

Title: Journalists Put Heads Together to Combat Stereotypes

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I recently sat on a panel of journalists to discuss how the news media cover the Washington area. The discussion, "Working to Eliminate Stereotyping In and Of the Press," was part of a media day of dialogue held by the National Conference for Community and Justice.

The panelists were Jim Vance, a news anchor at WRC-TV (Channel 4); Kevin Merida, an associate editor of The Washington Post, which was a sponsor of the event; Wendy Thompson, general manager of Telemundo, WGZS-TV (Channel 64); and Adrienne Washington, a columnist for the Washington Times.

A number of issues were raised:

Telemundo's Thompson said that it bugged her to have people labeled by race or ethnic group. We only perpetuate racism and divisiveness with such meaningless classifications, she said.

I disagreed. I believe that one way to undo racial stereotypes is by showing black people in ways that the media tends to ignore -- as high academic achievers, for instance, and as successful entrepreneurs.

What do you think?

A question from a representative of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority -- an influential group of black women devoted to improving the lives of black people -- provoked a lot of thought:

Why, she asked, does The Post write stories about white women's groups who do good works in the black community but tend to ignore black women's groups when they have been doing similar good deeds longer?

Some in the audience felt that "news" meant something out of the ordinary and that white women working to improve the black community was news. When black women served their own, they said, it was just normal.

What do you think?

Another question that generated rather intense discussions was about why The Post ran a photograph of a group of high school cheerleaders with what some perceived as skirts hiked up and legs apart?

The Post story, which ran in the Metro section on April 17, was about a parade celebrating District of Columbia Emancipation Day. Both the writer and photographer are women.

The Post's Merida broadened the context by sharing observations from a recent NCAA basketball game featuring Hampton University and the University of Connecticut. He noted that the all-black Hampton cheerleading squad performed highly stylized dance routines, while the predominately white Connecticut team stuck mainly to gymnastics and cheers.

Perhaps, Merida suggested, the photograph was simply a reflection of black culture and our unique style of dance.

What do you think?

Thompson said she was upset by the way the "mainstream" media covered a Hispanic celebration at the mall in Wheaton not long ago. The mall was evacuated when an overflow crowd showed up to see the star of a Spanish-language soap opera. Some reporters had relied on characterizations of the event as a "near riot" by Hispanics after overhearing officers' comments on police scanners.

What had actually been a well-attended celebration, said Thompson, became a widely publicized slur against Hispanics.

Cheryl Kravitz, executive director for the NCCJ, noted that the goals for the media day are to help the media eliminate stereotyping and to educate the community about obstacles facing the media.

And just what had she learned about the media since the NCCJ began holding such programs in 1994?

"Using labels and metaphors to describe people and groups often sends powerful hidden messages," Kravitz said. "Stereotypes in the news media are manifestations of prejudice and impact the creation of inclusive, respectful and just communities."

Another important finding was that the news about communities of color is often negative. And when there is a deviation from that pattern, Kravitz noted, the result is usually stereotyping of a different sort.

"The rest of the news about communities of color is often limited to cultural celebrations or artistic endeavors, while other aspects of life also deserve attention," she said. "Studies show that people of color most frequently appear in stories about crime, sports and entertainment."

WRC's Vance acknowledged that bias in the media does exist and is mostly the result of ignorance. "The good news is that we tend to be very teachable," Vance said. "But that's

where you come in: Improving news coverage is a two-way street, and you have to make your voices heard."

What do you think?

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