

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE RAINBOW

BY WILLIAM MCGOWAN

From the outside, it must have looked like the classic media power meeting. But inside, last December's joint Diversity Summit meeting of the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the Newspaper Association of America had the air of a tent revival, full of jeremiads, calls for repentance, and holy roller zeal. The push for diversity may be one of the most contentious issues in American journalism, responsible for polarizing, if not balkanizing, more than one newsroom around the country. But you wouldn't have known it from this crowd. Speaker after speaker got up to testify to its saving power.

Sitting smack in the center of the room was Arthur Sulzberger, Jr., the laid-back yet lordly young publisher of *The New York Times*. Sulzberger's front-and-center seat was significant: in less than a year since assuming the helm of the *Times* in January 1992 he had already made diversity a central, defining feature of his new reign. As the tributes to diversity continued, Sulzberger listened with an expression of rapt intensity, then got up to deliver his own appeal: diversity not only made good editorial sense, he claimed, it made good business sense too.

Accepting the premise that a newsroom lacking in proportional representation of nonwhites cannot provide fair and accurate coverage of America's increas-

ingly multicultural society, Sulzberger has called diversity "the single most important issue" his newspaper faces. In 1991 he made a speech to the National Association of Black Journalists in which he referred to it as "our cause." The following year he told the National Gay and Lesbian Journalists Association, "We can no longer offer our readers a predominantly white, straight, male vision of events and say that we, as journalists, are doing our jobs."

Endorsing the first tentative steps toward diversity taken by the *Times*'s executive editor, Max Frankel, after Frankel took over the newsroom in 1986, Sulzberger has urged his executives to redouble efforts to hire and promote minority editors and reporters. In 1991, Gerald Boyd, the first black manager in the *Times*'s Washington bureau, had been made editor of the Metro section, and in 1993 he became the paper's first black assistant managing editor; as Metro editor, Boyd expanded coverage of the outer boroughs, to which the paper

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had previously given short shrift. Other celebrated diversity hires have been Bob Herbert, who this spring became the first black columnist, and Margo Jefferson, who became the paper's first black critic, leaping from outside the *Times* over the heads of several talented white male veterans whose seniority would have given them preference before.

The quest for diversity has had unquestionable benefits. It has led to the hiring of many talented members of minority groups who might have been ignored by the paper in a less enlightened day. While not too long ago the *Times* was a nearly all-white institution focused on all-white precincts of power, it is now getting closer to the "ideal newspaper" made up of "as many smart people from as many different backgrounds as possible," as one *Times* reporter put it.

Some acknowledge the value of this effort but see a worrisome downside. A recent *Esquire* magazine piece by Robert Sam Anson described the feelings of white reporters at the *Times* who complained of certain stories being reserved for minorities, of editors tailoring stories to suit their political views, and of management so desperate to hire and promote minorities that some have been placed in positions where they were in way over their heads.

It is the impact that the *Times*'s diversity push has had on coverage, however, that has triggered the sharpest criticism. As some see it, the aspects of diversity that aim to enhance racial sensitivity have fostered an atmosphere of "hyper-sensitivity" that undermines the *Times*'s vaunted tradition of frank, fearless, and forthright exposition of the news.

After combing through the coverage generated by a handful of what might be called "diversity issues" in society at large — racial hiring preferences in the workplace, gays in the military, immigration, and recent episodes of racial unrest in New York City — I'm compelled to agree with those who claim that, instead of providing a reality check on the fashionable cant of the day, the *Times* has become its ready vehicle. It may not be the *Pravda* of p.c., but it is certainly something less than a model of detached neutrality.

And so I would suggest that diversity supporters at the *Times* and other papers ask themselves some hard questions. Does the effort to increase racial sensitivity and diversity in the newsroom create an atmosphere in which troublesome racial and sexual issues cannot be adequately and reliably explored? Can a newspaper like the *Times*, which is so preoccupied with diversity issues inside its own walls — battles over hiring, promotion, and assignment policies, and arguments over the biases of "the dominant culture" — report with critical distance on diversity in the rest of society? Does the effort to hire minority reporters who can identify and articulate separate and distinct minority points of view encourage representation long denied or partisan cheerleading?

Not asking these questions will have consequences both for the *Times* and those American newspapers that look to it as an example of how they should

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deal with the challenge of diversity.

As the *Times* makes its own diversity effort, its reporting on diversity in corporate America has been interesting to track. Not two weeks after last December's "summit," a piece by Lena Williams headed COMPANIES CAPITALIZING ON WORKER DIVERSITY appeared on the front page. Defining corporate diversity management as "a desire to recognize, respect, and capitalize on different strands and backgrounds in American society," the December 15, 1992, article explained that not long ago few in corporate America took the concept seriously. Today, however, "more and more employers view diversity as good business as well as good public relations." The article also noted that, in addition to becoming "one of the most popular management concepts of the '90s," it is also "a booming multimillion-dollar business."

The piece did convey some skepticism toward the trend. It voiced doubt about the sincerity, as well as the qualifications, of some consultants entering this booming field. It also made clear that many of the corporations hiring them are only doing so out of obligation. But while Williams referred to a study by the conservative Hudson Institute, which the diversity management industry has embraced as a justification for its existence, she neglected to note an important part of that study — the section on minority preparedness. In it the authors point out that minority groups are underrepresented in corporate America not only because of racial inhospitality but also because of the lack of needed levels of education and skills.

An earlier article about aggressive affirmative action efforts at Corning, Inc. in upstate New York characterized Corning's program as one of corporate America's most ambitious bids at "cultural engineering." The reporter, Peter Kilborn, did note that some white men were "resentful and bristling," but the piece included no interviews that might have made these feelings more intelligible. Instead, there were voices that could have come from a corporate press release. "The competition for me will be more difficult," said one white male who reportedly accepted the effort. "Corning has quotas; I don't resent it. It's a fact of life."

Opposition to dropping the ban on gay military service was treated as homophobic "bigotry"

Ironically, the *Times*'s reporting on the struggle within the press itself in dealing with diversity has been conspicuously wanting. In 1992, the *Los Angeles Times* offered buyouts to some of its senior people in an effort to trim costs in the face of an advertising slump. To management's surprise, the buyout was more attractive than expected. Eighty-eight editorial employees, nearly 10 percent of the newsroom staff, announced they were leaving the paper, four times the number management had planned on. Many were top reporters and editors at the peak of their careers.

According to *Washington Post* media reporter Howard Kurtz, the exodus was a reflection of plummeting morale; in the aftermath of the L.A. riots, management had exacerbated racial strains by intensifying its affirmative action efforts. "There is a factionalism at work at this paper which I think is extremely counterproductive," said one exiting Metro staff veteran. In trying to pacify and placate minorities, this reporter said, management had alienated many of those who had not been alienated before. But the *Times* made only vague references to "dissatisfaction in the working environment" and "the policies of current management," and attributed the popularity of the buyout to its generosity. No references to newsroom racial tensions were made.

Equally telling was its coverage of the adoption of racial hiring quotas at *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Both *The Washington Post* and the *Times* had reported extensively on an earlier controversy generated by a December 12, 1990, *Inquirer* editorial which suggested that teenage welfare mothers be given Norplant to reduce pregnancies. Such an editorial, many minority staffers had complained, reflected pervasive racism at the paper.

But only the *Post* followed up with a report on how the Norplant contretemps

had been used by minority factions at the paper to force management to increase the paper's racial sensitivity through what editor Maxwell King specifically referred to as hiring "quotas." Although the five-year plan, which would require that 50 percent of newsroom hires be minority and 50 percent be women, was "the most aggressive plan" at any newspaper in the country, as King said in a dramatic newsroom announcement, the *Times* chose not to report on it.

A September 10, 1993, *Times* news story headed GAY JOURNALISTS LEADING A REVOLUTION celebrated the trend of out-of-the-closet journalists, asserting that "there is wide agreement that homosexual journalists are bringing about more, and more sophisticated, treatment of gay subjects." More treatment undoubtedly, as the number of stories related to gay issues and themes has increased dramatically. But whether the coverage is more sophisticated is debatable. On most gay issues — domestic partnership, AIDS, curriculums to teach tolerance for gays in the schools, even the issue of a gay-inclusive St. Patrick's Day parade in New York — the *Times* has demonstrated partisan sympathy.

A case in point was its handling of the gays-in-the-military issue. While the editorial stance was that opposition to dropping the ban on gay military service was nothing other than homophobic "bigotry," feature articles celebrated gay servicemen. Joseph Steffan, a former midshipman who was kicked out of Annapolis shortly before graduation for revealing he was gay, was "every mother's dream for her daughter," wrote Jeffrey Schmalz, an openly gay reporter, in a February 4, 1993, Style section profile. "Handsome as can be, with a principled intelligence and a diffident way." Also cheered was Scott Peck, the gay son of a Marine colonel, who was described in an editorial as "a recruiter's dream."

While the more right-wing ends of the opposition did indeed invoke antediluvian stereotypes of gays as predators and perverts — one Navy spokesman claimed that "homosexuals are notoriously promiscuous" — other supporters of the ban raised thoughtful objections that were given short shrift.

For example, reservations dealing with the impact that sexual relations — consensual or unwanted — would have on morale were airily dismissed with the suggestion that sexual relations between consenting gays in the ranks would have no impact on unit cohesiveness or morale, and that anyone who was the target of an unwanted overture only had to insist that “no means no.”

Existing rules prohibiting demonstrations of affection between males and females would work for gay relations too, the *Times* implied in a piece by Jane Gross headed FOR THE MILITARY, POLICING SEX IS NOTHING NEW. The article ignored what many feminists say is the military’s rampant problem of sexual harassment, as well as the embarrassing rash of pregnancies that occurred among servicewomen on duty in the gulf war. Also ignored were statistics the *Times* itself had reported on earlier — that in 1992, 37 of the 360 sodomy investigations by the Army involved rape. Another study, reported on in *The Washington Times* but not in *The New York Times*, found that eight out of ten homosexuals court martialed by the Army for sexual misconduct in the last four years had involved a sexual assault.

The sense of realities denied in the service of gay partisanship was nowhere more obvious than in the coverage of April’s gay march in Washington. “Tomorrow’s parade can be helpful,” declared the editorial page the day before, if it held up “a mirror for the nation to see its own reflection.” Indeed, middle class America did see its own reflection. The *Times*’s Jeffrey Schmalz, in a page-one report, focused largely on feelings of gay pride and solidarity among the marchers. But, as *The Washington Post*’s Kurtz pointed out, Schmalz failed to acknowledge the topless lesbians, the men in leather harnesses, and the cross-dressers seen by everyone who watched C-Span, as well as the lesbian comedian at the podium who said she wanted “to fuck” Hillary Clinton and the speaker who said she “wanted to get it on with Anita Hill.”

Of course, the bizarre behavior of a few shouldn’t have discredited the cause espoused by the thousands who really were the boys and girls next door. But neither should the *Times*’s coverage have deliberately denied the obvious. →



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The *Times*'s treatment of immigration, like that of gays in the military, is marked by only the most cursory acknowledgment of unpalatable realities.

A prime example is the exaggerated sensitivity with which it has reported on drug dealing in Manhattan's Washington Heights, one of the city's most violent neighborhoods. Washington Heights has a huge population of illegal aliens, about 100,000. Police estimate that half of all crimes committed there, most of them drug-related, are committed by illegals. Many of these drug dealers are street toughs called "Dominicans." Recruited in the Dominican Republic, they usually reside in the U.S. illegally and serve as foot soldiers in the street trade for a couple of years before returning home.

In the summer of 1992, riots erupted in Washington Heights after a plainclothes police officer killed an illegal Dominican drug dealer who had pulled a gun on him. The city's other papers reported that the disorder was fed in large part by drug dealers who saw an opportunity to create a political problem for the police so they would back off from aggressive street-level antinarcotics tactics. But the *Times* seemed unwilling to challenge the assertion by a Latino community activist that allegations that drug dealers were inciting violence were "totally ridiculous and incendiary."

Another reflection of the *Times*'s aversion to linking crime and illegal immigration was apparent in the way it treated the criminal involvement and illegal immigration status of the dead drug dealer. According to police, Jose "Kiko" Garcia was a known associate of a gang called Los Cibanos, had been convicted of felony narcotics possession, and had violated his probation by giving officials a false address and dropping out of sight. Authorities also said he was an illegal alien who had slipped into the country four years before.

Information on Garcia's criminal record was reported by other papers several days ahead of the *Times*; when the *Times* did report it, it still conveyed the impression that Garcia was a victim of racist police brutality. And when mention was made in the *Times* of Garcia's illegal status, it was to create sympathy for him by implying that the lack

The search for minority points of view has opened up opportunities for racial and ethnic cheerleading

of a green card made employment difficult and drug dealing inevitable. The question of how a felon like Garcia received probation rather than deportation was not pursued.

Immigration never became the presidential campaign issue in 1992 that Pat Buchanan and David Duke wanted to make it. It was, however, a heated issue in several state-level campaigns, particularly in California, where the mounting anti-immigrant backlash is most intense. But instead of analyzing the backlash dispassionately, the *Times* dismissed it as an avatar of nativism. A case in point was a June 13, 1993, Week in Review piece that likened calls for gaining control of the borders to the xenophobia sweeping Germany and to America's nativist past. "Americans, pinched and worried, say asylum seekers are a burden. They have said so before," read the pull-quote.

The politics of race and crime in New York City has always proved troubling for the *Times* to cover, but it has been especially vexing while David Dinkins has been mayor. Like the *Times*, the Dinkins administration has devoted itself to the cause of diversity. The "gorgeous mosaic" model of governance, a race-conscious rejection of the old colorblind, melting pot ideal, seems to be to politics what the doctrine of newsroom diversity has become to journalism.

Intriguingly, the most egregious shattering of that mosaic, the Crown Heights riots in August 1991, also represented one of the *Times*'s most profound journalistic failures in years. Instead of providing accurate and complete information about this incident of racial unrest, the *Times* left the dereliction of the city's political officials and leaders unbarred for more than two years, until a state fact-finding commis-

sion revealed the real story. Had the *Times* performed as well on Crown Heights as it does routinely on other tough stories, it could have spared itself the embarrassment of having to run a front-page mea culpa two days after the state report came out this summer. In that piece it admitted to "blindspots" that made its reporting on the official malfeasance behind the disorder "so deficient as to be misleading."

The accident that killed Gavin Cato, a seven-year-old black boy hit by a Jewish driver who had run a red light, set off an explosion of anti-Semitic disturbances. As the *Times* reported on August 20, "More than 250 neighborhood residents, mostly black teenagers shouting, 'Jews! Jews! Jews!'" jeered the driver of the car, a Hasidic man, and then turned their anger on the police." Later that day, Yankel Rosenbaum, a Jewish scholar from Australia, was stabbed to death by a mob of up to twenty black youths shouting, "Get the Jew!" Meanwhile, rioting continued for three nights of escalating violence, which the state report called "the worst outbreak of racial violence" to afflict New York City "in twenty years." The disorder was not quelled until the fourth night, after Mayor Dinkins, himself the target of rocks and bottles, ordered the police to crack down.

Reporting the anti-Semitic taunts and the fact that most of those arrested were blacks, the *Times*'s street reporting left little doubt that the basic story of Crown Heights was one of black mobs attacking Jews in retaliation for the death of Gavin Cato. Still, news analysis searched for the "context" of the riots as a way of blaming societal racism and excusing black mobs in Crown Heights for their misdeeds. One story was headed FOR YOUNG BLACKS ALIENATION AND A GROWING DESPAIR TURN INTO RAGE; another story, headed THE BITTERNESS FLOWS IN 2 DIRECTIONS, explained that the Hasidim were often the focus of anger because of the widespread belief that they receive special treatment from the police and other city institutions and get help that blacks sorely need in a time of dwindling resources. (*Newsday*) too, reported this widespread belief — but went on to commit substantial resources to check it out, and conclude that there was no basis for the charge.

Overall, the inattention columnists and editorialists gave Rosenbaum's killing stood in stark contrast to their response to the racially motivated murder of Yusuf Hawkins, a black teenager, in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn by six white boys two years earlier.

The most egregious lapse on the *Times*'s part, though, was in not throwing its reportorial resources at the question of why the police failed to crack down on the rioters until the fourth night of the disturbance. Hasidic leaders, who filed a lawsuit against the city, charged that such restraint had been ordered by the mayor so that black youth could "vent their rage."

Were police afraid to act lest they be accused of brutality in the wake of the Rodney King beating in March 1991? Was the slow response motivated by fears that a crackdown would have adverse political repercussions for Dinkins in the black community? Whatever the answers to these questions, the *Times* seemed to have absolved Dinkins of any responsibility for the way the disturbances were handled. In a January 1992 editorial reviewing the first two years of Dinkins's mayoralty, the *Times* concluded, "But he has learned.... When Crown Heights erupted, Mr. Dinkins was at his peace-making best."

Is it wrong to blame efforts to increase racial representation and sensitivity in the newsroom for the skewed reporting on diversity issues alone? Indeed it is. The problem is the way these diversity efforts have worked in conjunction with tendencies within the institutional culture of the *Times* to create an atmosphere that discourages skepticism toward fashionable nostrums.

Consider also that the emphasis on racial and ethnic diversity has ignored class diversity, which has resulted in reporting with an elitist cast that is often remote from middle- and working-class realities. More *Front Page* and less Foucault might curb the paper's seeming obsession with victim-oppressor dynamics and the trendy insistence that diversity represents the only stay against American society's intractable racism.

Another factor to be considered is the way the search for separate and distinct minority points of view has opened up opportunities for racial and ethnic

cheerleading and created a climate of racial and intellectual intimidation. Racial intimidation in terms of "a terror of offending any of the victimized groups," as one senior Metro reporter puts it; "all someone has to do is make a charge of racism and everyone runs away." Intellectual intimidation in terms of the way the publisher has made diversity such a personal crusade, which makes career-conscious reporters and editors reluctant to speak out against the party line. "You aren't going to get ahead at this newspaper by telling Arthur that we've gone too far and are losing credibility," says the jaded Metro reporter. "Arthur is certainly not going

to race down to the newsroom and embrace you."

American society is at a crossroads, and to the extent that uncritical enthusiasm for diversity delays needed measures to deal with it, or prescribes the wrong ones, we will suffer the consequences in the future. If a society of such staggering, ever-increasing diversity as the United States is ever to work out a framework for handling its multiplicity, it has to abandon wishful thinking and come to grips with reality. This process is only undermined by an agenda that encourages intellectually dishonest news reporting and analysis, however well-intended. ♦

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