

EQUALITY, FRATERNITY,

OPPORTUNITY

“Equality, Fraternity, Opportunity,”

Shie-Mee Yeh, *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, Spring 1997.

On the evening of January 20, 1994, Angela Lawrence sat in disbelief as she watched a TVOntario program featuring a panel discussion on diversity in Canadian newsrooms. Among the four panelists was radio and television commentator Dick Smythe, who argued that the dearth of newsroom diversity was due to a lack of qualified candidates in the field. “How many dark-skinned people do we see out there?” he asked, noting how few minorities there were in the audience of mainly journalism students.

Like many of her peers, Lawrence, senior editor of *Canadian Select Homes*, had been hearing about an idea to form an association for black journalists for years, but nothing had come of it. Inflamed by Smythe’s comments and inspired by her sister, who had helped form the Black Law Students Association of Canada while studying at the University of Toronto, Lawrence decided to pursue the idea. She tracked down CBC *Evening News* reporter Hamlin Grange, who had once discussed the prospect of forming a group with a few fellow journalists. He told her that if she was willing to put in the time, then he was willing to help. A year later, in February 2, 1996, at Ryerson Polytechnic University, approximately 200 people attended the launch of the Canadian Association of Black Journalists with Lawrence as its president. For many in the black community, the common sentiment was that it was about time.

Hamlin Grange, who became the CABJ’s vice-president, remembers that 20 years ago all of Toronto’s black journalists could fit around one restaurant table. Today, while there have been no surveys of staffing patterns across all media, smaller studies show that the number of black journalists is still lower than population patterns would suggest. For example, a 1993 survey conducted by the Canadian Daily Newspaper Association (now the Canadian Newspaper Association) of 41 daily newsrooms showed that of the 2,620 professional journalists working there, only 67, or 2.6 percent, were visible minorities, although visible minorities make up 9.4 percent of Canadians. In an attempt to change this, one of the CABJ’s goals is to encourage black students to pursue careers in journalism. But the organization’s main aim is to establish a network of black journalists.

In an industry where success is often determined as much by who you know as what you know, the importance of networking and building contacts is incalculable. Many black journalists and other minority journalists have felt isolated over the years because they had virtually no contacts or mentors within the industry. Citytv videographer and assignment editor Dwight Drummond was one of them. He wishes the CABJ had existed while he was a

radio and television arts student at Ryerson six years ago. While it seemed that many of his classmates had solid contacts within the industry, he had to search endlessly for a connection. “I had no one to really turn to who could help me and I actually had to go out and find these people,” says Drummond, a CABJ member. His search ended when he spotted reporter Royson James’ picture and byline in *The Toronto Star*. After giving James a call, Drummond was able to shadow him for a few days. From that time forward, Drummond was able to rely on James as a resource and mentor whenever he had questions or concerns.

Now, at the CABJ’s monthly meetings at Toronto’s central YMCA, the 70 members have the opportunity to meet other working professionals in the industry. (Membership is open to those in media-related occupations, including researchers, photographers and public relations professionals; students are welcome if they are at an accredited college or university studying journalism or journalism-related subjects). Some evenings’ programs are designed to help members build their connections. At one of last year’s meetings, Trevor Wilson, a diversity management consultant and former host of CFMT’s *Black World*, ran a networking workshop. He talked about networking in light of the ineffective employment equity legislation currently in place, stressing the importance of maintaining contacts among members and keeping each other informed of job opportunities in the workplace.

On a larger scale, the association has entertained the idea of a future affiliation with the U.S.-based National Association of Black Journalists. Founded by a group of 21 journalists in 1975, the 3,000-strong NABJ is the largest media organization for people of colour in the world. Its mission is, not surprisingly, very similar to the CABJ’s. The NABJ’s accomplishments provide a glimpse of what the CABJ might achieve in the next 20 years.

Each year, the NABJ awards over $70,000 in scholarships to black journalism students and offers fellowships to seasoned journalists. Its renowned annual convention provides hands-on education and training for members, whether they are at entry level or already well established. At the gathering, students also receive hands-on training in the various journalistic disciplines. In print, for example, a number of students produce a daily newspaper under the supervision of professionals.

At last year’s convention in Nashville, guest speakers included U.S. Vice-President Al Gore, presidential candidate Robert Dole and Church of Islam minister Louis Farrakhan. President Bill Clinton has indicated he will attend the 1997 conference. Another feature of the convention is the job fair, which routinely attracts 150 or so recruiters from media outlets across the U.S. The association also runs two toll-free, 24-hour joblines (one each for print and broadcast) that members can call to hear of available job opportunities.

While an affiliation with the NABJ has been considered since the CABJ's launch, the idea of ties with the Canadian Association of Journalists was never an issue. The CAJ, which has 1,500 members across the country, is home to seven subgroups, including ones for women, journalism educators, critics and photojournalists, but has never had a caucus for minority journalists. The reason, according to CAJ national president Tom Arnold, is because "the issue has never been addressed." Does that mean there isn't a need for one? "No, I don't think so. You just have to take a look around the newsrooms to see if minority journalists are represented and they're not."

Still, some critics of the CAJ think the absence of a minority caucus isn't the only issue that's never been addressed. The association frequently talks about general issues—the CBC cutbacks, freedom of information, the concentration of ownership by Conrad Black—but seldom spends time on anything of specific concern to racial minorities. "The things that are put on the front burner aren't necessarily issues that concern us as journalists of colour," says Hamlin Grange. "I don't see employment equity and portrayal of blacks in the media."

To begin putting some of these issues on the front burner, the CABJ organized a panel discussion last April about crime reporting in the media. Participants included *Toronto Sun* columnist Christie Blatchford, *Toronto Star* Life and Diversity editor Carola Vyhnak and Michael Van Cooten, publisher of *Pride*, a Toronto weekly for the black community. The occasion was an opportunity for members to air important questions, questions such as why the media continues to stereotype black males as criminals. The discussion was especially relevant for Dwight Drummond, who became a journalist because of his desire to report on his community accurately. Growing up in the Jane and Finch area, he saw firsthand how unfairly blacks were being portrayed. "I felt that there were a lot of positive people in my neighbourhood and if people watched the news or read the papers, they would think only negative things were happening."

Another criticism is the lack of "mainstreaming" in the media—that is, including minorities in all types of news stories, so that a story on, say, the effects of the recession on Canadian families would focus on an Asian or East Indian family, or a piece on innovations in dentistry might feature a black dentist. Instead, the major media often include minorities only in race-related stories. Even then, they get it wrong. Freelance PR consultant and CABJ secretary Valerie Wint says the media "will call on a black person to talk about the whole black community and not understand that the black community is actually several communities."

But perhaps the biggest challenge for the CABJ is tackling institutional racism in the industry. The 1993 CDNA study explored the reasons given by the papers as to why they

weren't hiring more minority journalists. More than half blamed a hiring freeze, while others cited the availability of qualified candidates as the problem. Jules Elder, editor of *Share* newspaper, calls the latter reason a "cop-out." He says many CABJ members are university graduates coming out of journalism schools. Not only do they have the academic qualifications, but the experience as well, with some having worked in the United States, England or the Caribbean. "I think that they will use excuses," says Angela Lawrence. She recites the experience of a colleague wanting to progress to a larger city newspaper from the black community paper where he'd been working. When he contacted one Toronto daily, he was told no positions were available because of a hiring freeze. A month later, while covering an event, he met a young, white reporter newly employed by the same paper.

An isolated incident or typical of what many minorities have been experiencing for decades? According to CABJ member Fil Fraser, president and CEO of Vision TV, "One of the things that coming together in an association does is to allow you to compare notes and see just what the landscape really is." Throughout his own 45-year career, Fraser fortunately has faced virtually no discrimination. Initially, being black may even have worked in his favour since he was considered "exotic," being one of the very few black men working in the industry at the time and the first in broadcasting. "But what's different today is there are thousands of blacks trying to get into these professions and they are a threat to the people who are there. It doesn't need to be a threat, but people respond in that way; it's just a part of human nature."

Representation, access, equity, portrayal in the media—Hamlin Grange believes the CABJ has already begun working to resolve these issues by talking about them in workshops, discussions and forums. As problems present themselves, the association can pen letters and meet managers of media outlets to voice recommendations and grievances. In a more proactive way, the CABJ has created a speaker's bureau that provides members to address students at public schools, universities, and colleges.

However, Ashante Infantry, a city reporter at *The Toronto Star*, doesn't think the CABJ can resolve representation or equity problems, nor does she necessarily see that as its role. But Infantry does endorse the CABJ's commitment to encouraging young people to enter journalism. "Once there are more blacks and other minorities working in news organizations, they're going to be more sensitive to those issues, they're going to think about it and are going to force everybody else to think about it."

To this end, the CABJ has sent letters to the 15 elementary and secondary schools with the highest population of black students in the greater Toronto area, inviting them to contact the association if they would like to have members as guest speakers. "Schools can come

to us and say we'd like a journalist to come out and talk to the kids so they can see that journalists aren't always white. They can be black, they can be East Indian, they can be Asian," says Lawrence. By the end of June, the association will have a career resource centre set up for students and journalism schools will be able to find out about job openings and internship programs. The CABJ is also planning two scholarships in the names of the late Al Hamilton, publisher of *Contrast*, a now-defunct black advocacy paper, and Mary Ann Shadd, the first black woman in Canada to be the publisher of her own newspaper, the *Provincial Freeman*, an abolitionist newspaper she established in 1853.

The only obstacles to CABJ success seem to be money and numbers. It's almost impossible to find anyone who doesn't think the organization is a good idea. "Every credible black journalist I know belongs to it and I think it does a very strong job of being available to up-and-coming journalists in a way that other journalist associations could only admire," says *Globe* managing editor Colin MacKenzie. "They're certainly among the people who keep the diversity fire burning under the bums of people like me."

As for the argument that the association represents reverse discrimination, Hamlin Grange has this to say: "It's not segregation, it's specification. It's saying that these people have specific needs and requirements and concerns that are not being addressed elsewhere and they come together as a group to talk about it. Anyone can join as long as you support the goals and objectives of the association.

"But I think it also becomes a self-monitoring kind of thing," he adds. "For example, would you join the Ukrainian Association of Journalists if you didn't speak the language? Probably not. The important thing that people have to come away with this association is that ultimately it will become a place where industry and the people entering the business can come to for information."

But more importantly perhaps is the group's ability to provide a positive community of people who have the same goals and interests. As Fil Fraser says, "They're really interested in improving the lot of its members, they're not out there to walk around with chips on their shoulders looking for battles to fight. They're out there to solve problems, not to fight battles."