

Panel with a purpose

Eleven representatives of the media met with the public to discuss their concerns about potential racism in news coverage.

By Mike Costanza

Nearly a dozen representatives of print and broadcast media were on hand on Feb. 25 for a lively discussion of the role and responsibility of mass media in helping to address individual and institutionalized racism.

Activists Against Racism Movement, a local group, organized the panel discussion. AARM representatives said the meeting was the first of a series the organization plans to hold on such issues. About 50 people attended the event at Rochester's James Monroe High School. While 10 of the 11 news professionals onstage represented local organizations such as the Democrat and Chronicle and WXXI-TV News, Michelle Rice of TV One was on hand to participate, as well. Ms Rice is vice president of distribution strategy and marketing for the Maryland-based entertainment network, which targets African Americans.

The discussion began with opening statements from Monroe's stage, after which the panelists took questions from the audience. Many onstage and in the audience focused on the need to improve the coverage of stories involving African Americans, and to offer a more balanced view of life in the city's minority neighborhoods.

"There's a disproportion in the number of positive images being portrayed in the media," said Grace Flores, one about 20 people who addressed the panel. Though minority youth write poetry, act in plays and are involved in other positive cultural and social activities, local media doesn't mention those activities. "They don't get covered," she said. Flores is a member of AARM.

Dave McCleary, the publisher of "Minority Reporter" and one of the panelists, seemed to agree.

"There's a lot of positive things happening in our community that you really don't see all of the time," McCleary said. "We are more than—our community—more than just crime and all the negative things that we see many times." Minority reporter is a weekly newspaper that's geared toward the African American community.

The coverage of two recent news stories involving African Americans drew the concern of several in the audience that evening. The first was the coverage of the case of Tyquan Rivera, the 14-year-old accused of shooting Rochester police officer Anthony DiPonzio. DiPonzio was shot in late January on Rochester's Dayton Street after investigating a report of possible drug activity. Jon Greenbaum of Metro Justice called on those present to treat the story with more than just a "procedural response."

"The usual procedural response, which is 'OK, here's a criminal and let's respond by doing a procedural investigation, or let's give voice to people who just want to see him put in jail,'" Greenbaum said. Real coverage of the story would transcend the official view of the shooting.

"Whose voices are heard in the story? Whose voices are not heard in the story," Greenbaum said. "This was really more complex than initially portrayed."

Steve Dawe, news director of 13 WHAM News, said his staff has tried to talk to those in the neighborhood in order to get beneath the surface of the story, to no avail.

"We went back and we tried to get people to talk yesterday, and no one in the neighborhood—going door-to-door—would talk to us," Dawe said. "It was challenging."

Julie Philipp, news director for WXXI-TV News, said that those in some communities refuse to speak up when approached by reporters.

"A lot of times, the person showing up is not necessarily someone that they can relate to," she said. While newsrooms have grown more diverse in recent years, greater attention to hiring practices might help break down the barriers between them and the communities they cover.

"A qualified person might not be the one who has the highest journalism degree and has experience, but the person who has access to the community that doesn't necessarily trust the white press," Philipp said.

The Democrat and Chronicle's coverage of the recent arrest of Yolanda Miranda, an African American mother from Rochester who is accused of illegally placing her children in Greece schools, drew the ire of community activist Patricia Mannix. The story appeared prominently on the front page, with that of bankers who were accused of contributing to the current economic debacle—a much more serious crime.

"Juxtaposed to the bankers' story was the story of this extremely dangerous life criminal in our community who had dared to send her children to the Greece school district," Mannix said. "If that doesn't scream of racism, I don't know what would."

Rochester City Councilman Dana Miller decried media representations of the victims of crimes.

"The immediate expectation is they must've been involved in drugs, or

crime, or violence or somehow were at fault for becoming victims," Miller said. "They may not have actually done anything wrong."

As the meeting began to wind down, Tanya Poyser said she was glad it had taken place.

"I'm happy to see an open dialogue in a forum like this," said Poyser, who lives in northeast Rochester. At the same time, she wondered about the future.

"What will they do now?" she said. "What will be different tomorrow, when I open the newspaper or turn on the tele-

vision?"

Dana Bratcher, the AARM member who moderated the panel, pronounced the evening a success.

"We had a wonderful turnout," He said. "All of the panelists participated; gave their input."

The panel discussion is only the first event of its kind for AARM. Bratcher said that the organization planned to examine what it had learned from the panel over the next 30 days, and hold another meeting on the subject afterward.



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