

Ignited by public protests, American newsrooms are having their own racial reckoning

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Like the nation itself, news organizations across the country are facing a racial reckoning, spurred by protests from their own journalists over portrayals of minority communities and the historically unequal treatment of nonwhite colleagues.

Protests and petitions over racial inequities have spilled into public view at major publications, including the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Philadelphia Inquirer and Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. It has also intensified internal complaints by employees at others, such as The Washington Post.

And it has taken a startlingly swift toll: In just nine days since reporters and editors at the New York Times publicly objected to the publication of a controversial opinion column urging military intervention in cities where protests have spurred violence, top editors at five news outlets have resigned or stepped aside under employee pressure, including those at the Times, Inquirer, Variety, Bon Appétit magazine and the fashion and culture website Refinery29. The union representing newsroom employees at the Post-Gazette on Friday called for the resignation of its editor and managing editor.

The fallout in the media world has been faster and more extensive than the impact of the #MeToo movement in 2017 and 2018. While allegations of sexual harassment ended the careers of several prominent men in news media, #MeToo didn't fundamentally challenge newsroom leadership the way the

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“Things have been building for some time,” said Wajahat Ali, a contributing opinion writer at the New York Times. “A culture has been sustained at the Times that is fueled by double standards, and one that marginalizes and silences the concerns of women and people of color. Our colleagues just don’t care. If they did care, they would not just listen, they would create a better culture.”

He added: “I told my father I was probably going to get kicked out of the Times for speaking out. And my father said, ‘So be it. You said the right thing.’”

Readers have gotten an unusual glimpse of the roiling tensions, which have played out largely over screens — and frequently in Twitter exchanges — among a journalistic workforce scattered from newsrooms by the coronavirus pandemic.

When staffers at the Times objected last week to the “Send In the Troops” op-ed by Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) — a piece they viewed as dangerous and racially inflammatory — they did so in tweets, effectively inviting readers to support them. Four days later, editorial page editor James Bennet, once considered a possible contender to become the paper’s executive editor someday, resigned from the Times. Publisher A.G. Sulzberger, citing “a significant breakdown” in editing, said he and Bennet concluded Bennet “would not be able to lead the team through the next leg of change that is required.”

Some at the Times noted a telling anecdote about the controversial essay’s path to publication: A black photo editor had raised issues about the piece before publication with the junior colleague who was overseeing it, but his concerns weren’t heeded.

Other newsroom employees said the Cotton essay was merely a precipitating event awakening long-festering resentments — and not just toward the Times.

When one critic on Twitter suggested newspaper managers were “caving” to demands by minority employees, the Times’ Nikole Hannah-Jones, who in May won a Pulitzer Prize for commentary about the history of slavery, replied: “Please explain why [journalists of color] are still underrepresented across newsrooms [and] mastheads still almost entirely white.”

Newsrooms have made substantial progress in diversifying their ranks since the Kerner Commission report on urban riots in 1968 warned the news media for being “blackish-whitehead” in recruiting black

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ESPN 2½ years later as a senior vice president. The Post no longer has an African American in a senior managerial job in its newsroom.) The petition had attracted 454 signatures as of Saturday morning.

In an email to employees Friday afternoon, Ryan didn't address the petition, which the Guild hadn't yet presented to management, but he was conciliatory. He offered employees a day off Friday in commemoration of Juneteenth, which celebrates the end of slavery in 1865. "While The Post has long worked to build a diverse workforce, we also know there is more to be done — and we are committed to doing it," he wrote.

At the Los Angeles Times, journalists filled an interoffice messaging system with complaints about the dearth of black and Latino staff in a city in which minorities comprise more than half the population and which was convulsed by riots in 1992 over the police beating of black motorist Rodney King. One reporter described the exchanges as "raw and intense."

In a kind of mea culpa, executive editor Norman Pearlstine acknowledged in a staff memo that the paper failed to address "concerns of people of color in the newsroom" and that it focused "on a white subscriber base even as the city became majority nonwhite."

He wrote that the Times "has a long, well-documented history of fueling the racism and cruelty that accompanied our city's becoming a metropolis." He noted its support of Japanese American internment camps and a "blind eye" to police abuses and discriminatory policies. "At its worst, our coverage didn't simply ignore people of color — it actively dehumanized them." Pearlstine promised discussions with staffers, annual disclosure of staff diversity figures and training in unconscious-bias awareness.

On Monday, Refinery29 editor and co-founder Christene Barberich resigned, as did Bon Appétit editor Adam Rapoport after complaints about pay disparities and workplace discrimination at both companies arose on social media.

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old institution kicking and screaming into a more equitable age,” a group of reporters wrote in a letter to management amid a protest that prompted about a quarter of the staff to call in sick. “We’re tired of being told of the progress the company has made, and being served platitudes about ‘diversity and inclusion’ when we raise our concerns.”

“The issues that we see happening outside our newsrooms are also playing out inside our newsrooms to varying degrees,” said Tanzina Vega, a former Times reporter who hosts the public radio program “The Takeaway.” “The solutions have to go beyond diversity efforts and affinity groups to making sure journalists of color feel like they have the same opportunities to succeed and fail that our white colleagues have.”

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