

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Reporting by the Numbers

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1519 words

18 March 1996

The Wall Street Journal

A18

English

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Serving a white-bread town in the nation's whitest state, Vermont's Burlington Free Press seems an unlikely place to look for what the diversity wars are doing inside America's newsrooms. At issue is whether the Free Press -- one of 93 owned by Gannett -- acted properly in firing Paul Teetor, a reporter who had been targeted by Burlington's small but vocal minority community over his reporting on a controversial community forum on racism in March 1993.

During the forum, a white woman trying to defend Vermonters against angry accusations of white racism was cut off at the microphone by the moderator, a black mayoral aide named Rodney Patterson. Mr. Patterson directed that the woman be escorted outside, explaining that the meeting was "specifically designed for people of color" to describe their "ethnic experiences" of living in Vermont.

Mr. Teetor, three times named the Vermont Press Association's Reporter of the Year, agreed with the woman's characterization of the incident as reverse racism. When his account appeared the next day, minority activists charged that the story was "ugly" and "distorted" and that it "inflamed racial tensions." Leading the attack was Mr. Patterson, who threatened to file a lawsuit and to march on the paper unless Mr. Teetor was fired and an apology published.

Free Press editor Ronald Thornburgh terminated Mr. Teetor that night in a 90-second meeting without giving him a chance to defend himself, reviewing a videotape that supported the reporter's account or talking to any officials in attendance (who also confirm what Mr. Teetor reported). The blackballed reporter has tried to make ends meet since then with a string of menial jobs.

Still Mr. Thornburgh insists he did not cave in to community pressure. But Mr. Patterson later told a Boston Globe reporter: "He [Mr. Teetor] messed with the wrong person. And I think the Free Press was aware that we could rally enough support to cause people to question what they were doing."

At Mr. Teetor's wrongful dismissal and defamation trial, which opened two weeks ago, attorneys for the Free Press and Gannett argued that Mr. Teetor's inaccurate and unbalanced account of the race forum "was the last straw . . . after a long history of problems." Citing a record of poor performance, unprofessional conduct and a reputation for recklessness, Free Press attorney Robert Rachlin told the Boston Globe last year that Mr. Teetor was "a problem employee from day one" who would have been fired much sooner if Gannett had not been so "kindhearted."

Mr. Teetor argues that the facts and the tone of his story were accurate, and that an incident of reverse racism at a community forum on race was indeed newsworthy. He admits his record has some blemishes, but he insists it is being distorted to obscure the fact that he was "sacrificed on the altar of political correctness" in what his attorney Ritchie Berger told the jury was an act of "pandering to the minority community." These minority critics could have made trouble for Free Press editors back at Gannett corporate headquarters. There, Mr. Teetor's attorneys argue, sensitivity to minorities has been declared Holy Writ, and they appear to have the goods to prove it.

Delving into the bowels of Gannett's corporate diversity effort, Mr. Teetor's attorneys found internal documents that shed light on the quota-based system that the company relies on to measure the racial correctness of its editorial products. This is a system, they argue, that encourages hypersensitivity and double standards, and is inappropriate in a setting like Burlington, where minorities represent less than 3% of the population.

The documents center on Gannett's "All American Contest," an annual numerical review that judges editors on how successful they have been at achieving racial balance on their news staffs and their news pages. An important part of this diversity effort is what Gannett calls "mainstreaming," a controversial, ill-defined policy of covering the news by racial numbers that encourages reporters to maintain and consult minority source lists, and to integrate positive images of minorities in news coverage and photos.

Court papers show that at the time of the Teetor dismissal, the Free Press had some of the lowest All American scores in the newspaper division and that Mr. Thornburgh was under pressure from Gannett -- which ties

executive compensation and career security to the contest results -- to improve them. This made the editor highly susceptible to Mr. Patterson's threats, attorneys for Mr. Teetor argue; if an alienated black community stopped taking calls from the paper's reporters, mainstreaming would become impossible.

To establish just how skittish Free Press editors were on the racial front, Mr. Teetor's lawyers point to a July 1993 letter from Mr. Thornburgh to Gannett in which he desperately trumpeted the steps the newspaper had taken to strengthen its commitment to diversity. These included the hiring of a Japanese-American writer and an African-American couple, one of whom would be groomed for management, in keeping with a promise to seek minority candidates for every editorial opening. Mr. Thornburgh also underscored the recruitment of a new managing editor who had formerly spearheaded a successful diversity drive at the Gannett-owned Detroit News. In addition, the letter crowed about sending a photographer to three minority business forums, with the assignment of photographing every minority face there, and having senior editors meet with the paper's minority committee to review coverage, particularly coverage of crime. And it included a proud description of Mr. Thornburgh's plans to make mainstreaming a part of all newsroom professionals' annual reviews, not just top editors'.

In a deposition to Mr. Teetor's lawyers, Mr. Thornburgh conceded that he had decreed that one out of six faces in a photo series called Vermont Voices should be a person of color. Another deposition from the paper's star columnist disclosed that Mr. Thornburgh had instructed him in a memo that at least one column in every four should be about a minority or address a diversity issue. Court papers also show that Mr. Thornburgh was especially cautious about photographs; a shot the paper ran of a black man raking refuse was later criticized by Mr. Thornburgh because it could be seen as reinforcing stereotypes of blacks as suitable for manual labor only.

Mr. Teetor also cites two incidents as background for understanding the paper's racial anxieties. One involved the fits of protest triggered in the black community when the Free Press ran a picture of a scowling, manacled black suspect as he was arraigned in a sensational 1992 murder case. (Photos of the defendant did not run a year later during the actual trial, which would not have been the case had the defendant been white, Mr. Thornburgh conceded in his deposition.) And since racial trouble in the Gannett empire had become national news two weeks before Mr. Teetor's dismissal with the revelation that USA Today had run a front page photo of armed black gang members later found to be staged, the Free Press was even more anxious than usual.

The climate of racial solicitude at the Free Press was also underscored by the fact that prior to the forum the paper's editors never challenged its ground rules -- that it was exclusively designed for people of color to speak and that those who did not wish to make statements in public could hold forth from a media-free zone. These were infringements on First Amendment liberties and would have been considered newsworthy in a normal newsroom, Mr. Teetor argues.

The case has been a profound embarrassment to the editors of the Free Press and the corporate officers of Gannett, none of whom would comment for this story. A so-called clarification that ran the day after Mr. Teetor was fired and was clearly published to appease angry minorities was itself inaccurate on several critical points, leading a columnist for an alternative weekly to dub the paper "the gang that couldn't retract straight." In the early stages of the court proceedings, the paper's attorney asked that information relating to personnel records and financial information be impounded under a gag order, a move that was denied by the judge, who wryly observed that the Free Press was asking him "to prevent newspaper coverage." And the psychiatrist Free Press attorneys hired to evaluate Mr. Teetor declared he had an antiauthority complex -- an odd thing to hold against a reporter.

Odd, but not totally surprising in the bland new world of corporate journalism. "I stood up for one woman who was denied her First Amendment rights and removed from a public meeting room because of her skin color," Mr. Teetor insists. "And now I think I am standing up for the rights of journalists. It is too bad Gannett wants generic stories that don't offend anybody."

Mr. McGowan is writing a book about identity politics and the press.

(See related letters: "Letters to the Editor: Chameleon Policy Colors the News" -- WSJ April 3, 1996)