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No Seat at the Table: The Black-White Appearance Gap in the Election 2000 Story

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The Joan Shorenstein Center

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Ordinarily on the day after a presidential election, network newscasts and political talk shows are a feast of reviews and retrospectives about the newly lapsed campaign -- what went wrong for the losing candidate; what went right for the winner; what states were bellwethers, which were decisive, how exit polls compared to the final tallies; what the results foretell for the political parties and for the future of major legislation.

That was not the case in the wake of one of the least ordinary election days in United States history. Rather than the usual day-after fare, November 8, 2000 supplied a bigger and livelier post-election story than producers, editors and reporters had imagined – the suspenseful tale of an undecided election.

The networks' coverage the night before foretold the intrigue. Based on flawed exit polling, all had mistakenly projected Vice President Al Gore the winner in Florida whose 25 electoral votes were enough to decide the election. Mortified by their miscue, the networks recanted their call. Resolved now to wait on actual precinct tallies, the networks withheld the Florida call until the wee hours of November 8 when they proclaimed Texas Governor George W. Bush the winner. Gore telephoned Bush to concede.

But that also proved to be premature. Loud, rampant and continuous rumors about voting irregularities throughout Florida had convinced the Gore camp that Bush's claim on The Sunshine State was tenuous. To everyone's astonishment, the Vice President retracted his concession and decided to contest the Florida vote, venturing into a thicket of controversy that would frustrate and fascinate the country for the next 35 days.

The Florida dilemma struck at the very heart of American democracy and electoral traditions, raising questions about the fairness, legitimacy and viability of the electoral system itself. In some Florida precincts, elderly voters complained they had been confused by the ballot

design and had mistakenly voted for the wrong candidate. In other areas, black voters alleged they had been harassed, spurned or otherwise mistreated at the polls. Voters in several Florida counties were outraged to learn thousands of punch card ballots had been deemed indecipherable and were discarded.

Although Florida's election officials immediately acceded to a recount, there was no consensus on the execution of the agreement -- i.e., whether discarded ballots should be recounted and, if so, which ones, how, and by whom. The contest quickly turned into a hot war.

With the presidency at stake, Bush and Gore surrounded themselves with lawyers, surrogates and political consultants to argue their case in the courts of law and public opinion. Activists -- some independent, some under partisan cover -- set up shop in Miami, Tallahassee and Palm Beach. An army of reporters alit upon the Sunshine State. Civil rights protestors took to the streets in marches, rallies and sit-ins, sometimes clashing with counter-demonstrators. The Bush camp, the Gore camp, special interest groups, party operatives, lawyers and judges unleashed a blizzard of petitions, briefs, opinions and news releases. Ordinary citizens were pressed into service and quarantined in a virtual factory of squinty and red-eyed ballot readers.

Thus was the Day After story transformed into a five-week-long political thriller rich in dimensions and angles comprising race, technology, political party machinations, legal experiments, civil rights protests, and the extraordinary engagement of the United States Supreme Court. So many developments were happening so fast that the Election 2000 saga was variously referred to as a "circus," a "crisis" and a "drama." The news media found the story's significance, controversy and unpredictability irresistible -- a natural for round-the-clock coverage that characterizes the so-called Information Age.

For 35 days, the post-election story led the evening newscasts on each of the major broadcast and cable television networks -- ABC, CBS, NBC, PBS, CNN, FOX, and MSNBC.

While network newscasts covered a variety of the day's important events replete with field reporting, the discussion shows took full advantage of their option to engage a single topic for the entire 30 or 60 minutes of airtime. Without exception over the five weeks, the political talk shows that dominate cable programming during prime time on weeknights and that rule the broadcast networks' lineup on Sunday mornings devoted their shows solely to the election saga.

Because the story went on for so long and because it was Topic A on every political talk show, producers and other staffers who book guests for the programs found the job especially challenging during the post-election period. The supply of practiced commentators -- the "usual suspects," so to speak -- could not satisfy demand. Moreover, the story's web covered such a wide range of disciplines that unraveling it required a whole new crop of experts. Soon, not only were veteran pundits ubiquitous on the talk show circuit, but lawyers, academics, current and former politicians, civic leaders and even a few entertainers started appearing too.

Between November 7, when voters reported to the polls, and December 13, when Gore finally conceded to Bush, the talk shows booked hundreds of guests. Gail Evans, senior vice president for the CNN News Group, told *The New York Times* that it was not unusual for her network to book 60 guests per day during the post-election period. Indeed, so great and incessant was the demand for guests that the "talking head" pastime became something of a cottage industry. Some commentators participated in several shows a day. Some struck exclusive deals with one network or another.

Fortunately for talk show producers, Florida, the epicenter of the story, provided a new source of prospective commentators and, in short order, once-obscure citizens and officials

became regulars on the talk circuit, called upon to explain their state's electoral procedures, local sensibilities and, in some cases, their own role in developments.

Yet despite the need for a large stable of guest commentators, the networks' proclaimed allegiance to diversity, and universal interest in the unfolding story -- not to mention the racial component -- the talk show guest chair and the expertise it conveys were, for the most part, reserved for whites. Black Americans, though clearly integral to the story and represented in every category of expert, rarely appeared as authority figures or specialists on the television talk shows.

This writer's analysis of 14 cable and broadcast political talk shows reveals a glaring disparity between the number of appearances by white and black commentators during the post-election period. Nine of the programs that were monitored were regularly scheduled weeknight shows: CNN's "Inside Politics," "Crossfire," and "Larry King Live;" MSNBC's "Mitchell Report," "Hardball," and "Rivera Live;" and Fox's "O'Reilly Factor," "Hannity & Colmes," and "The Edge with Paula Zahn." The remaining five programs were regularly scheduled Sunday morning shows: ABC's "This Week with Sam Donaldson and Cokie Roberts," CBS's "Face the Nation," NBC's "Meet the Press," Fox's "Fox News Sunday" and CNN's "Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer."

A total of 158 programs were monitored between November 8 and December 11 inclusive.¹ For purposes of the analysis, the appearances were divided into 13 categories:

1. Principals: Key players in the post-election story
2. Media: Print, television, radio, Internet, publishing.
3. Legal experts: Judges, practicing lawyers and law professors

¹ The author of this report, Deborah Mathis, personally tracked the programs by watching them either in their original telecast, on delayed telecast or on videotape. Additionally, Mathis checked her records against the "TV Pundits" list provided each day online at [National Journal.com](http://NationalJournal.com).

4. U.S. House members
5. U.S. Senate members
6. Other elected officials: Governors, mayors, etc.
7. Former elected officials
8. Former cabinet members
9. Former administration officials
10. Scholars: Historians, college and university professors
11. Florida residents
12. Political operatives: Consultants, spokespersons, pollsters, etc.
13. Special interest/ad hoc organizations

During the tracking period, 373 individuals made a total of 857 guest appearances on the shows. Of the total appearances, 811 (94.6 percent) were by whites. Overall, white appearances outnumbered black appearances by nearly 19 to 1.

The gap narrows when the 107 “principals” appearances are extracted, but the change is negligible. Discounting principals, whites account for 94.2 percent of all appearances and the white-black appearance ratio is 17 to 1.

The appearance gap is more striking in particular categories. For instance, there were 69 appearances by white legal experts for every one black. “Hardball” (MSNBC) and “Hannity & Colmes” (Fox) were the only two shows to present black guests in the role of legal expert.

There were 21 appearances by white Floridians for every one black representative of the Sunshine State; and nearly 20 appearances by white journalists for every one black media representative.

White scholars were 13.5 times more likely to be booked than were black scholars. Fox's "O'Reilly" and MSNBC's "Hardball" were the only shows to present a black academic, hosting Harvard's Cornell West on December 5 and 6, respectively.

Not a single black was among the political operatives, former elected and non-elected government officials, or other political officials (e.g., governors, mayors and secretaries of state) booked for the shows. There were no blacks among the 95 appearances by members of the U.S. Senate – a given in that there are no black senators.

"Hardball," "O'Reilly" and "Hannity & Colmes" booked black guests from four categories; "Rivera," "Larry King Live" and "Crossfire" booked from three categories; "The Edge" booked from two; and "Late Edition" booked from one.

Among the networks, Fox had the highest rate of black appearances on weekday shows during the tracking period. Blacks accounted for 10.4 percent of the total guest slots on Fox's three shows. MSNBC had the second highest overall black appearance rate at 5.26 percent. Black appearances on CNN's three weekday evening shows made up less than three percent of the network's total

Fox's "Hannity & Colmes" was the single most racially diverse of the shows with nearly 12 percent of its guest slots going to blacks. It was followed by CNN's "Crossfire" where blacks accounted for more than 10 percent of the guest appearances. Fox's "The Edge" was third highest with blacks making 9.8 percent of the total appearances, followed by "O'Reilly" (Fox) with 9.6 percent; "Rivera Live" (MSNBC) with 8.5 percent; "Hardball" (MSNBC) with 4.4 percent; and "Larry King Live" (CNN) with 2.1 percent. Neither "Inside Politics" (CNN) nor "Mitchell Report" (MSNBC) had black guests during the tracking period.

On the Sunday talk show circuit, appearances by blacks were all but non-existent, outnumbered by whites 134 to 1. Only CNN's "Late Edition" featured a black guest during the tracking period. (However, it is notable that "Fox News Sunday" has a black journalist among its regular weekly commentators, unlike any other Sunday show.)

Categorically, the 46 appearances by blacks break down as follows:

- Twenty-six members of Congress
- Eight journalists
- Four special interest groups
- Two legal experts
- Two principals (both by Gore attorney Teresa Roseborough)
- Two scholars
- Two Floridians

The feeble showing of diversity by the talk shows has been blamed, in part, on the so-called "Rolodex" problem – a general unfamiliarity with black expertise and, specifically, the lack of names, numbers and other contact information for prospective commentators.

But that is a dubious defense given the substantial profiles and well-established histories of at least two African American organizations that represent categories with wide white-black appearance gaps: law and media.

The National Bar Association, the country's largest organization of black lawyers, boasts 17,000 members and has large and active chapters in Washington, D.C., New York and Florida – the command centers for the post-election talk shows. But there were only two appearances by blacks in the role of legal expert: Former O.J. Simpson prosecutor Christopher Darden ("Hannity

& Colmes,” Fox, December 4), and former National Bar Association President H.T. Smith (“Hardball,” MSNBC, December 5).

Likewise, the National Association of Black Journalists is not an obscure organization. More than a quarter of a century old, the N.A.B.J. has 3,000 members nationwide with at least one chapter in every state, including six in Florida. There is even a chapter in Palm Beach, home of the notorious “butterfly ballot” that befuddled so many voters and sparked early protests. Still, none of the shows had a black Florida journalist on air during the tracking period to help explain what was going on in the state and why.

Although it is less well-known nationally than either the N.B.A. or the N.A.B.J., the 22-member Florida Conference of Black State Legislators should have been hard to overlook in the pursuit of guests to discuss the Legislature’s imminent role in the election saga. Nearly half of the appearances by Floridians were by members of the Florida House and Senate, but state Sen. Kendrick Meek was the only black Florida lawmaker to appear on any of the monitored shows (“O’Reilly,” Fox, November 15). Tony Hill, a former state representative, made the only other appearance by a black Floridian during the tracking period (“O’Reilly,” Fox, November 28).

Neglecting the pool of black Floridians was especially curious since there were obvious and compelling reasons to seek their input in the story:

1. Black voter turnout in Florida on November 7th was up 70 percent over the 1996 turnout, one of the highest increases in the nation.
2. Conceivably, the surge in black voter turnout contributed to difficulties in ballot validation.
3. Most of the allegations of abuse at or near the polls were from black voters.
4. Black Floridians staged several large, high-profile protests.

Anderson C. Hill of Orlando, former education chairman of the Orange County Branch of the NAACP, said the slight to black Floridians betrayed the media's disinterest in the black perspective.²

“A number of blacks noticed that there were irregularities at the polls and lodged the appropriate complaints. As a matter of fact, the Orange County Branch of the NAACP started to question the voting irregularities as well as the appointment of electors,” Hill explained. “We started making inquiries and even sent a notice of our written inquiry to the Associated Press, but there was absolutely no feedback, no follow-up and this was well before the controversy fully erupted. We sent out press releases to several news sources -- television, print, radio – and no response was ever made. That means, what? That means that the media knew there was an interest on our part to at least participate in the dialogue. Obviously, they didn't value our opinion.”

There have been widely hailed advances in the news media's diversity quest. A June 2000 study sponsored jointly by Ball State University in Indiana and the Radio-Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) found that 21 percent of the jobs in television newsrooms belonged to minorities – an all-time high. Likewise, the study found, minorities had a stronger than ever presence in television news management; 14 percent of the news directors were minority. (It should be noted that the “minority” umbrella covers women as well as non-whites.)

But, the good news is tempered by another appearance gap, this time between white male reporters and other TV journalists. A February, 2001 report by The Center for Media and Public Affairs concluded that minorities and women television journalists are still rare sights on the

² Anderson Hill was interviewed for this project on April 6, 2001.

evening news, reporting about 11 percent of the stories on the network newscasts. Also, according to the study, 76 percent of the stories are reported by men.

The low appearance rate by black journalists and black experts on television endangers equality in both perception and reality. In The Black Image in the White Mind: Media and Race in America, communications professors Robert M. Entman and Andrew Rojecki take note of the problem: “Although African American expert sources on television are few, the networks do feature blacks as correspondents – experts in journalism itself. This turns out to be a slight exception to the general paucity of authoritative blacks.” The book cites a 1997 project by Entman and Debra Burns Melican and Irma Munoz, both former students at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government, which kept track of persons interviewed on network newscasts by race.

“(W)ithin the total sample of 1,980 minutes of network news, blacks spoke as experts outside the realm of black-related issues little more than 15 times, whereas whites were likely quoted more than 700 times,” Entman and Rojecki wrote, recalling the 1997 study. “So, images of knowledgeable blacks are appearing on the networks. But there remains a relative dearth of high status, credentialed black persons providing insight on the network news across a wide range of issues.”

Entman and Rojecki’s work bears resemblance to prior studies by Fairness and Accuracy in Media (FAIR), a Washington-based media watchdog group. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, FAIR focused on PBS’s “NewsHour,” National Public Radio and ABC’s “Nightline,” in search of minority experts and commentators. It found that 92 percent of the American guests on “Nightline” were white; that “NewsHour” booked white guests 90 percent of the time; and that more than 96 percent of NPR’s repeat commentators were white.

FAIR founder Jeff Cohen said the findings underscored “not only the incredible whiteness of being an expert in national media ... but a tendency to ghettoize minority experts into discussions of ‘black’ or ‘brown’ issues” that are often seen as social pathologies – crime, drug abuse, and unwed teenage pregnancy, for example.

But in the post-election period, not even the “tendency to ghettoize” brought black guests to the talk shows’ tables. Even though race was conspicuous and organic to the story, appearances by black pundits and experts were still few and far between.

Janine Jackson, program director for FAIR, said the problem is steeped in habit, disingenuousness and favoritism toward establishment figures.³

“I can already hear part of the response, which is, Well, look; you’re talking about a story that’s about national politics. We in the media cannot help that people of color are not in these positions,” said Jackson. “It’s part of a larger, journalistic bias – a top down bias which is that it’s okay for media to simply give voice to the powerful.”

At the same time, it is understandable that prominent, high-ranking and celebrity guests are considered prized “gets” on the talk show circuit. It is likewise undeniable that whites dominate the upper echelons of American institutions. Therefore, the math does not favor blacks and other minorities.

Entman and Rojecki: “Members of the current majority group...control almost all newsworthy institutions – government agencies, legislatures, corporations, interest groups. As the dominant power holders, whites naturally predominate in news reports not involving social problems”

The authors continue: “Professional norms demand that journalists choose conventionally credible sources, as certified by their rank and affiliation with the best-known institutions, and

³ Janine Jackson was interviewed for this project on April 13, 2001.

their ability to influence those institutions' decisions." Entman and Rojecki concede that the standard creates a "racialized pattern of expertise" in television news.

"Take the example of an American spy plane being seized by the Chinese," said Gail Evans of CNN.⁴ "You automatically go after former secretaries of state and former ambassadors to China and the odds are, they are all going to be white men." Evans said her network "made a conscious effort" to book non-whites during the post-election period, adding, "There were nights when I just had to flat out tell the producer this is not going to be an whites-only discussion." Still, she concedes, achieving diversity is a challenge for producers. "You have to work harder," she said.

Indeed, had Evans and other producers sought out former black Supreme Court clerks to prognosticate about the high court's deliberations, they would have been hard-pressed. Only eight have served under the current justices.

Had they wanted to book black national reporters regularly assigned to the Bush and Gore campaigns, they would have been limited to four choices.

To the extent that producers and bookers were able to secure top officials for the commentary or analyst chair and to the extent that those choice guests were not African American, the absence of diversity is less egregious. But, the fault then shifts to society at-large which stands to be indicted for its perpetuation of racial disparities.

Therefore, the apparent contradiction between the media's pledge to diversity and its neglect of black voices may be a reflection of a long-standing and deeply rooted cultural disorder – namely, democracy's love-hate relationship with majority rule.

Nonetheless, Jackson says the media has been remiss in its responsibility to champion and exemplify fairness.

⁴ Gail Evans was interviewed for this project on April 9, 2001.

“Some say they have no special responsibility to seek out people of color for commentary,” Jackson said. “I think there really is an ideological disagreement here. It’s simply good journalism to try to get a range of perspectives on a story and specifically to try to get the perspectives of a particular community that is impacted by the story. That’s not social engineering, that’s journalism. What we find, though, is that people believe that making a special effort to get new sources is introducing a non-journalistic value.”

Entman and Rojecki say outreach to new and perhaps non-traditional sources has the circular effect of influencing public opinion which, in turn influences policy which attracts media. In that way, they suggest that mainstream media will, in effect, be of service to improved race relations.

“There are simply not very many black voices to be found in the places where reporters habitually go for expertise. The tendency of reporters to return time and again to the same sources – in part out of habit, in part out of the news organization’s need to economize – compounds the problem,” Entman and Rojecki wrote.

In fairness, most of the major television networks produced special programs during the long post-election period and those programs employed a large number of political pundits, commentators and analysts. Although those shows were not included in this analysis, this writer is aware that many of them booked a number of black guests to lend insight and expertise.

It is not the intent of this report to embarrass, anger or frustrate the powers-that-be in mainstream media but rather to make them aware of the racial disparities evident on the air at a time when all of newsdom was focused on the same story; most of the country was engaged, even riveted by the daily (and sometimes hourly) developments; and the most fundamental rights

and mechanics of democracy were at issue. When one factors in the profound changes in the nation's demographics -- the so-called "browning" of America -- and the injection of race into the Florida story particularly, the post-election story looks as ripe for multiethnic participation as any story of the modern age.

Yet, the numbers portray a bad marriage between media's promises and its deliveries. As a guardian of liberty, democracy and the good fruits they bear, America's media can and must do better next time and every time.

"It's not just how bad things are, it's the lack of concern among mainstream media in improving them," notes Janine Jackson. "That really is as troubling as the numbers themselves. There's a kind of blandly earnest concern on the part of media about the lack of diversity both behind the scenes and in stories. But earnest concern won't make change. Media really have to understand the platitudes they're always saying about how diversity makes for better journalism."

As has been demonstrated, not including significant or proportionate numbers of black people as sources or experts is an old habit of American media. Dr. Don Heider, a communications professor at the University of Texas at Austin, examined the trend in White News: Why Local News Programs Don't Cover People of Color. "News decisions support dominant views, reality is defined by the existing social order, and the exclusionary decisions are routinely ignored," wrote Heider. In other words, media not only routinely commits what one researcher called "incognizant racism,"⁵ but has a shrugging indifference to it.

Yet, conspiracy and connivance are not for all its inventiveness and creative thinking, media is also a creature of the culture. So, when the forerunners of today's producers, editors and

⁵ The term comes from the report, "Understanding Everyday Racism" by Philomena Essed (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1991).

hosts overlooked or shunned black expertise, they made it unlikely that the next generation of media professionals would “go black,” so to speak, because they had not grown up with a model of black expertise. Likewise, the current generation’s omissions will beget similar oversights. And the beat goes on.

It is the circuit between imagery and perception, then perception and opinion, followed by opinion and policy that is dangerous. Without input from a variety of sources and the distillery of cross-sectional debate, media takes a calculated risk at portraying or relaying the wrong impression about a given issue, person or event of public interest. It follows, then, that public opinion would be skewed. And, as politicians and policy-makers are ever mindful of the political winds, the laws, regulations and policies forged from erroneous or lop-sided information and molded from ill-informed public opinion are bound to be flawed, even unfair and counterproductive.

Thus are media, politics and public policy cheated for lack of inclusiveness.

And there is another loser: The faithfulness of children from all ethnic groups who deserve to see themselves and the entire American prism reflected in positive and authoritative lights from time to time.

Journalists must, first and foremost, seek accuracy and fairness in reporting. If, however unintentionally, media create or feed an erroneous impression, then it has failed its calling. Whom it does or does not invite to speak with authority makes a statement about whose opinions are valued.

It is not enough for mainstream media to rest on the laurels of past achievement in diversity – and certainly not sufficient for it to rest on its good intentions. The advent of a new

century and millennium are good occasions to turn the page on old habits and to make diversity a living tenet of modern American journalism.