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## **Taste: Among the Believers --- Diversity, yes. Diversity of opinion, no.**

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Seattle, Wash. -- Want to know why a profession that should be reporting the facts is acting like a bunch of cheerleaders? Why news coverage of affirmative action and other sensitive subjects has become skewed to fit a political orthodoxy?

To answer such questions, you'd need more than just a few days at last week's "UNITY 99" convention here. But it was a good place to start.

The convention brought together about 6,000 members of black, Latino, Asian- and Native-American journalists' organizations. Naturally, the event was heavily covered in the press. Many stories gave top billing to what was said to be an alarming attrition of minority reporters in U.S. newsrooms.

A serious matter, no doubt. But a bigger story concerned the alarming attrition of something else in the newsroom: an ethic of professional detachment and neutral observation. To judge by the proceedings, in its place there is now a spirit of activism and advocacy masking as "unique and distinct minority points of view."

UNITY 99 began with a tell-tale controversy. A faction within the National Association of Black Journalists objected bitterly to holding the convention in Seattle, since a Washington state ballot initiative called I-200, which passed last year, had curtailed racial preferences in the public sector. Other members of the UNITY coalition weren't so keen on breaking the organization's commitments -- although not (God knows!) out of any

respect for the point of view represented by I-200. The Native-American journalists likened the call to explore other sites to the broken treaties littering American history.

Ultimately, the NABJ dropped the matter. But for the event itself, nobody checked her identity politics at the door. Quoting the revolutionary Frantz Fanon in her remarks, NABJ President Vanessa Williams explained that "out of relative obscurity, each generation must realize its mission -- either fulfill it or betray it." The mission she was referring to, let it be said, was a political one. Kara Briggs, president of the Native American Journalist Association, gave an interview declaring that her identity as a Native American was more important to her than professional detachment. "I was born into a tribe," she said, "not a newspaper."

Such statements set the tone for the entire convention. Times Mirror hosted a session titled "Balance or Bias: Affirmative Action and the News Media." Supposedly, the point of the panel was "to develop a report card" on the way affirmative action was being covered. (A worthy task indeed.) But the discussion quickly ran off the rails.

For one thing, the panel was tipped heavily toward the pro-affirmative-action side, with two opponents overwhelmed by nine supporters. One of the supporters was ABC News correspondent Farai Chideya, who often reports on racial matters. Warning of incipient "de facto apartheid," she said supporters of I-200 had won a victory similar to that of Afrikaners in pre-Mandela South Africa.

A panelist -- Roger Clegg, of the Center for Equal Opportunity -- objected to this "irresponsible" analogy. But a bigger question went unaddressed: How could Ms. Chideya voice such a sentiment and still be considered professionally objective enough to report on race?

A panel on covering civil rights showcased Lani Guinier, who spoke glowingly of the days when journalists "were part of the unpaid staff of the civil-rights movement." A session on "tracking" hate crimes featured USA Today reporter Gary Fields, the man who led the charge in 1996 on the "epidemic" of arson attacks on black churches in the South. (As it turned out, there was no epidemic, and the notion of an organized racial conspiracy was eventually repudiated by even his own newspaper.) Of course, no one asked Mr. Fields how his own reporting had gone so wrong.

There was also lots of MLA-style deconstruction attacking the ideal of objectivity. Frank del Olmo, chief of the L.A. Times's special Latino unit, led

a panel discussing "the Rashomon effect," in which truth, as the program stated, "may not be absolute even when facts are not in dispute."

Famously, the UNITY convention played host to various presidential candidates. Here again, even-handedness was not exactly the rule of the day. The participants gave Al Gore a standing ovation for a speech in which he denounced anti-affirmative action movements like I-200 as "phony" ballot initiatives and called the concept of colorblindness a "duck blind" for people to hide behind.

Meanwhile George W. Bush, who decided to attend the conference at the last minute, was pilloried. UNITY's president, Catalina Camia, held a news conference to scold him. Syndicated columnist Cynthia Tucker wrote that the misstep proves that "the Republican Party cannot resist sending out signals that it would just as soon not open its tent to the darker skinned."

To be sure, there were some dissidents grumbling in the corners. One of them was Michelle Malkin, a columnist for the Seattle Times, who spoke to me after appearing on a panel of minority columnists. The problem, she explained, is that "reporters hired because of racial preferences wind up reinforcing each other, leading to groupthink." Later, she composed a blistering column. The "fatal flaw of Unity," she wrote, was "its unspoken mandate of strict political conformity. . . . If you don't accept the left leaning agenda of advocacy journalism, you're enabling racism. If you don't support the pursuit of racial hiring goals as a primary journalistic goal, you're selling out."

Probably more than a few people at the conference felt this way, but I didn't hear too many say so. As one reporter told me at a lavish reception: "A lot of people might be more critical, but there are just not that many jobs in the newspaper world. No one wants to stand out, or make enemies."

Indeed, the dominant impression from the week was of a conference full of activists joined by mostly white liberal managers who were too timid to confront them or too enamored of their politics to see something wrong. When I asked one Miami Herald editor about the ideological skew in the proceedings, she said: "I guess I basically agree with what they are saying, so it really doesn't bother me."

On my way out of Seattle, my cab driver, a South African of mixed race (black and South Asian), asked me how one gets to be a journalist in this country. Not sure whether I should point him to the black journalists' organization or the Asian one, I asked him to what racial category he was

assigned back in the old country. Laughing, he said that since he got here, he no longer cared about such things. "All I care about now is taking care of my family."

I was tempted to tell him there were 6,000 people inside the convention center who would have him think otherwise.

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Mr. McGowan, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, is completing a book about the politics of media diversity.

(See related letters: "Letters to the Editor: In Unity There Is Diversity" -- WSJ Aug. 2, 1999)