THE RESILIENCE OF JOURNALISTS OF COLOR
IN NEWSROOM MANAGEMENT

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ANALYSIS

Overview

In the past ten years, journalists of color who work in newsroom management have noticed a push and pull effect when it comes to diversity and inclusion in newsrooms: the recession gutted momentum for the movement, only to see it ricochet as a focus again amid widespread criticism that the industry was ill-equipped to cover a wave of “identity politics” conversations sweeping the nation. A major challenge moving forward that’s become more pronounced in the interim: how to fairly define diversity and inclusion in the sense of who should be a priority to focus on and how do you best include those who are intersectional – meaning they come from one of more historically marginalized groups, such as people of color who are also women or identify as queer. Amid these trends, journalists of color who have made it into newsroom management must develop their own customized sense of resiliency and hone it as new challenges arise. This analysis aims to explore their psyche and the tactics they employ to stay in journalism.

Environment is key to building resilience, according to a series of interviews with over a dozen journalists who are now in management. When newsroom managers express that diversity is important, journalists of color are made to feel important and their voices are more valued in the work environment when it comes to decisions on content and staffing. In turn, journalists of color operating in that culture are more likely to stick
around. When diversity was not a priority, however, they felt like neither were they as employees, nor were the stories they felt went under-covered on historically marginalized communities. And if those stories did get told, it wasn’t always done as well.

The journalism industry has hoped to achieve parity - that is, have its staff reflect the communities it covers - for almost 40 years now. In 1968, a scathing federal government report by the Kerner Commission found in the immediate aftermath of the civil rights movement and related riots that the media was woefully unprepared to write about race (Mellinger, 2008). The industry nearly took a decade to get its house in order to formally address those concerns but in 1978, the American Society of News Editors, a membership organization for managers in newsrooms and journalism programs in higher education, set a goal to have their newsrooms’ racial and ethnic staffing profile match that of the nation’s population by the year 2000. That has been postponed until 2025, in part because of the recession. It remains to be seen if it is even feasible given today’s disparity along racial and ethnic lines when it comes to staffing toward parity (Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015).

“I haven’t heard that word [parity] in years,” said Maria Carrillo, a senior editor at the Houston Chronicle and Cuban-American woman with 32 years of professional journalism experience. “We don’t talk about it anymore, which is sad.”

Younger journalists of color interviewed said they can’t recall ever hearing the word “parity.” Others, such as Minneapolis Star-Tribune’s Maria Reeve, a black woman who oversees the publication’s largest department as an assistant managing editor for news, said she doesn’t “think about it anymore.” She instead opts for a more realistic approach, fostering a more inclusive culture in hiring and content of their diverse
community in the Twin Cities, rather than obsess with meeting any sort of percentage barometer. Her publication is ahead of the industry, with roughly 24 percent coming from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds in the newsroom, but is still not near what would be considered parity, she noted.

ASNE reported in 2015 that of 32,900 employees considered newspaper journalists, about 4,200, or about 13 percent, are racial minorities. Meanwhile, people of color now represent nearly 40 percent of the nation’s population, with demographers predicting that the U.S. will be majority-minority for the first time by the mid-2040s, according to U.S. Census Bureau data (Sanburn, 2015).

Meredith Clark, an assistant professor at the Mayborn School of Journalism at the University of North Texas and a monthly columnist for Poynter, recently noted in her column that the self-reported data on newsroom diversity from ASNE comes from less than half of the more than 1,700 news organizations the organization counted last year, so it’s unclear what the actual number is, and noted the data almost didn’t come out after some news outlets requested their information not be released because their numbers were so low. The broadcast news industry is somewhat closer to parity as minorities make up about 22 percent of the local television news workforce, according to a 2015 study by the Radio Television Digital News Association. This analysis is focused on traditional newspaper legacy media.

Journalists interviewed for this analysis said the numbers speak for themselves in assessing inequality in newsrooms, and several said it will continue to haunt the integrity of the industry until more aggressively addressed. In her column, Clark noted the arguable hypocrisy of journalism publications calling out other fields on a lack of
diversity – as in Hollywood, technology, the corporate executive class, and politics – when the media industry’s numbers are just as dismal, or even worse.

**Themes explored among lines of journalists of color resiliency**

Journalists interviewed cited the economic recession of 2008 as a major blow to the momentum seen in the previous decade when it came to diversity in newsrooms, as interviewees said they saw the industry go into survival mode, shedding jobs and nixing funding allocated to recruitment of diverse candidates.

However, of late, journalists also said in interviews that they have seen somewhat of a renewed focus by news outlets and in journalism industry thinkpieces on diversity. These thinkpieces note the reawakening to the “identity politics” in the past five years that has gripped the nation – from the pockets of the more conservative side of the dominant white class to those from historically marginalized groups. Both spectrums have passionately expressed frustration in how they feel the mainstream media stereotypes them and say the media is trapped in a politically left-leaning, white, upper middle-class bubble that limits its ability to better represent the nuances of evolving identities in its storytelling.

The definition of diversity is also changing, and carries a stigma that the word “inclusion” seems to help soften. These changes pose a unique challenge to those journalists of color who experience intersectionality.

When it comes to crafting their resiliency, tactics journalists spoke of that consistently arose in interviews included: the role of mentorship as key to survival, reinventing one’s skill set consistently through going back to college or getting training in the latest digital tools, and taking cues from their traditionally straight, white male co-
workers climbing the ranks on how to advocate for themselves as they have had no role models that resemble their identity.

At the same time, journalists of color in management must mentally balance when to advocate for better, more sensitive and inclusive coverage of minority groups that they may be more aware of than their white peers, or even come from, without becoming a broken record, or being accused of bias. Learning when and how to speak up is a skill honed over time, they said.

Interviews were conducted with 13 working journalists who all were in management or had worked since the 2008 recession in a management role where they had a voice in content and hiring decisions. The journalists ranged in professional careers of eight years to almost 40 years in the news industry. All wrote for independent news outlets that were predominately “legacy” media companies. The interviewees were raised throughout the country (including states such as California, Colorado, Florida, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, Texas and the District of Columbia) and worked in all quadrants of the nation. Six were women and seven were men. Six were Latino, four were black and three were Asian, both of far East and South Asian descent. Two identified as gay. The interviewees reflected the diversity composition and proportionality somewhat of the three largest minority groups in the United States that media is responsible for covering most often. All agreed to go mostly on record throughout the entire interview, usually only refraining from directly naming colleagues who may have insulted them or who they didn’t want to out in a situation they saw. Interviews lasted roughly one hour to 90 minutes over roughly a month in February and March 2017.
A challenging beginning

Andy Alford has worked for newspapers for 20 years, half of which as an editor at the *Austin-American Statesman*. Alford, a black woman who grew up in Dallas, echoed what several interviewees articulated that early on in their careers especially they felt that their minority background wasn’t always a plus. She explained that she found out at one of her first jobs she was paid $6,000 dollars less for the same work and with the same experience, despite having more skills in data reporting than her white and male peers. She said during the interview process at another publication that one editor, who was of color but not black, informed her that someone who was white said she couldn’t “hack it.” Others who interviewed her whom he spoke with though disagreed. So he offered to mentor her to help prove that editor wrong. Two decades later, she’s climbed the ranks and was one of the first reporters to champion computer-assisted reporting techniques in a newsroom lauded for being among the most adept in going digital first.

“People tend to underestimate you,” Alford said of how her racial background may at times have been a setback in some manager’s eyes. “It’s a positive though suddenly when they are looking for a diverse voice in the room though.”

Interviewees who started their careers in the 1980s and 1990s all spoke of how at the time in the news industry, there had been a large emphasis on diversity in newsrooms, specifically with the ASNE effort to push for parity. It made for a challenging time, because with the added encouragement, came the skepticism that perhaps the reason they were hired was mainly because of their minority background.

Emilio Garcia-Ruiz, a Hispanic managing editor of *Washington Post*’s digital news division, has worked in newspaper journalism in California, Minnesota and
Washington D.C. for roughly 35 years. He explained that while perhaps he may have gotten a first or second look by employers because of his last name or heritage, which is Spanish, that the special treatment ended right there. He recalls at his first job he had to pass a copy-editing test and meet all the qualifications his peers did to get hired.

He said that overall, people tend to act somewhat professionally in newsrooms around discussions of race, so it’s hard for journalists of color to know how others may view how they got into the room, noting that on occasion he has been told he was hired only because he was Hispanic by co-workers, usually “under the influence of alcohol.”

“I think for me, it made me want to work harder,” Garcia-Ruiz said. “I don’t spend a lot of time dwelling on those thoughts, as to survive, you have to think positively.”

**Trying to be themselves**

Journalists also develop a sense of resilience in realizing that once they are in the newsroom, and particularly in meetings where content is decided, that they have a responsibility, from the news outlet’s integrity to interview subjects to readers, to not just speak up on boosting coverage on underrepresented communities, but how to handle language and visuals used in publication when they do cover minority groups.

Mizell Stewart III, vice president of news operations, USA Today Network, and ASNE’s president, has worked in the news industry for over 30 years for publications large and small in the Midwest and East Coast. He recalled an incident in one newsroom in the Midwest where he had to push back on editors describing an altercation in a black part of town as a “riot,” arguing that it was not accurate and a historically charged term that should be used with caution.
This sensibility was echoed by Steve Padilla, an assistant national editor for the *Los Angeles Times*, who is of Mexican-American identity and with 35 years under his belt in the news business. Padilla said journalists of color in management often have to learn that in educating their colleagues on cultural issues, which in some cases may tie to back their own personal identity and experience, that they shouldn’t be misinterpreted by their peers that they are advocating on their heritage group’s behalf if it’s going to make the story more factual.

“It’s not like you are trying to protect some subgroup in society from being offended, it’s a matter of accuracy, and a responsibility to bring up especially if you and your publication should know better,” Padilla said. “Gatekeepers often are thought of in helping decide what gets published, but also should be focused on what doesn’t make it in.”

Journalists of color in management interviewed said that getting their peers who are not of color to see the value in working to learn more about the minority communities they cover doesn’t incite the same type of discomfort and tension as do programs designed to hire more minorities and a consciousness in the need to promote them.

“One of the downsides with anything that gives off any semblance of an affirmative action-like initiative is people questioning why you are there, or even for those hired under that diversity banner, feeling that way,” said Andrea Chang, an assistant business editor at the *Los Angeles Times*.

Chang, in her early 30s and an Asian-American woman of Chinese descent, sometimes is mistaken for having been recruited through a minority training program
called METPRO, when she was an intern who came in through the traditional summer program route.

All the journalists interviewed said they didn’t feel that they had to deny, or even thought they could downplay, their racial and ethnic identity in order to do their job.

Some quipped that because of the way they look, there’s no way to escape it anyway: “I’ve been black my whole life and you can tell,” Stewart said.

Still, that’s not to say they weren’t conscious of how they could be perceived, as wanting to avoid stereotypes that mainstream America may have of their minority backgrounds.

For example, Stewart eschewed wearing jeans in one office that was trying to adopt a more “hip” culture, because he was raised to think as a minority that he has to always dress professionally to be taken seriously. He felt as someone who was commonly the first and/or only black man in the room while climbing the ranks that he always needed to look the part.

For those whose identity includes more than one historically marginalized group, it can take some time to open up personally and build better relationships with colleagues and the community because of concerns of how they will be perceived. It can feel like a bit of a guessing game which identity of theirs may cause more friction or dismissal by those who they cover, or struggle to win the respect of some in the office.

Take, for example, Chalkbeat Colorado bureau chief Nic Garcia, and USA TODAY NETWORK-Tennessee Opinion & Engagement Editor David Plazas, who are both Latino and gay. The two are roughly a decade apart, as Garcia, of Mexican-American descent, is 31, and Plazas, also a U.S. native but of Cuban and Colombian
heritage, is 40. Both expressed feeling more reservations around how their sexual orientation seems to have caused more of an issue for them than their ethnic identity.

Garcia first worked at a LGBT publication in Colorado. He said that if he hadn’t been out he might not have gotten that job and thus started his career in journalism so for him being out initially felt like a plus. He moved up to an editor position there before shifting to a non-LGBT outlet, Chalkbeat, where he now steers education coverage. However, he was tasked with covering the Legislature for the gay publication and in order to be taken more seriously, decided to forgo voting to prove he didn’t have a stake in the outcome.

“When I was the gay reporter covering gay issues for a gay publication, I didn’t want for the work to be discounted, and people assumed I would have some implicit bias, so it was a sort of symbolic gesture I made to sources that I would not vote in order to persuade them that I am unbiased or detached,” Garcia explained.

After joining Chalkbeat, Garcia felt a different “othering,” this time more inside the newsroom. He felt his story ideas and sourcing sensibilities as a gay Latino from a western state were quite different from the coastal, predominately straight, white, Jewish women that shaped the editorial spirit of the publication, and felt compelled to express that openly to his managers and colleagues, which took some aback. In the end though, he said there is a culture of striving for better inclusion, thus he feels that he can push back when he feels the need – citing a spirited discussion with higher-ups about broadening the definition of what “underserved” means in schools based on his multicultural prism to not limit just to poor, black and brown children in larger urban metros.
Plazas said he always felt like his Latino identity wasn’t as much of a lightning rod, and often says his lighter-skinned appearance may have safeguarded him to a degree from some of that ire, in or outside the newsroom. He, like Garcia, also has no foreign accent as are English-dominant in their work and daily communication. Indeed, colorism, where darker skin is viewed as less favorable, and ethnic accents often can draw more negative attention, some interviewees said.

But as Plazas was working in a more conservative part of Florida in the early 2000s during which gay marriage ban legislation and “family values” were sweeping the nation, he didn’t want his sexuality to distract from his work. He already knew that his proud Latino identity could irk some watching him, as some of his colleagues expressed feeling uncomfortable, or “left out,” around the Spanish-language speakers that worked at the paper’s niche Latino publication, so he wasn’t sure how his bosses would react. Thus, he stayed relatively closeted. However, as acceptance grew stronger of openly gay people in the U.S. and he entered in a relationship with the man who would become his husband, Plazas became more public about his sexual orientation. After moving to Tennessee a few years ago, he resolved to be unapologetically out, living in Nashville which can be as progressive in some parts as it is conservative in others.

**Role models and mentorship**

Chang, of the LA Times, said that one of her mentors, an Asian male, told her and another female colleague that they should “walk with purpose” around the office. She also had to learn when to be assertive and vocal about her ideas as mainstream society has been conditioned to regard Asian women as being submissive and quietly industrious. In Chang’s case, having women and Asian colleagues, male and female, such as business
editor Kimi Yoshino, who came before her in management laid somewhat of a template she could borrow from in learning how to counterbalance her natural personality traits of being collegial, with the assertive qualities she knew she would need to harness to move up into management.

“Mentorship comes every day in little ways,” Chang said. “Kimi never said, ‘can I be your mentor?’ I think a lot of it came from observing how she leads and consulting with her when I was facing a challenge or her pulling me aside quickly to share some feedback.”

Indeed, all 13 journalists cited mentorship – or simply having someone senior to go to inside the newsroom, or outside somewhere in the field – as a key staple of their resiliency in the journalism world.

Diana Fuentes, a deputy metro editor at the San Antonio Express-News, said that because of those conditions, it was mostly straight white men who spotted her potential and recruited her for management positions, becoming an editor roughly a decade into her career and working her way to be a publisher of the Del Rio newspaper. It’s rare to see a woman in such a role, much less one who is also of color. She recalled though on occasion, she would summon her inspiration from the example of a female colleague senior to her when she started working in Laredo, Carmina Danini. Fuentes recalled Danini was told that she could only write for the social section as that was the area of the newspaper women were relegated to, but she broke that mold, at the time only with a high school degree as women were not encouraged or supported in pursuing higher education.
“I figured if she could put up with that hell, I could do it too,” Fuentes said. “I knew she had it harder than I did so I kept that perspective on bad days.”

Often though, older journalists interviewed said at the time that they were coming up in the field that they didn’t have one singular mentor, or role model whom they could identify with. They said that was in large part because the field was so overwhelmingly white, and minority journalism organizations were still in their infancy.

“There still aren’t many of us when you look up in the newsroom from your desk at these legacy outlets you see that looks like you,” Padilla said. “So, there’s no one there but in the mirror.”

Indeed, associations for journalists of color, formed to represent black, Latino, Asian, and American Indian journalists, were cited often by those interviewed in their 30s and 40s as instrumental in helping them connect with employers looking for qualified people of color and scholarships as they were often the first generation to attend college. The associations also were vital in building a support system of peers as they were among the first major waves of minorities in newsrooms.

**A downturn and learning to stay relevant**

When it comes to diversity programs being successful in sustaining a more inclusive environment, all journalists cited various events in the mid to late 2000s that essentially gutted what progress may have been made on the hiring front. ASNE numbers show a drop from 7,400 in 2007 to 4,200 in 2015 in number of newsroom employees who are of color.

In the end, their resilience was tested yet again because they were often the last ones standing who were of color and left to wonder at times why. Journalists interviewed
who survived that period of nearly 10 years of cuts expressed sometimes grappling with “survivor’s guilt,” or “imposter syndrome” in why they were kept on or didn’t leave.

Garcia-Ruiz said that of all the challenges that minorities have faced in newsroom inclusion, the industry contracting as a whole likely hurt the most. Those who are most recently hired under union contracts are the first let go. Although exceedingly minorities were entering newsrooms in greater numbers they start to generally see higher rates of college education and population saturation, there weren’t jobs for them and the jobs available may have been too unstable or underpaid the workers with more college debt on their back than past generations.

“Some of my friends of color just felt undervalued and underpaid and left,” Fuentes said. “There wasn’t much mobility for them in the newsroom for years, and especially for some of the younger ones who had more college debt and also felt the stakes were high being the first in their families to go to college but chose a lower paying field like journalism, they didn’t think it was worth sticking around.”

Recruitment certainly took a hit as news companies scaled back. Papers were closing or in a hiring freeze so didn’t need to send recruiters to minority journalism conventions. That in turn impacted sponsorships of their conferences, which also downsized their offerings.

Then came the break-up of UNITY, which was formed in the mid-1990s to better foster diversity in the newsroom industry, and create a space at a joint conference every four years during the presidential election cycle where recruiters could come find a concentrated group of talent and presidential candidates speak to some of the most influential journalists of color in the U.S.
UNITY: Journalists of Color consisted of the National Association of Black Journalists, Asian American Journalists Association, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists and the Native American Journalists Association. In 2011, NABJ left, followed by 2013 by NAHJ, citing that they were unhappy with two aspects of the coalition: the way the profits were redistributed back to the member organizations, and the coalition welcoming the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association to the coalition in 2011. The group changed its tagline from “Journalists of Color” to “Journalists for Diversity” and some felt the inclusion of NLGJA took away from UNITY being about journalists of color because NLGJA was mostly white. This fracture touches on the challenges of intersectionality some journalists interviewed had mentioned when it came to creating a more inclusive industry environment as LGBT people of color felt torn about who to side with in the rifts.

So amid these job and diversity hiring program cuts and divisions among journalism associations in the industry, the picture for keeping inclusionary practices a priority became bleak as many moved into survival mode.

It’s something that Neil Foote felt quite personally. Foote reported for major daily newspapers such as the *Miami Herald* and *Washington Post*, worked on both the editorial and business side of journalism at various publications, and now teaches in the Dallas area at the University of North Texas’ prestigious Mayborn School of Journalism. A black man from Brooklyn with 36 years of journalism experience, he served as chairman of the now-defunct National Association for Multicultural Media Executives, which for over a decade aimed to help shore up more diversity in newsroom management and took its helm just as the recession hit.
“I was told by sponsors and members that ‘we know diversity is a big issue but right now I am trying to decide whether to layoff x number of people or buy memberships to this organization and underwrite travel to our meetings, so support dried up,” Foote said. “During those years, diversity got pushed to the back. It wasn’t always at the front either, but at least it had become an integral part of the conversation.”

In order to stay relevant and keep growing, interviewees worked on broadening their skill sets, learning new social media, or data mining techniques, or going back to school to learn more about the business. Getting another degree in a specialized area was a tactic both Foote and Plazas used. Plazas earned a master’s in business while working on his next career transition that primed him for a top editor position in Tennessee.

“My outlook was helped by going to business school, as I came to a point that I realized I had the freedom to leave, and they have freedom to get rid of me,” Plazas said. “So I weirdly found a tremendous sense of bliss, and wasn’t going to enter a newsroom fearful again.”

Foote echoed the importance of pushing your own development to stay relevant and move up in rank, as mentorship can only go so far.

After expressing his desire to work his way into management, but not receiving much concrete guidance on how to get there and being passed over for development and promotions, Foote return to school to get a master’s in business administration. He then was passed over again after gaining what skills he saw he had to move up through earning the degree, and was told not to take it personal as he was liked. Eventually as his family grew and his income didn’t, he felt forced to move on, getting hired quickly thereafter at a black-owned media company. There, he found validation as he was
immediately hired as chief operating officer and could finally spread his wings as he felt ready for a stronger leadership role.

“'You have to take ownership, and realize even if you are qualified, it still may be a challenge to get the chance to grow,’” Foote said. ‘'You have to believe in yourself when it feels like those you are somewhat dependent on for growth opportunities don’t.”

**Taking cues from the boy’s club**

For those still climbing the ranks, and in beat areas or roles where white men still dominate or did well, some continue to take cues from them in order to breakthrough to sit with most elite in the field.

“'You may finally work your way into that room, but then you may not get invited to sit with anyone,’” said Jyoti Thottam, a South Asian woman with 25 years of journalism experience, including as a senior editor for *Time* and Al Jazeera America.

Thottam was one of the few women in her peer group to be a foreign correspondent, let alone also being one who is of color, male or female. She said while her male colleagues were friendly, she recalls being “othered” and excluded on occasion. She noted one example when she was asked by other male correspondents if her husband would like to join them for their monthly poker night – an invitation that wasn’t extended to her.

“'It can very much still be a boy’s club and human nature shows we tend to hire those that look and remind ourselves of who we are as that’s more comfortable,’” Thottam said. ‘'So you have to constantly be the most prepared in the arena when going up for a job when you don’t look like the decision-makers.”
Stewart said he’s trained himself and his mentees, of color or not, to keep in mind that journalism is an uncomfortable field to work at in times, and those of color can seize great opportunities to grow by getting outside of their home communities, where they may expand their worldview and perhaps enlighten those around them who don’t know someone of their background.

“It makes you more marketable when you can show you can do great journalism anywhere and in places where maybe you would be considered an outsider,” Stewart said.

And as time goes on, journalists of color in management start to see how these differences between white and non-white culture can play out among who they now manage or recruit. Chang recalled being surprised at how the white men she managed tended to forward any praise readers or sources in stories sent their way, which she said is different from how she was raised as a both a woman and Asian because she had been conditioned to feel that behavior would be interpreted as bragging or unsavory.

Tom Huang, who manages enterprise reporting and recruiting for The Dallas Morning News, is of Asian descent as well. He echoed struggling with being a better advocate for himself or his ideas, even today after decades in the field. He explains that he was raised to be more introspective and agreeable as an Asian man. So he has long hoped that his work would speak for itself, something Chang also mentioned, but has come to realize that journalists of color often can get a rude awakening that hope usually only goes so far.

“I’ve learned you have to advocate for yourself from their example, and editors can’t read minds so you learn to speak up about what you want and what you bring to the
table, as that’s what usually happens with who gets attention and eventually moved up,” Chang said.

Through his involvement in various mentoring programs and scouting new talent, which newspapers have returned to in the past couple of years more aggressively, Huang said interacting and shaping the pipeline of talent helps educate him on how to stay relevant.

“I realized that with so much changing in the industry, you can learn a lot from mentoring and helping cultivate younger talent, as they can expose you to new ways of doing the work,” Huang said.

Plazas and Padilla said that ultimately though, if a journalist keeps working on their skill sets and reinventing how they do their work, it makes them more immune to being cut, as the industry is notorious for also shedding those at the top who become “too expensive.”

“You just have to keep working at being the best,” Padilla said. Or as the motto goes for The Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting organization recently formed to diversify the most elite ranks of journalism: “Be Twice As Good.”

**Defining a changing inclusive mindset**

Journalists generally agreed that they have some cautious optimism about a renewed discussion on the best ways newsrooms could best tackle improving diversity in newsrooms. Several noted that the past five years have created a better sense of urgency to do so, stemming from a few developments in 2012. Then, the black community protested how Trayvon Martin’s killing was covered in the media, President Barack Obama was reelected amid a GOP-sanctioned report that said the Republican Party
should reach out better to minorities to stay relevant. That conversation took another turn, interviewees said, when President Donald Trump was elected amid belief that the predominately white mainstream media didn’t take him seriously even though minority groups did because of his rhetoric early on against Mexicans and other minorities that they knew to be harmful. Conversely, those who supported Trump in the media and at the ballot box felt animosity about how they believed the media has typecast them or ignored them in coverage.

Journalists interviewed largely agreed that moving forward that race and ethnicity cannot be diminished within the push for diversity as it undergirds so much of America’s historical discrimination. They are concerned that the broadening of the “diversity and inclusion” definition may divert the need to address the ramifications of United States’ centuries-old albatross of racism that’s haunted the nation’s soul, and is something journalism isn’t immune to.

But as the nation has become more multicultural in discussions about gender, nationality, ableism, sexual orientation, gender identity, family wealth, and political partisanship, newsroom managers will be pressed to include those aspects if trying to reflect the United States today in their newsrooms and coverage decisions. It’s something millennials, the media’s future consumers, demand be taken into better account as well.

“I think it comes down to simply looking around the newsrooms and across your content and asking regularly, who are we missing? Do we have a sense of being inclusive?” Chang said, also a millennial and from the nation’s fastest growing minority group as an Asian-American.
Indeed, “diversity” has developed a stigma for some, both for those who are white and others who are of color, that it’s a stand-in for affirmative action. However, “inclusion” is something everyone can more easily claim, as long as they can demonstrate some sort of exclusionary practice, or underrepresentation in coverage or staffing composition. It’s been added to several efforts in recent years, in journalism and other industries, but editors agree it still remains a prickly subject on how broad to define diversity.

For example, as with the breakup of UNITY somewhat tied to welcoming the LGBT journalists group into the fold, the factionalism can hurt those who are intersectional. Those who are of color and also queer may feel like they had to choose a side. It can also divert the efforts toward a more inclusive society into an uncomfortable competition of who’s suffered the most in world history. The reality is that journalists say the definition is fluid and somewhat dependent on the context of the newsroom environment and who they cover, so it can defeat the spirit of inclusivity to just focus efforts on one subgroup. Moving forward, not striving for a more inclusive environment may alienate younger, more progressive minded folks from wanting to pursue newsroom leadership ranks as they feel those divisive attitudes are a turn-off and outdated.

“When we divide like that, even if there are good reasons, the fallout hurts us more as a whole in this mission for better inclusivity in the long run of an already precarious outlook,” Thottam said.

For editors like Carrillo, Reeve, and Thottam, while they have held on in part because they know as women of color they have earned a seat at the table, they often wonder about who will be there to join or succeed them someday. They think the industry
keeps kicking the can down the road, be it blaming the disproportionately low numbers of journalists of color in their newsroom on a recession or qualified worker shortage.

“The pipeline excuse is weak, just go to any journalism school, or program teaching media and you’ll see many women and minorities,” Carrillo said. “We have to take responsibility as an industry and I’ve seen people who run newsrooms know how to solve problems and get things done, so you just have to do it if it’s important to you.”

For decades now, the news industry has acknowledged it makes good economic sense to have a more diverse staff as they inherently have more access and familiarity to places under-covered due to language and cultural barriers, Reeve said.

Chang said often younger reporters don’t want to get pigeonholed as the reporters who only do stories tied somewhat to their identity, but after establishing oneself, says she has seen colleagues better embrace those stories. She and others noted that even younger generations who are reclaiming their heritage as a proud part of their identity at their career onset are eager to take on the stories, as feel they it’s a way to champion marginalized communities, and in the market, those stories are in demand and relevant to today’s “identity politics” editors and readers want.

“You have to have stories reflect the community and if the community is changing, you have to prepare for that,” Reeve said. “If you are not doing that, no one is going to buy you, and you’ll be left in the dust as other outlets come to take that audience, so you do have to be deliberate.”

But editors who are involved in recruiting are already seeing the fruits of their labor thanks to a reawakening on the importance of a more inclusive staff. Huang said at the Dallas Morning News they have hired about 40 people in the last 18 months, moving
their diversity from a low of about 17 percent to 23 percent, adding, “we still have to do better to reflect the diversity of our community, but some progress has been made.”

Dallas used to be 86 percent white 50 years ago, but now half of its population is comprised of minority groups, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. However, ASNE data for how many minorities the Dallas Morning News newsroom employees for 2016 makes it look like it’s actually still stuck in a time warp five decades ago as 82 percent of its staff is white. The Latino population alone in Dallas has grown in that time frame from 8 percent to 43 percent. The percentage of Latinos the DMN employs today: 8 percent.

At the Star Tribune, Reeve said that in the past six months they recently hired a Latino reporter and a Muslim reporter whom she helped recruit and mentors. Acknowledging the changing demographics with growing Mexican and Somali populations, newsroom managers agreed in the past few years that they needed more folks who could speak the languages and had familiarity with the culture as they noticed a coverage gap, Reeve said. And recently the leadership saw this strategy pay off.

After President Trump’s issued various executive orders that sent shockwaves through immigrant Latino and Muslim populations in the Twin Cities coverage area this January, Reeve recalled the pride she said she felt when she saw a triple byline with white, Latino, and Muslim reporters on their story about the issue. She said the trio was able to cobble together a more inclusive story thanks to the diversity of skills and experience all three brought to the table.
“At least we are not embarrassed because we have people in our organization whose different backgrounds can help inform our work,” Reeve said. “I was so, so happy to see that.”

Championing those beliefs provides some motivation to stick it out, editors said, even if it seems exhausting at times to cyclically have these conversations. Journalists mentioned programs such as Fault Lines by the Maynard Institute, which aims to foster a more inclusive newsroom environment, that have helped some of their newsrooms.

Stewart, the ASNE president, is helping champion the society’s own Emerging Leaders Institute, previously known as the Minority Leadership Institute, which ASNE started in 2012 with the goal of training minority journalists to become leaders in their organizations and in the industry. In just five years since its inception, ASNE has trained more than 150 news leaders.

Stewart said he sometimes struggles with recommending students and newbies follow in his footsteps because the same path he took doesn’t really exist with how the news industry has changed, particularly in the newspaper business. In the past 15 years alone, he’s survived through six corporate newsroom mergers.

“I don’t think that my career trajectory can be replicated again today where you can stick around a place for a longer amount of time, so younger journalists from minority backgrounds have to be inherently more resilient as the market has become more volatile.”

But for all the talk of why they have stuck in journalism for decades, or see themselves doing so until retirement day, journalists of color in management boiled it
down to something universal in their field: a love of the craft and devotion to remembering that they won’t be deterred.

“I think people who gravitate to journalism are adept at overcoming adversity as part of our DNA in doing our work, so it becomes easy to forget that,” Stewart said. “One thing that has contributed to my longevity is just being willing to face adversity. Most people of color had to deal with adversity just in the process of growing up, and so if I look at the long arc of my life, I think I have overcome a hell of a lot more in my life than office politics. So that perspective helps.”

Journalists of color interviewed say that there’s really no excuse for newsrooms to not be diverse, and if managers can’t find the talent, then they need to be at least working on assessing how they are consciously covering all the voices in their community. The debate on how to go about creating a more inclusive newsroom culture can be fractious and emotionally charged at times on what’s fair to which group inside and outside the newsroom, but the mainstream news industry is increasingly in peril as demographics shift and purple America diminishes, so niche and partisan media chip away at their audiences.

Newsroom leadership, still white men from U.S. society’s most predominately powerful class, must make a concentrated effort on representing the views in their communities. The goal should be, journalists interviewed said, to foster a greater consciousness in their coverage of inequality in every community for the nation to better confront the historical ills that continue to haunt us, with people of color most often bearing the brunt. Bringing more journalists of color into the management ranks can put the greater newsroom at an advantage, as these journalists have often navigated the
intersections of striving to the traditional professional standards of the industry, and experiencing more familiarity with problems facing people from their historically marginalized identities. Internally, they also can serve as role models for future generations of journalists, a guidepost that pathways do exist to overcoming barriers we’ve allowed as a field to hinder our own growth in better covering an increasingly nuanced, and divided country.