

Reversing declines in minority journalists: A community-based approach in East Palo Alto

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Media organizations in many parts of the world seek to have their staffs reflect the make-up of the communities they serve. In April 2011, the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) reported that the number of journalists of colour working in newspaper and online newsrooms declined for the third consecutive year. Findings revealed that while minorities represent 36% of the US population, they account for only 12.79% of journalists working in newspaper newsrooms (ASNE 2011). This qualitative study investigates the unique approach underway in East Palo Alto, designed to alter a backward-sliding trend in the numbers of minorities entering the journalism profession. Through field observations and one-on-one interviews with programme participants, instructors and advisors, this study examines how academic and extracurricular choices made while in high school can affect students' perceptions about possible futures. Specifically, it looks at the efficacy of an off-campus approach to altering a school's dominant culture.

Keywords: employment; hiring; journalism; minority; diversity; equity; inclusion

Introduction

Media organizations in many parts of the world seek to have their staffs reflect the make-up of the communities they serve. In the United Kingdom, the BBC follows a diversity policy aimed at fostering more equity and inclusion in its workforce. In 2012, the percentage of black and minority ethnic (BME) employees at the BBC was reported as 12.5%, consistent with a goal the organization set in 2008 (BBC 2013). However, in the United States media firms are missing their minority employment goals. In April 2011, the American Society of News Editors (ASNE) reported that the number of journalists of colour working in newspaper and online newsrooms declined for the third consecutive year. Findings revealed that while minorities represent 36% of the US population, they account for only 12.79% of journalists working in newspaper newsrooms (ASNE 2011). The results are in sharp contrast with the organization's stated objectives. In 1978, ASNE set a goal to have minority journalists reach parity with their proportion of the US population within 25 years (ASNE 2012). In fact, based on disappointing results, the organization later voted to extend its deadline to the year 2025 (McGill 2000).

Several journalism educators argue that affecting change in newsrooms must begin long before prospective minority hires reach adulthood – and even college. Ellen Austin received the Dow Jones News Fund's 2012 Journalism Educator of the Year Award, and serves as the Journalism Education Association's (JEA) southwest region director. Austin notes

50 per cent of future journalists start in high school and 75 per cent of minority journalists start in high school. If you are not meeting those future journalists now, you are not going to meet them when they are on a college campus. (Austin interview 15 November 2011)

Previous surveys of college students confirm Austin's statements (Hipsman and Wearden 1991; Collins, Hipsman and Warden 1995).

Austin's primary duty is teaching journalism at Palo Alto High School, in Northern California. The school is widely recognized as having the nation's largest and most acclaimed high school journalism programme. Nearly 500 of the school's 1,800 pupils participate, and they produce seven different publications – all student run. 'Paly', as it is known within its community, consistently wins top honours from the Columbia Scholastic Press Association (CSPA), and it was one of only three high schools in the country honoured with the 2011 First Amendment Press Freedom Award, bestowed by the Journalism Education Association. Additionally, President Barack Obama has acknowledged the programme's achievements. However, for some time the programme's teachers have been disturbed by the fact that their student newsrooms do not reflect the changing demographics of their school's student population.

Paul Kandell is Austin's colleague at Palo Alto High, and was the 2009 Dow Jones News Fund Journalism Educator of the Year. That year, Kandell and a team of teachers,

who are Caucasian, launched an unorthodox initiative to increase the numbers of minorities participating in their high school's journalism programmes. While there have been numerous media training initiatives targeting minorities, many of which bring young people into mainstream newsrooms as interns, this particular programme is unique. It is unconventional in the sense that it is not at the high school, not in a mainstream newsroom, nor is it based in Palo Alto.

The reasons why are intentional. Surrounded by the corporate offices of Facebook and Google, and by Stanford University, Palo Alto, California is among the nation's wealthiest and intellectually elite communities. However, Kandell and his colleagues established their grant-funded summer journalism programme in the economically and crime-challenged neighbouring community of East Palo Alto. That community's own high school was closed in 1976, due to low enrolments and poor student academic performance. East Palo Alto students are now bussed to Palo Alto High and similar schools in surrounding affluent neighbourhoods. However, upon arrival at Palo Alto High, these students generally stick together – and do not participate in journalism. The summer programme's goal is to ease diverse student populations into the practice of journalism by offering participants structured news-gathering experiences within their own community.

While there is a significant body of academic research that looks at employment issues relating to lack of diversity in newsrooms (Mellinger 2007, 2008; Newkirk 2011; Brislin and Williams 1996) and several quantitative surveys of students' attitudes (Hipsman and Wearden 1991; Collins, Hipsman and Wearden 1995; Vlad, Becker and Kazragis 2011), there is a minimal amount of qualitative scholarship that considers prospective journalism students and their motivations during the formative high school years.

This qualitative study investigates a unique approach under way in East Palo Alto, designed to alter a backward-sliding trend in the numbers of minorities entering the journalism profession. Through field observations and one-on-one interviews with programme participants, instructors and advisers, this study examines how academic and extracurricular choices made while in high school can affect students' perceptions about possible futures. Specifically, it looks at the efficacy of an off-campus approach to altering a school's dominant culture.

Literature review

Issues related to a lack of diversity in America's newsrooms surfaced in the wake of mass civil unrest in the mid-1960s. Race riots erupted in major urban cities across the United States. The Watts Riots in Los Angeles (1965) were followed by the Division Street Riots in Chicago (1966), and a year later the Newark Riots (1967). The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, also known as the Kerner Commission, was established in 1967 by President Lyndon B. Johnson to address the problem (Mellinger 2008; Smith 2008).

The commission's report warned that the nation was 'moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal' (Kerner Commission 1968: 1). It cited

the failure of federal and local agencies to provide minorities opportunities for fair housing, schooling and social services. Additionally, it urged the media to recruit more minorities 'into journalism and broadcasting and promote those who are qualified to positions of significant responsibility. Recruitment should begin in high schools and continue through college; where necessary, aid for training should be provided' (1968: 17). When the Kerner Commission advocated for more minority press coverage and hiring in 1968, African Americans represented 2.6% of the nation's newsroom workforce, while the country's minority population stood at 17% (Rivas-Rodriguez, Subervi-Vélez, Bramlett-Solomon and Heider 2004).

Social responsibility and a critical vote

Two decades earlier, the journalism profession's own Hutchins Commission asserted that the press freedoms articulated in the nation's founding documents implied certain unstated civic obligations. This notion of *social responsibility* presumed journalism should present 'a representative picture of the constituent groups in society' (Peterson 1984 [1956]: 91). Therefore, composition of newsroom staffs should reflect the populations they serve.

Since it formed in 1922, ASNE has positioned itself as one of journalism's foremost professional associations. The tone and temperament of the early twentieth century accounts for the constitution of its members, who were previously all white males. A nonwhite editor did not join the organization's ranks until the 1960s, and only one woman had held a board position until the 1970s. ASNE did not elect its first woman president until 1987, and an African American president until 1993 (Mellinger 2008).

To address diversity issues, an ASNE subcommittee met at Northwestern University in September 1977 with the specific intent of desegregating America's newspaper newsrooms. At that point, fewer than 1,700 of the nation's 43,000 newsroom employees were nonwhite, and two-thirds of publications had no nonwhite employees (ASNE 1978). Mellinger (2008) drew from oral interviews and archival records to determine how the deliberations at Northwestern led the organization to issue an official proclamation aimed at ending segregation.

Records indicate the Northwestern meeting grew contentious. Many Southern editors were accustomed to operating under strictly enforced segregation laws, which influenced the tone of their editorial content. They perceived their audience to be only white readers. Other editors worried that affirmative action would force an infusion of unqualified hires and therefore dilute the quality of their news product. However, other Southern editors saw an opportunity for redemption. *Charlotte Observer* editor, Rolfe Neill, argued: 'This is simply a moral imperative' (Mellinger 2013). After vigorous debate, in April 1978 the ASNE board of directors approved 'Goal 2000', an initiative aimed at raising the numbers of nonwhite employees in America's newsrooms to a level consistent with the nonwhite portion of the nation's population by the turn of the century.

Passing the initiative was one hurdle; implementing it was another. To avoid perceptions that ASNE was imposing a 'quota', the report's authors framed 'Goal 2000' as an aspirational objective rather than a mandate. The proclamation positioned the goal as an optimal outcome and let editors determine how it would be achieved. An annual census was implemented to monitor progress (Mellinger 2008).

However, the organization's 1982 census results revealed the hiring initiative was off to a slow start. Just 5.5% of journalists in daily newspaper newsrooms were nonwhites. Numbers not only fell short of projections, but the rate of increase appeared to be slowing (Mellinger 2103).

Retention rates

Retention of minorities has been another issue. A Freedom Forum study, released in 2000 by ASNE, found while an average of 550 journalists of colour were joining America's newspaper newsrooms annually between 1994 and 1999, approximately 400 exited each year (McGill 2000). Like their white colleagues, many cited burn-out, desire to earn a higher income and a change in career focus as their reasons. However, there were some notable differences. McGill reported that while 39% of white journalists surveyed cited lack of advancement opportunities as the reason they contemplated leaving, 63% of African Americans, 60% of Asians and 58% of Latino journalists expressed those sentiments. Additionally, where 35% of white journalists voiced concerns about not being able to cover stories that were aligned with their interests, 60% of Latino, 54% of Asian and 42% of black journalists said similar concerns could lead them to quit (McGill 2000).

College publications and diversity

Conflicting trends are evident at the college level relating to diversity in journalism. One pertains to journalism programme enrollments; the other relates to after-graduation success. While the number of minorities in accredited college journalism programmes is at an all-time high of 36.3% (Vlad, Becker and Kazragis 2011), a closer inspection of Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication's (AEJMC) survey results reveals a 17.1% disparity between minority and non-minority graduates in their ability to secure industry jobs (Daniels 2011). Further investigation uncovered that this gap is not new. What is new is that the gap is widening. When asked to explain the broadening disparity, Lee Becker, director of the annual survey, said there are 'things ingrained in the system that work against minority students' (Daniels 2011). Indications are that minorities may have less access to the same circles of influence as their Caucasian peers; more often work their way through school, and therefore cannot accept unpaid internships; and may have fewer opportunities to participate in extracurricular campus media projects.

Sullivan (2007) observes that when students of colour are active in scholastic journalism programmes they say having a 'voice' is a primary reason. The sense that

their participation makes a difference is a determining factor in whether they will join a publication, and in whether they will stay. Social psychologists argue that young people need to identify themselves as being part of a larger collective (Brewer and Gardner 1996; Funk 1998). They seek a sense of purpose, and a need to feel 'self-actualized' (Clark and Monserrat 2011; Bennett 2008).

Smith (2008: 185) argues for a fresh perspective on matters of diversity: that journalism professionals and educators need to 'shift the diversity discussion away from a focus on news workers and toward news leaders – away from demographics and toward core values that inform the profession'. Smith suggests this can be accomplished by engaging young people in news reporting and media production at earlier ages. Other scholars concur that participation in media creation can empower students in lasting ways (Beals 2010; Brennan, Monroy-Hernandez and Resnick 2010). Additionally, such student journalism work often fosters civic engagement and social responsibility among students (Smith 2008).

As cited earlier, the Hutchins Commission first articulated the tenets of social responsibility theory in the 1940s, and it remains widely recognized as one of the four theories of the press (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm 1984). Fundamentally, it asserts that the press has a moral obligation to serve the greater good of all society and to reflect the composition of its constituents (Nerone 1995). Given continuing declines in the hiring and retention of minority journalists, this study is timely. The research is especially relevant as the Supreme Court prepares to revisit the legality of affirmative action policies.

Therefore, this study of the East Palo Alto summer journalism programme seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does a community-based approach to introducing minorities to journalism affect their on-campus participation in scholastic journalism?

RQ2: How does a community-based approach affect their desire to enter the profession?

Method

A longstanding ontological and epistemological debate often separates quantitative and qualitative approaches in social science research. Quantitative research seeks to remain objective, while qualitative research is often subjective – acknowledging the role of the researcher in a manner that is self-reflexive. Some researchers argue, 'while randomized studies can determine whether an intervention works, they cannot answer key questions about why it works. (Viadero 2005: 1)

Qualitative field study

Field study, which was employed for this investigation, has a long tradition in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). It is informed by the discipline of anthropology and its method of ethnography, which involves extended and immersive

engagement with a culture (Geertz 1973). Communication studies scholars borrow ethnographic techniques to analyse communication behaviours – both verbal and nonverbal – while seeking clues to underlying meanings (Rubin, Rubin and Piele 2000). In Foucaultian terms, these social interactions can be described as discursive practices, which can reveal insights about relationships of power (Foucault 1978).

Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater (2002: 302) argue that qualitative analyses based on fieldwork are best described as ‘written portraits of an informant that require noting the same kinds of character details that fiction writers use: physical features, material artifacts, body language, oral language patterns and personal history’. In keeping with contemporary qualitative research design, interview questions were unstructured. They were informed by the researcher’s observations in the field (Gubrium and Holstein 2003).

Participants

Beginning in fall 2010, nine visits were made to Palo Alto High School over the course of a year and a half to observe course instruction, typically for three consecutive days at a time. During July 2011, an additional three days were spent with students enrolled in the East Palo Alto programme. Students were observed as they engaged in journalistic assignments and instruction at several locations in East Palo Alto and in Palo Alto. Additionally, in between those assignments and classes, one-on-one on-camera interviews were conducted with selected students, instructors and advisers. A diverse mix of ten of the programme’s twelve students participated in the research study. Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures were followed and parents and students consented to the videotaping and disclosure of their identities. This qualitative study on the summer programme is part of a broader investigation of several facets of Palo Alto High School’s journalism curricula.

Background

Palo Alto and East Palo Alto are adjoining communities situated on the San Francisco Peninsula approximately halfway between the cities of San Francisco and San Jose. Despite the name ‘East’ Palo Alto, the city is due north of Palo Alto and is its own incorporated community. The two cities are separated by the Bayshore Freeway (EPA.net 2007). There are also demographic distinctions. Palo Alto has approximately 64,400 residents: 64.2% white, 1.9% African American, 0.2% Native American, 27.1% Asian, 0.2% Pacific Islander, 2.2% from other races and 4.2% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino residents of any race were 6.2%. In 2010, Palo Alto ranked as the second most expensive city in the United States, with home prices averaging \$1.48 million (US Census Bureau 2010).

In contrast, East Palo Alto has approximately 28,200 residents: 28.8% white, 16.7% African American, 0.4% Native American, 3.8% Asian, 7.5% Pacific Islander, 38% from other races and 4.8% from two or more races. Hispanic or Latino residents of any race were 64.5%. East Palo Alto’s African American population has decreased from approximately 50% since 1990 (US Census Bureau 2010). Of the Pacific Islander population, many are Tongans with some Samoans and Fijians.

East Palo Alto has often made news due to high crime and poverty. In 1992, the city was characterized as the 'murder capital of the world, with 43 homicides among a population of 24,000 people' (WCBS-TV 2010). However, UC Berkeley research indicates a 62% drop in the crime rate since that period (Lawrence and Shapiro 2010).

A gang-related shooting that killed an infant made regional headlines in June 2011, startling the community one month before this study of the East Palo Alto summer journalism programme began fieldwork.

Since East Palo Alto's own high school was closed in 1976, the community's students have been bussed to schools in surrounding affluent towns, including Menlo Park, Atherton, Woodside and Palo Alto. The summer journalism program seeks to recruit minority students from those high schools.

During the academic year, Kandell and Austin teach journalism at Palo Alto High. The Spanish-style stucco school campus is located directly across from Stanford University, and is near several high-technology companies, including Google, Facebook, Hewlett-Packard, Sun Microsystems and PayPal. Founded in 1898, 'Paly' is one of the oldest high schools in the region and is recognized for its academic excellence and rigour. Esther Wojcicki is the matriarch behind the school's nationally acclaimed journalism programme, which she has directed for 25 years.

Palo Alto High School's campus is in walking distance of boutiques, high-end retailers and fine restaurants. In contrast, East Palo Alto's streets are lined with distressed properties and small family-run businesses, many of which are protected by iron security bars. Other than an IKEA and several fast-food chains, there are few recognizable brand-name establishments.

Now in its third year, the East Palo Alto summer journalism programme takes place over six weeks and is headquartered at the community's Boys and Girls Club. The twelve participating students receive three weeks of basic journalism instruction before being assigned to three weeks of internships where they apply their new skills. Time is split between East Palo Alto Today, a bimonthly community newspaper and online website and the Midpenninsula Media Center, which is the Palo Alto area's public access cable facility. Students are paid \$600 stipend, subsidized by private grants.

Findings

East Palo Alto Today publishes print editions and updates its website from an unmarked building, just within the city limits. A miss-match of desks are filled by closely quartered part-time student workers who make use of limited resources. The desktop computers are distinctively older than the shiny new iMacs students use at Palo Alto High. Most of the students present were not aware of East Palo Alto Today before joining the summer programme. Several students shared about the experience of being a minority student outside of their neighbourhood. The individuals and comments presented represent a cross section of responses from numerous students.

Janay is a senior who, during the academic year, is bussed from her home in East Palo Alto to affluent Woodside High. She says she is one of only twenty black students

at the high school, and explained why some of her peers tend not to mix: 'Sometimes you just feel more comfortable with your own race.'

Destiny is also African American and an East Palo Alto resident. During the academic year she takes the city bus each day to Menlo-Atherton High, where she is among the minority: 'I feel welcomed in the school, but un-welcomed in the community [...] Some people just don't like to change.'

Elena is Latina, lives in East Palo Alto, and is a second year student at Palo Alto High: 'Because we stay in our own little cliques – that is how racism is created.'

Transportation issues can also prohibit East Palo Alto students from participating on a school publication staff during the academic year. Many of the students must catch a scheduled bus, which prevents them from taking part in after-school news-gathering and editorial work.

Paul Kandell explained how these issues affect minority participation within Palo Alto High's student publications:

They may be the only student from EPA on the staff. They might be younger than everyone else on the staff. So, no pre-established friends, no one who looks like them on the staff, so no natural companions, if you will.

His colleague, Ellen Austin agreed. Minority students have said: 'Ms Austin, I would be in that class but it's "snowing in there" – it's so white. You're not going to be able to change the core culture – you have to do it in alternate ways.'

Negative peer pressure also factors into why some minority students do not pursue journalism. Tremaine is a junior at Palo Alto High who chose not to participate in the summer programme. His dad is African American and was raised in East Palo Alto. However, his mom is white and was raised in Palo Alto, where their family now lives. Tremaine has embraced his African American heritage and leads Palo Alto High's Unity Club, a student organization committed to bridging cultural differences. He explained why journalism does not appeal to some minority students:

It's not seen as cool. It's not something that minority students do [...] I think it's not seen as a successful career path for people of colour [...]. You don't really see a ton of successful black journalists that are in your face.

For some minority students, participating in journalism is perceived as 'acting white'. This form of peer pressure, often directed at high-achieving minority students, has been documented by several scholars (Fordham and Ogbu 1986; Steele and Aronson 1995).

Davaughn is an African American East Palo Alto resident, entering her senior year at Palo Alto High. She participated in the East Palo Alto summer programme the previous year, and joined 'InFocus', her high school's broadcast news team the

following fall. Students who follow Davaughn's path can be subjected to being called 'whitewashed':

Yes, I have been called 'whitewashed' before – but I don't feel too whitewashed [...]. I've always hung out with different types of races, ethnicities – people [...]. Issues of race will always occur, it's just a thing that we have in our society. I think we just have to adapt and know who we are.

As an African American and seasoned professional, Henrietta Burroughs is saddened by the attitudes some minorities hold about the appropriateness of journalism as a career. She launched the nonprofit East Palo Alto Center for Community Media in 2003 to fill what she viewed as an information void. She established East Palo Alto Today three years later as a fulfilment of that vision. The publication is the community's first continuously published newspaper in more than twenty years (EPAToday.org 2012). Burroughs also hosts a cable-access public affairs interview series, seen within the community: 'I got a note from someone who said – "why are you on there acting white?" And I think that's sad. We were supposed to be the role models. And so we need to work on this.' Burroughs is an advocate for affirmative action, but cautions that it can be a double-edged sword: 'It as a curse and a blessing. People assume you are where you are because of affirmative action.'

The East Palo Alto summer programme allows her to give back. Student participants report academic benefits, and several have discovered journalism as a new possible career choice.

Davaughn shared:

I used to think journalism was just writing. I liked writing but I wasn't the best writer. But taking beginning journalism over the summer helped me improve my writing a lot. I might do journalism. I'm also interested in law.

Like Davaughn, Elena's interests have gravitated towards media. She has also seen her grades improve: 'Before I would get "Cs" and now, through the year, I get "As" on my writing.'

Ceci is Latina, an East Palo Alto resident, and in the summer programme. She is a second year student at Palo Alto High, and sees a journalism career in her future: 'I find it really appealing, just because it's kinda front row to history in the process – and I find that very intriguing.'

Kandell and Austin are pleased with their results. Kandell stated: 'They are small numbers but considering the numbers in the programme, and to have five or six from Paly [...] and watching them succeed is pretty cool. This is our best year yet, in terms of numbers from Paly.'

It is significant to note that the Palo Alto journalism instructors receive substantially less than standard pay for their contributions to the summer programme, and its continued existence is due to their vigilant ability to secure grant funding. Austin explained why

she dedicates a good portion of time that might otherwise be spent on vacation: 'I do this programme because I believe in what we are trying to do here [...] I believe that these are the building blocks, not for "jobs", but for forming a better-woven social fabric.'

Discussion

As articulated by the participants, instructors and advisors, the community-based approach is introducing minority students to the practice of journalism – free from the peer pressures they may experience on school campuses. Situating such programmes within students' neighbourhoods engages them in news-gathering that is relevant to their cultural experiences and daily lives. When the experiences are positive, they can prove to be empowering, have a positive effect on academic performance, and can present students with career possibilities they may never have considered before.

A unique strength of the programme is that, through partnerships with media outlets like Palo Alto Today, it incorporates minority-based knowledge and values from within the students' communities. This is in sharp contrast to more traditional programmes that often take place in corporate environments, which for some minority students can seem foreign and insensitive to their cultural concerns. The distinction allows minority students to have a 'voice', and to appreciate that their journalistic contributions can make a difference (Freire 1970; McLaren and Leonard 1993).

In accordance with social responsibility theory, the programme's instructors believe the press has a civic obligation that should include all citizens; a duty that extends beyond recruiting minorities into the profession. The intent is to educate students to become active, engaged and productive adults – with tangible skills they can apply in multiple areas of their lives.

The programme benefits from having award-winning instructors who are also adept at raising the grant dollars that sustain its existence. Media institutions and their trade associations are more likely to experience success in their recruitment of minorities, if they study, endorse and financially support these forms of grassroots efforts. Significantly, the Dow Jones News Fund co-sponsored the East Palo Alto programme in its first three years, but has not renewed its support, citing an increase in competition.

By design, qualitative research intends to provide a snapshot of localized phenomena, viewed through a micro-social lens. Results may not be generalizable. However, they provide significant insights and point to areas warranting further investigation. Future longitudinal research is needed to assess the long-term benefits of this and similar programmes to participants and to the journalism profession. Additionally, research is needed to assess how well such programmes can be replicated in other communities.

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