

**Presentation made to the Minnesota Advisory Committee
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“Minneapolis-St Paul News Media Coverage of Minority Communities”**

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By Leonard Witt

Holder of the Robert D. Fowler Distinguished Chair in Communication and
assistant professor of media studies at Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw,
Georgia.

Thank you for the honor of allowing me to address this committee.

Today I get the special pleasure of announcing that in August I will become the first holder of the Robert D. Fowler Distinguished Chair of Communication at Kennesaw State University, just outside of Atlanta, Georgia. Until January of this year, I was employed by Minnesota Public Radio and my job as executive director of the MPR Civic Journalism Initiative was to bring people together to talk about public policy issues and then amplify what they said via the radio, Internet and print. Now I will be doing the same thing, but in an academic institution. At Kennesaw State University we will be experimenting with ways to empower citizens with the aim of integrating their voices into newsrooms, and thus we hope improve the quality of news coverage.

Today newsrooms are not very diverse places. Even when they are diverse in terms of color, which they rarely are, they are still not diverse in terms of class. Ultimately that hurts the news decision-making process.

There is little that's scientific as to how news decisions are made. A lot of it is visceral. A million times you will hear, "I know it's a story, I can feel it in my gut." Rarely will you hear, "I know it's a story I can feel it in my brain."

Let me give you a personal example of how that worked for me when I was a newspaper and magazine editor. I always thought I was a good editor because I was on the leading edge of the baby boom and experienced things before the rest of the boom. I always thought a good editor published a story just as it was on the tip of everyone else's tongue. We said it first. We helped the readers articulate what they were getting ready to say.

Here is a perfect example of what I am talking about. Some 21 years ago my wife and I decided we wanted to choose a name for our soon to be born daughter. We wanted a name that was unusual and no one else was using. We picked Emily. Well unbeknownst to us that very same day every other family in America was naming their

daughter Emily. I told people, for better or worse, I was totally plugged into this common consciousness. I knew America. It was ingrained in my very soul. Emily's classrooms and her soccer fields were filled with other Emilys.

Then one day when Emily was maybe 11, I realized I had hardly ever heard of a black girl named Emily. Nor a Latino girl. What I in fact knew was the common consciousness of white middle class America. Since the rest of the newsrooms everywhere are mostly white and middle class our view of the world, I realized, is not quite as objective as we want people to believe it is.

Another example, about a year and a half ago I was shocked to read that liberal, progressive Minnesota had the worse racial disparity of black males to white males in the country when it came to imprisonment. If you're a black man in Minnesota your chances of being sent to prison were 25 times greater than if you were white.

We had a news editor retreat, and I mentioned these figures. The rest of the people couldn't believe it and challenged the numbers and said I had to be wrong. What were my sources? Prove it, because they were not buying it.

Then the very next person at the retreat said he read that by the year 2020 a third of the world's population will suffer from clinical depression. Everyone quickly agreed that that was a story that had to be done. No one challenged the numbers.

Why? What was going on here?

The answer was that as white middle class Americans they all knew someone who had suffered from mental illness, so when you mentioned mental illness, yes, they feel that story in their guts. It's visceral. On the other hand as white middle class Minnesotans, they didn't know anyone in their cohort who was in prison. It never came up on their personal radar screen. Why? Well Minnesota does not imprison more blacks than the rest of the nation. But it does imprison far fewer whites. For every 100,000 black citizens in the state, 1,463 black men are in prison. For every 100,000 white citizens in the state there are 63 white males in prison. 1,463 to 63. So if you are black this is a visceral issue, you feel it in your gut. If you are a white newsman or woman, you don't.

So to do right by all the people left out including, minorities and the poor everywhere we have to find ways to get their voices heard.

Journalists must go out and listen, and listening doesn't just mean a

phone call or a visit. It means getting out into the community and going to where the people are. Or it means convening some forums and summits, so reporters and editors can watch a group dynamic which is much different than a singular talking head.

And it is vital because even though journalists really don't know much about other ethnic communities, what they write is often the only connections other whites have to these other communities. For example, the Pittsburgh Press newspaper did a poll and discovered that 80 percent of their white readers never had any contact with black people. My guess is similar numbers are true for Minnesota. The bulk of what they know about black life is what they read in the newspaper, hear on the radio or see on the TV.

Now this is where it gets very crazy. In other words, for the majority of white Minnesotans the only understanding of black and other ethnic cultures is what is provided them in our newspapers, radios or our TVs. And ironically most of the media stories are produced by news people who look and act a lot like me. White and middle class. So white and middle class reporters and editors are telling other white and middleclass Americans about the black experience in America.

Or about the Hispanic experience or the Asian experience. Common sense says something needs to be fixed with this formula.

It is mandatory that we as journalists get out into those communities and bring those communities into the very heart of the newsroom.

However, this is not easy because a lot of reporters and editors don't think the citizens have much to say. And I have seen it happen over and over.

Here is an example, *The Minneapolis Star Tribune*, TPT public television and Minnesota Public Radio brought people together to talk about major political issues during a recent election season. Before the people broke into small groups we had experts give them background material. One reporter dutifully took notes when the experts spoke. However, when the people went into the small group discussions, I saw the reporter standing out in the hall. I asked him why he wasn't with a small group. He said, "They don't have anything to say." "

How do you know, you're out here in the hall."

Another meeting where we gathered parents, teachers and kids in a forum to talk about issues that affected their every day lives in schools, a reporter was standing in the back of the room talking to a

lobbyist. Again that reporter like the one in the hallway said there was nothing new here. Maybe, but our radio reporter submitted an excellent five-minute story, which is a lot of time in radio. And it is universal with reporters, I heard a reporter from Denmark say, why would I listen to the people, everything they say is a bunch of crap. The truth is people do have a lot to say, and there is power when people start to talk because often that talk turns to action. Reporters world wide might think what the masses have to say is crap however the nastiest dictators in the world understand the power of people talking. When people form groups to talk about issues they are herded up and arrested. Dictators understand the worth of people talking.

Now we just have to convince newsrooms.

I know after being in newsrooms for some 30 years this will not be an easy task. Indeed I now believe if left on their own newsrooms will pretty much push civic journalism to the side. Each newsroom must have a champion for the civic engagement. But even that will not be enough.

Everyday people, and especially those in ethnic communities, must be given access to empowerment tools so they learn the strategies

and skills needed to get their voices, needs, wants and desires heard inside newsrooms and then amplified to wider audiences. We can't rely on mostly white, almost always middleclass newsroom to accurately understand how groups outside their own cohort see and interpret the world. If we find methods to get the people's voices heard inside newsrooms and then amplified to larger audiences, the end result we will be a stronger and more accurate body of news available to all news readers, listeners and watchers. Everybody wins.

In conclusion this is a battle that must be fought on two fronts.

Newsrooms have to be aggressive in finding ways to integrate a multiplicity of voices into their news gathering process. At the same time citizens have to be given empowerment tools so they know the strategies and have the skills to fill that void that is present in so many newsrooms today. I know when I arrive at Kennesaw State University we will be searching for ways to empower citizen voices and to empower civic journalism champions inside news organizations. In other words, we will be fighting that battle on both fronts, and I encourage the same battles be fought across Minnesota

and the rest of the country. If we succeed, as I said earlier, everyone wins.