

Why the whiteness of the American media is everyone's problem

By Howard W French

When the world is depicted from a uniquely white perspective, non-white people suffer serious consequences

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In spite of what may appear to many observers to be fitful progress, the American media is still beset by a profound crisis of race: marked by both a failure to integrate black journalists into the business, and a pattern of excluding them from the coverage of certain subjects.

None of this is new – but recent events have highlighted the issue and cast new light on the performance of the press. The first of these was a long string of killings of unarmed black men and children that began in 2014, and the second is the ongoing US presidential campaign, in which leading Republican candidates, such as Donald Trump, have effectively normalized starkly offensive racial language.

As I recently wrote in a lengthy piece for this newspaper, this is not a trivial matter, or a subject of concern only for journalists. The enduring whiteness of the American media has real consequences – and it persists even as a number of black journalists have become prominent, and even celebrated, figures in American journalism.

One of the celebrated figures to whom I had referred, Ta-Nehisi Coates of the Atlantic, has taken exception to my discussion of the many ways – some of them subtle and even counterintuitive – in which black people continue to be marginalized in the media.

Beyond his distaste for my having cited him as an example of how such marginalization can be seen to persist, even amid celebration of his work,

Coates has disagreed with a major element of my argument, which deserves further debate.

African Americans still face exclusion from the mainstream media, which has historically come in many forms. One of them, which has received insufficient attention, is the way in which black journalists have been disproportionately channelled into specific realms of coverage – often to do with race – which means they are also disproportionately excluded from other areas. Those areas in which African-Americans have been underrepresented – national politics, business, national security, foreign policy, international reporting, culture (as opposed to entertainment) – easily constitute more than half of the work of serious news organisations. This means that a very large slice of the media industry remains a kind of desert for African Americans; if not completely off-grounds, seriously forbidding.

In making this point, I do not argue that African American journalists writing about race and racism – in society or their own lives – are somehow superfluous or overabundant. In his response, Coates has turned my point on its head to suggest that in my concern for what black writers have traditionally been denied the opportunity to write about, I am valorizing the role of white gatekeepers and denigrating the work of those writers, like himself, who have done brilliant work chronicling the lives and struggles of black Americans. The suggestion that I am the kind of black journalist who is preoccupied with “what white people think of black writing” is demeaning. It would also come as a surprise to anyone who has read my work over three decades, to my colleagues and editors, and more recently, to my students.

I have no quarrel with Coates, who seems to feel I am criticising his work. To the contrary, I have loudly saluted his emergence as a powerful and necessary voice in American journalism, taught his work to my journalism students, and invited him to appear in my classroom. Coates invokes a roster of African American journalists whom I have not mentioned in my essay, but some of the names he mentions are people I spoke with as I was writing, and preferred not to be quoted. Some of the other names he cites are referred to indirectly, such as when I discuss the efforts made by a small number of prestigious publications to hire high-profile black writers.

I referred in my original article to the “hegemony of whiteness” in American life – and the ways in which Trump, for example, appeals to supporters who resent any challenge to this dominance. But here is where journalism takes on an important role, and one that makes it essential for black reporters to be represented in every area of the news: when the world is construed and represented to readers from a uniquely white perspective, non-white people in this society suffer serious and direct consequences.

American journalism doesn't need to hear less of Ta-Nehisi Coates – whose writing has played such a vital role in re-energizing the discussion of race in our country – or less of the other writers who take inspiration from him. But what it also needs, with at least equal urgency, is for African Americans and people of other minority backgrounds to finally break down the doors that have barred their entry for so long into broad areas of journalism that have disproportionately remained the preserve of white people.