72 percent (Fox News Channel) of guests booked.

That's down from the week before, when whites accounted for 71 percent (CNN) to 93 percent (MSNBC) of booked appearances. After the Imus incident, white representation, which fell during the controversy, made a comeback of sorts a week later to levels observed before Imus - a range of 74 percent (CNN) to 82 percent (MSNBC).

What is telling is that minority representation on MSNBC, which simulcasted Imus' former radio show, skyrocketed 700 percent from 4 to 30 percent of guest appearances during the week of the controversy, compared to the week before. The week after the controversy, the percentage settled down to 14 percent.

It's not any better on the Sunday morning talk shows, either, Media Matters found in its "If It's Sunday, It's Still Conservative" report. The study follows up on research conducted in the National Urban League's 2005 Sunday Morning Apartheid report, which found that only 8 percent of Sunday morning guests were black over an 18-month period from 2004 to 2005.

The Media Matters report, which monitored talk show appearances in 2005 and 2006, found that whites

tended to outnumber minorities by a ratio of 7-to-1, and that two out of every three guests on Sunday shows were white men. At NBC's "Meet the Press," white men accounted for more than three-quarters of guest appearances followed by CBS News' "Face the Nation" with 72 percent. "Fox News Sunday" had the "best" track record with 62 percent.

The picture at America's daily newspapers is a little bit brighter in terms of newsroom employment of minorities but less than stellar. Nearly 7,800 minority journalists - or 13.62 percent of all full-time journalists - worked in the nation's newsrooms in 2006, down slightly from 13.87 percent in 2005, according to the American Society of Newspaper Editors' annual newsroom census.

The number of newspapers with no minorities on their full-time staff grew by 15 - from 377 to 392 but a majority of them had small (10,000 or less) circulations. Of newspapers with more than 500,000 circulation, 17 percent of full-time journalists are minorities. The percentage climbs to 22 percent for dailies over 250,000 but under 500,000, and 27 percent for those over 100,000 but under 250,000.

"Diversity isn't just about numbers, it's about making our news reports better," said ASNE President Dave Zeeck in a press release accompanying the survey. "Diverse staffs lead to better journalism."

The overall employment rate of 13.62 is only the second decline to have been observed since 1978, when the organization, which helps newsrooms increase their diversity to better reflect the communities they serve, began conducting the survey. In 1978, minority journalists made up nearly 4 percent of the total newsroom work force.

When we released our Sunday Morning Apartheid report in 2005, we encouraged cable and network outlets to take positive and productive steps to provide their viewers a broader perspective of the public policy issues. Since then, not a lot has been done - until after Imus. NBC News, which simulcasted Imus' radio show on MSNBC, took three bold steps toward diversifying its ranks in the weeks following the controversy.

The news organization hired former Newsweek editor Mark Whitaker to be second in command, appointed Lester Holt, host of the weekend "Today" show, to serve as weekend anchor of "NBC Nightly News," and promoted weekend "Today" executive producer Lyne Pitts to be vice president of NBC News and the division's point person on diversity issues.

You have to give NBC News some props here but it shouldn't take a controversy for news executives to understand the importance of diversity to the journalism process for the constituents it serves.

I'm not advocating media diversity for the sake of diversity but for the substantial benefits it delivers to the

public at large. Broadening the pool of guests and anchors and reporters improves the tenor and quality of the debate, offers a richer and more varied array of information to viewers and helps fulfill the responsibility of news outlets to educate the American public to make them better equipped to make informed political and policy choices.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

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