

Color the Newsroom Gray

Book Review by Brenda Walker

Newspaper editors who wonder why their readership is falling should pay attention to *Coloring the News: How Crusading for Diversity Has Corrupted American Journalism*. William McGowan's recent media critique recounts the press' strange detour into a new sort of journalism that is less attentive to standards of accuracy than it is to a supportive view of certain groups. Hint: average Americans are not represented in those newly favored demographics.

McGowan agrees with the idea that a wider diversity of views in the newsroom would be a positive thing, but his research indicates that the quota-based diversity of skin hues and ethnicities has actually reduced free speech and chilled the forum of competing ideas. The appearance of diversity has broadened, but the belief system has narrowed considerably. Even objectivity has been challenged by radical journalists as a white cultural artifact. Of course, perfect objectivity in any human affairs will be the ideal rather than reality, but that is no reason to reject the concept. We don't discard "justice" as a sought-after goal merely because perfection is rarely achieved in the courts or in life.

Some of the newsroom policies to implement the new journalism are mind boggling in terms of Stalinist thought control. At *USA Today*, the practice of always having a photo of a minority person above the front-page fold was expanded in 1993 with a policy called "mainstreaming" designed to include the views of ethnic persons in every story. The paper's diversity committee analyzed each article for the number of minorities quoted,

and the score for each reporter was part of that writer's evaluation. In 1997, *USA Today* scaled back by keeping the scorecards but no longer used them in assessing journalists. In a similar instance, the ninety papers in the Gannett chain promoted the so-called "All American Contest" in which promotions and other financial rewards were given to editors who successfully increased newsroom diversity and sensitivity to coverage of minority issues. After all, the tone had been set by influential *New York Times* publisher Arthur Sulzberger Jr., who repeatedly stated that diversity was the "single most important issue" facing the *Times*.

The book is divided into chapters based on those topics now favored with special treatment by diversity journalism: race, gay and feminist issues, affirmative action, and immigration. Each receives thorough examination with plenty of examples. The immigration chapter is nearly forty pages long and will confirm

many of your worst suspicions about how the issue is considered in today's journalism.

Indeed, immigration is regarded as an unquestioned good in the newsroom. Objections based on factual observation and statistics are dismissed by editors out of hand as nativist rantings. The multicultural paradigm has been accepted with no question; the previous ideal of the Progressive era, that newcomers would assimilate into the larger American society, has disappeared from memory. Instead of joining with their American neighbors, immigrants are encouraged by the media to remain in balkanized communities with hyphenated identities. In one stellar example of celebrating diversity (and rejecting harmony), the *New York Times* suggested in 1998 that assimilation was a racist concept.

With beliefs based on diversity ideology, it is not surprising that the press has been the unapologetic cheerleader for policies that increase social

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by William McGowan
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Brenda Walker is a freelance writer and is the editor of the website www.LimitsToGrowth.org.

fragmentation, although the argument is always framed in terms of preserving cultural diversity. From bilingual education (which should more accurately be called non-English instruction) to taxpayer-subsidized benefits for illegal aliens (California's Proposition 187), the press has thrown objectivity out the window in order to lobby for a more uniform multicultural social order. When the readers vote for a different kind of community, journalists retreat into their elite mindset and harden the belief that they are right and noble. Furthermore, it follows that the general public must be filled with unenlightened racists to hold such views. No wonder the disconnect between the mainstream press and the reading public is growing wider.

Sadly, the remaining critical editors and writers appear cowed into submission. Many of the journalists consulted for the book did not wish to be named. At the *Los Angeles Times*, numerous experienced writers grabbed the opportunity of early retirement when it was offered. In one case, a Vermont journalist was fired because he reported an instance of reverse racism in

which a white woman was ejected from a minority forum for requesting an opportunity to speak. Throughout the book, the pervading newsroom atmosphere is one of fear and repression. The reader is left with generic human-interest stories about immigrant families struggling to find a better life, rather than factual analysis about the demographic tidal wave.

Unfortunately, *Coloring the News* appears to have been eclipsed by the best-selling *Bias*, another media critique. *Bias* struck a chord with the public and is written with a mass audience in mind, with a conversational tone plus some juicy stories about Dan Rather that have contributed to its appeal. *Coloring the News* is more detailed and rewards the serious reader with much usable information as well as psychological insight into newsroom orthodoxy.

You can read the preface on the book's complete website, <http://www.coloringthenews.com/>. •

[Editor's note: Excerpts from the "Immigration" chapter of McGowan's book begin on page ??? of this issue.]