

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY  
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM

“Unless We’re Singing or Dancing, We Are *Not* Going to Be Represented in the Media”:  
Stereotyping of African Americans in Penn State Student News Coverage

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SPRING 2019

A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a baccalaureate degree  
in Journalism  
with honors in Journalism.

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## ABSTRACT

African American students at the Pennsylvania State University whose voices were heard in the 2007 documentary "The Paper" felt underrepresented on the news staff of the campus' student newspaper, and mischaracterized in the paper's news coverage. I wanted to find out is how much things have changed, if at all, in the past decade or more. It is widely accepted in the journalism world that news coverage should not be biased and that a diverse staff helps in that effort, specifically in terms of increasing coverage and being aware of unconscious biases that reporters may have. This research is grounded in the efforts of national media platforms to better portray African Americans to the public and increase staff diversity. Furthermore, this thesis examines whether the coverage of African American students by Penn State student media organizations reflect a lack of diversity on their staffs.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to give a warm thanks to Russell Frank, who dealt with my craziness over the past year as I scrambled to get all my interviews and drafts done. His wisdom, guidance, and encouragement were imperative in helping me construct a strong thesis, which I am proud to share with the academic community.

Additional thanks to Will Yurman and Jo Dumas for believing in my work, and serving as a support base throughout the writing process. Both of them provided me with the tools and necessary feedback to succeed. I would also like to thank Debra Rodgers for facilitating the thesis submission process and ensuring that I met the Schreyer thesis deadlines on time.

I would also like to give a special thanks to my cheerleaders, my family and friends, especially my parents, who were with me every step of the way. Their unending love and support served as a motivator for completing my thesis to the best of my ability. I couldn't have done it without them.

And last but not least, I want to thank my grandmother. Sadly, she passed away earlier this year. She was my biggest supporter all throughout my life and always encouraged me to pursue my education. She constantly took me to my local library as a child and helped me check out books. She was thrilled when I told her I was accepted into the Schreyer Honors Program at Penn State and couldn't wait to see me obtain my degree. This is for you my beautiful butterfly; I love you so much.

## Introduction

The 2007 documentary, “The Paper,” highlights various issues that Penn State’s student-run newspaper, The Daily Collegian confronted during the 2004-05 academic year. The news publication faced rapidly declining circulation, credibility concerns, and limited access to university officials. One of the main problems the film explores is the lack of diversity in the newsroom, particularly concerning the African American community. Students of color criticized The Collegian for failing to report on racial injustices and covering the African American community solely for sports and entertainment purposes, with one student proclaiming that “unless we’re singing and dancing, we are not going to be represented in the media here in State College fairly and adequately enough to get our voices heard.” Black student leaders lambasted local media organizations for their superficial coverage, reiterating that African American students were an “invisible population” at Penn State.

I wanted to find out how much things have changed, if at all, since the film was made. It is widely accepted in the journalism world that news coverage should not be biased and that a diverse staff helps in that effort, specifically in terms of increasing coverage and being aware of unconscious biases that reporters may have. This research is grounded in the efforts of national media platforms to better portray African Americans to the public and increase staff diversity. Furthermore, this thesis examines whether the coverage of African American students by Penn State student media organizations reflect a lack of diversity on their staffs.

In the documentary, director Aaron Matthews conveys that the conversation between black student leaders and the editors of The Collegian is left unresolved. The purpose of this

thesis was to uncover whether this dialogue between the black community and the local media has continued, and what the relationship between the two entities is over a decade later. For my study, I focused on two major student-run publications at Penn State: The Daily Collegian, which has been the dominant student newspaper at the university for 150 years, and The Underground, a recent digital media site that is gaining traction for providing coverage of students of color.

Before I discuss The Underground, it is worth mentioning that people often use the terms “people of color,” “black,” and “African Americans” interchangeably, but they have overlapping but different meanings. A “person of color” is defined by the Oxford dictionary as “a person who is not white or of European parentage”; an alternative term for this description is nonwhite. The term “black” refers to “any human group having dark-colored skin, especially of African or Australian Aboriginal ancestry” (New Oxford American Dictionary). Meanwhile, “African Americans” are defined as “black people living in The United States who are descended from families that originally came from Africa” (Collins Dictionary).

An online publication titled “The Underground” was co-founded by Penn State freshmen Adriana Lacy and Candice Crutchfield in 2015 (Thoet, 2018). After attending a presentation by Soledad O’Brien, the friends were inspired to create a news platform that incorporated diverse voices at Penn State. Today, the multicultural publication consists of 50 students who hail from various backgrounds, including international students, exchange students, and students who speak English as a second language (Thoet 2018).

The Underground prides itself on being a champion for people of color and uncovering hidden stories on campus, something that black student advocates in “The Paper” petitioned for. Meanwhile, The Collegian is facing declining readership and trying to develop a more innovative approach to gain subscribers. Both media organizations are trying to reshape their image,

strategies, and goals concerning their relationship with the African American community, especially given the current political and racial climate.

Over the course of the Fall 2018 semester, I conducted interviews and analysis of these two media publications to examine the staffing and coverage of African Americans within the past 12 years.

I interviewed board members of the Collegian, the assistant editor of The Underground, the editor-in-chief of The Collegian, the editor-in-chief of The Underground, a professional-in-residence of the College of Communications, and the College of Communications' assistant dean for multicultural affairs. I spent several weeks compiling detailed accounts that document the coverage and recruitment of African Americans in The Underground and The Collegian. Each person had their own set of interview questions. However, some overarching questions included the interview subject's perspective on the current relationship between the student media and African American community, whether the coverage of African Americans has improved in the past few years, and the strategies both student publications should implement in the future. I applied my own observations and analysis after reviewing the interviews in order to draw some conclusions. I also conducted a focus group as a means of garnering the current attitudes African American students have towards the student media.

I searched The Daily Collegian's database to find any significant themes regarding the coverage of the African American community. These historical trends helped me paint a picture of The Daily Collegian's reporting of the African American community between the release of "The Paper" and now. I also analyzed the content and formatting of The Underground's website to see if they have adhered to their mission statement, which is to cater to students of color.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter One provides additional background on the diversity issues affecting The Collegian in “The Paper.” This section also traces the history of The Underground and The Collegian, their respective missions, and their position in campus media. Chapter Two details staffing of African American reporters. This chapter outlines the recruitment efforts both publications have made to increase staff diversity. It also discusses the challenges associated with covering the African American community without enough black representation in the newsroom, how reporters get assigned to a beat, and the chain of command a story has to travel through before getting published.

Chapter Three discusses the coverage of the African American community, with the editors explaining how they decide which story is newsworthy, their collaborations with black student organizations regarding African American coverage, and the context of the coverage regarding African Americans. Chapter Four highlights the focus group I conducted in March, which consists of African American journalism students. They provide their thoughts, perspectives, and experiences on the staffing and coverage of African Americans in the student media.

Chapter Five contextualizes chapters two and three on a national scale by drawing from an interview with Walter Middlebrook, a veteran reporter and editor who worked at many national news outlets and who served as a professional-in-residence during the Fall 2018 semester at Penn State. Middlebrook applies his personal and professional experiences to the potential problems facing local media organizations and their African American audience. This chapter also examines the staffing and coverage of African Americans in the national newsroom through journalistic research.



Finally, in Chapter six, I will provide my overall analysis of the state of things involving the local staffing and coverage of the African American community, and what strategies can be implemented to improve the relationship between the two.

Before I analyze the performance of Penn State's student media's coverage of the university's African American community, I want to mention that there are other student media outlets at Penn State, but for the purposes of this thesis, I am only focusing on *The Collegian* and *The Underground*.

Although a third student media outlet, *Onward State*, is not going to be the focus of this study, it was mentioned several times by my sources, so I will provide some background about it here. *Onward State* is a student-run Penn State blog that began as a small project by three Penn State students, Eli Glazier, Evan Kalikow, and Davis Shaver. The site published its first post on November 17, 2008, catering to Penn State students, faculty, staff, and alumni (*Onward State*, 2019). They label themselves as “an independent alternative Penn State news website that seeks to foster the student voice through the combination of commentary that is fair, authentic, and sometimes humorous; analysis that is critical and irreverent; and news that is relevant and accurate” (*Onward State*, 2019). *Onward State* is the self-proclaimed mouthpiece of Penn State whose strategies include disseminating content rapidly through their online site, and taking advantage of social media. Their mission statement is to “generate honest conversation in the hopes of enriching the Penn State community and experience” (*Onward State*, 2019).

## Chapter 1

**“We have always struggled with having a more diverse newsroom.”**

### **The Daily Collegian**

The Daily Collegian is a student-run publication at the Pennsylvania State University. Besides The Daily Collegian, the publication has four subdivisions: The Weekly Collegian, P.S., Collegian Magazine and The Daily Collegian Online. All subsets are published by Collegian Inc., an independent, non-profit corporation with a board of directors composed of students, faculty and professionals. The Daily Collegian and P.S circulate on the University Park campus. The Weekly Collegian is mailed to Commonwealth Campus students, parents of students, alumni and other subscribers. Collegian Magazine contains information for Penn State home football games and other special interest topics (Collegian History, 2013).

On their “about” page, The Daily Collegian’s mission statement reads, “The dual mission of Collegian Inc. is to publish quality media products for the Penn State community and to provide a rewarding educational experience for the student staff members.” The publication features a range of categories on its online page. This includes news, sports (with football getting its own special sub-section), features and investigation, opinion, arts and lifestyle, photo and multimedia, and blogs. Each category has a set of sub-categories. News beats include administration, student government, mental health, and diversity and culture. On The Collegian page, sports appear to be its main concentration.

The Daily Collegian traces its history to 1887, when it was called the Free Lance. Less than 20 years later, the paper failed to receive financial support from delinquent subscribers and discontinued in 1904. That same year, former Free Lance staff members formed the foundation of the State Collegian, which was renamed the Penn State Collegian on Sept. 28, 1911. The Penn State Collegian became a semi-weekly publication starting with its Sept. 14, 1920 issue focusing on preparations for a football game in Dartmouth and who was “The Worst Dressed” freshman (Collegian History, 2013).

In September 1940, the news publication renamed itself the Daily Collegian. Collegian was chartered as a non-profit corporation, with a board of directors elected by the newspaper's Senior Board. The newspaper suspended publication during World War II, operating as a weekly and semi-weekly publication until it returned to its daily status in the fall of 1946. Women, who played a vital role in publication during the war, managed to keep influential staff positions (Collegian History, 2013).

The Daily Collegian has garnered both accolades and controversy over its long history. The paper has earned All-American honors and the top national award from the Associated Collegiate Press for their editorial and newspaper content. However, the student-run newspaper has also been the target of picketing, protests, and the ceremonial burning of issues on the steps of the Carnegie building, which was the former location of The Collegian offices (Collegian History, 2013). This stems from racially-charged epithets and controversial coverage. For instance, in November 1970, a Collegian reporter recorded a closed Black Student Union meeting and published an article about the meeting in the Nov. 6 issue of the paper. Black Student Union members burned 10,000 copies of the following edition in response (Lee, 2019). Staff members and editors have been suspended and terminated.

Racial tensions continued to follow The Collegian. In “The Paper,” The Daily Collegian’s Editor-in-Chief James Young, received complaints from Black Caucus members about the staff’s stereotypical reporting. He dismissed affirmative action as a possible solution, which would require recruiting more African American journalists. He insisted that the newspaper’s Caucasian reporters were more than capable of covering diversity issues, and there was no need to enlist more African American reporters. He argued that the staff simply needed to be more cognizant when reporting racially sensitive topics.

Young’s stance failed to yield any significant changes, and The Daily Collegian was again criticized for using inflammatory rhetoric when reporting on African American students. Young eventually scheduled a meeting with representatives from Black Caucus to discuss better diversity reporting practices moving forward. One of the Black Caucus members said, “Increasing integration into the Collegian is a good thing, but it needs to be another issue-- the fact that you don’t need to be black to understand that some things are just wrong.” He then said that “if the Collegian went to issues wishing to be more responsive to the student body that [it] shape the opinions of, these issues wouldn’t happen.”

Young later revealed that only three junior reporters were on the diversity team. Editors assigned beats based on the reporters’ interests, offering them limited tools and preparation for the subject they were covering. Another Black Caucus member said that “86 percent of white students that come to Penn State have very little experience with students of color before they come to Penn State. I have to assume that statistics carry over to the white students that are here at The Collegian.” When the Black Caucus representative asked Young if he was going to implement mandatory diversity training for the entire Collegian staff, he said that he wouldn’t commit all of them due to more pressing concerns.

Despite these setbacks, the daily publication has maintained its national recognition as Penn State's main newspaper. In the summer of 1996, the Daily Collegian launched its publication online. The Collegian wanted to access a wider audience at a faster rate and deliver breaking news in real time. This new business model proved successful in providing information to the Penn State community. The Collegian dominated by being the leading source of news coverage at the university. According to former editor James Young, who was featured in the documentary, "The Paper" (2007), newspaper circulation remained steady at around 20,000 per day, making The Collegian the fifth-largest college publication in the country. During the filming of "The Paper," Young said The Collegian ranked as one of the top three student newspapers in the country. At the time, Young supervised over 200 staff members, and The Collegian distributed content to 40,000 undergraduates at Penn State. He said that due to the publication's large size, staff members typically worked up to 40 hours a week on top of classes. "This isn't just some rinky-dink college newspaper," he said. The student-run publication saw its peak circulation in 2012, when it published a commemorative issue the day after former coach Joe Paterno died. A record 35,000 copies were printed and distributed; however, the demand for copies out-paced supply, resulting in the printing of an additional 10,000 copies (Collegian History, 2013).

In 2019, the publication, which prided itself on a sense of traditionalism, attempted to revamp its format and content to increase readership. The newspaper's current circulation has plunged significantly, to only 3,000 copies a day. In 2017, the student publication announced that it was reducing print production from five days a week to two days a week on Mondays and Thursdays. Meanwhile, The Collegian still publishes daily stories on its online site. The decline in circulation had already begun to alarm editors in 2004-05, when "The Paper" was in

production. That year, average daily circulation totaled 15,000 copies, which was equivalent to a nearly 9 percent drop that week compared to the year prior. This number marked the lowest circulation in three decades. The return rate, which is supposed to be between 8 and 10 percent, jumped to 18 percent, an all-time high. The rate of return or return rate, is defined as unsold newspaper copies that are recovered “for the purpose of supplying the used paper recycling loops” (Counting Returns in the Newspaper Industry, 1999). The Collegian staff worried about not attracting advertisers if their circulation numbers continued decreasing. The publication is independent from the university and had to meet their bottom line.

Meanwhile, readership was dying on a national scale. Major news organizations, including The New York Times and USA Today, have seen their circulation fall as well (Barthel, 2017). The Collegian editors attempted to tackle this issue by generating content that readers (specifically college students) would be interested in, such as dating columns and feature pieces. This ultimately boosted circulation numbers temporarily. The changing digital landscape is most likely the culprit for The Collegian’s current circulation decline. Many subscribers prefer to obtain the news from their phones and computers as opposed to print copies. In order to retain readership, Collegian editors have shifted the bulk of their content onto an online platform to provide more convenience and accessibility to its audience (Collegian History, 2013).

The current Collegian staff consists of 125 members in its Spring 2019 News Staff Division and 21 members in its Spring 2019 Business Division (Powers, 2019). The current editor-in-chief is Kelly Powers, who started her term in Fall 2018.

### **The Underground**

Another student-run publication that has become a dominant provider of campus news is The Underground. The Underground began as a project proposed by two freshmen, Adriana

Lacy and Candice Crutchfield. The pair launched the media publication online in 2015, with the intent to engage more community members and promote the sharing of diverse stories (The Underground, 2019). The Underground is solely an online publication. The first contributors consisted of a small team who happened to be friends. This group included Lacy, Crutchfield, Matthew Lamas, and Adam Tidball. Lacy served as editor-in-chief from 2015-2018. The current editor-in-chief is Stephanie Keyaka, who began the position in the Fall semester of 2018 (The Underground, 2019).

The Underground's mission statement says that it "is a multicultural student-run media site devoted to telling the untold stories within the Penn State community. [It] seek[s] to foster the multicultural student voice through creating an open forum of discussion and promoting diversity and community involvement," (The Underground, 2019). To achieve this objective, The Underground publishes five categories: News, Race and Identity, Commentary, Art, and Lifestyle. According to its site, News covers "salient campus events, national news, and world news," (The Underground, 2019) Race and Identity adheres to the publication's mission statement by providing stories, commentaries and personal narratives regarding culture, racial tensions, sexuality and religion. Commentary includes personal opinion pieces relating to current events and identity, while Art features spoken-word personal art pieces, etc. Lastly, Lifestyle has articles, inspirational messages, and personal accounts for a healthy and productive life (The Underground, 2019).

RISE is The Underground's online magazine, which publishes content 24/7, including music, arts and cultural topics. RISE serves as the cultural and contemporary companion of what the main Underground website strives to be. The online magazine is an innovative space that promotes inspiration, and advocacy among Penn State students. The name RISE derives from

Maya Angelou's famous poem "Still I Rise," which salutes triumph over adversity (The Underground, 2019). The Underground references the poem in its self-proclaimed commitment to social justice and community, stating that "the only way to overcome hate, oppression and injustice is if we rise – together, unified and with strength" (The Underground, 2019).

The Underground staff emphasizes on their "about" page that no previous writing experience is required. The publication wants "pieces that are thinking about things in new and different ways, pieces with original voice and a certain sense of fearlessness." The publication says that its goal is to provide a "diversity of experiences, voices, points of view, styles, and artistic forms" (The Underground, 2019). Currently, The Underground staff consists of nearly 40 members, with each category having an editor along with an assistant editor. The media site also has a board of directors that consists of alumni and faculty. To generate profits, the student-run publication accepts advertisements from local businesses and organizations (Keyaka, 2019).

Lacy and Crutchfield created The Underground in response to what they saw as the lack of student-media coverage of underrepresented groups. In "The Paper," Black Caucus members accused The Collegian of providing inaccurate stereotypes and racially charged rhetoric when covering the African American community. The vice president of Black Caucus hosted a press conference in the HUB to convey the daily racial injustices students of color face at Penn State. He also accused The Collegian of failing to cover racist incidents. He discussed how a Caucasian student called him racial epithets and threatened bodily harm towards him. He said that the investigation was still pending. The Collegian printed this story and received backlash from Black Caucus for the wording used in its editorial. The piece repeatedly referred to the event as a rally instead of a news conference. Collegian reporters also used the word "alleged" throughout the Black Caucus editorial, making it seem like they were questioning whether the incidents even



occurred. Some staff members defended the piece. Collegian reporters argued that the incident was still under investigation and until they had tangible proof, “alleged” was the appropriate word to use.

Editors expressed their frustration with Black Caucus members, who criticized the article for omitting what they thought were important quotes and failing to clarify certain points. Collegian staff defended their reporting, asserting that they had time and space constraints, and could not publish everything Black Caucus members say. This miscommunication and lack of understanding might have stemmed from not having enough reporters of color. “We have always struggled with having a more diverse newsroom. It’s just a huge problem for the national media as well,” a Collegian editor said in “The Paper”. “It’s difficult to recruit African Americans to schools of journalism because I don’t really think the newspapers cover the African American community very well. If the newspaper industry covered issues that are important to the black community, African Americans would want to read newspapers more, and they would want to become journalists.”

Concerns about inadequate staffing and coverage of African American students at the Collegian has prompted grassroots media organizations like The Underground to deliver news to communities of color. The next chapter will analyze the news staff at The Collegian and The Underground to determine if the two publications made any efforts to increase staff diversity.

## **Chapter 2**

### **“Relationships aren’t going to be quickly resolved.”**

This chapter will discuss the staffing of The Daily Collegian and The Underground. I will explore the recruitment strategies undertaken by both publications, the diversity and inclusion efforts each student media outlet has made, and whether their efforts have been successful. This chapter will also discuss the number of African Americans on both staffs and the trainings that prospective staff members have to complete before joining their respective teams.

#### **The Daily Collegian**

The Daily Collegian has around 70 students in its news division for the Spring 2019 semester. Five reporters are students of color. Editor-in-Chief Kelly Powers didn’t specify whether students of color meant African Americans or individuals of another ethnic background. The five-member group consists of two candidate reporters, one graphic designer, one photographer, and one sales manager.

Powers prides herself on being different from her predecessors in terms of promoting diversity and inclusion. She said she has established relationships with black student organizations before she began her year as editor-in-chief in Fall 2018. Powers said she actively communicates with groups such as Black Caucus and African Student Union (ASA), encouraging their members to participate in Collegian tryouts. She acknowledges, however, that the student-run newspaper still faces many challenges in the 13 years since “The Paper” was released. “Relationships aren’t going to be quickly resolved, it’s a topic that needs to continue to be discussed and editors...need to continue to work to change it,” she said.

Powers said that while The Collegian is a well-established student newspaper with a respectable image and legacy, some past decisions have reflected poorly on the organization. During The Collegian's first all-staff meeting of the Fall 2018 semester, Powers said, "We have a terrible past when it comes to being inclusive, and I think all of you understand that. It's time to realize it's something that we can change." She created a new staff called features and investigation, stressing to them the importance of lending a voice to underrepresented groups. "These are stories that people are too lazy to tackle," she explained. The Collegian has a diversity and culture beat that consists of two reporters, but in her Fall plan, Powers said that each department position needs to have diversity representation. She remains hopeful that she will gain a more inclusive staff, although she admits this initiative will take time.

In the summer of 2018, Powers established contacts with the president of Black Caucus, later building connections with other black student organizations through that relationship. She wanted to "give a face to the name of Collegian editor-in-chief," and adopted a more personable approach when reaching out, such as meeting black student organization leaders for lunch at cafes instead of The Collegian office. She spread the message about tryout dates, asking black student organizations to post them on their social media pages. Powers also went about assuring people that her philosophy is different from that of her predecessors. "I feel like it's more than other editors have done," she said. Powers claimed that multicultural student organizations were very receptive towards her, and that they created partnerships to focus on certain topics that are often overlooked. She has collaborated on projects with Black Caucus, with one being "Who's who at PSU," a hashtag created by Black Caucus to get to know notable students at Penn State.

Powers suggested that they put the hashtag and the responses it generated in one place. She wrote an article on The Collegian website that provided a link to the hashtag so it would

attract readers. Besides efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, Powers also created relationships with black student leaders to tap into a wider audience, stating that “these [are] multicultural organizations that people may or may not know about.”

Despite inclusion efforts, Powers said she didn’t witness a large influx of people of diverse backgrounds, later acknowledging that it’s a gradual process. She directed The Collegian’s creative team to make promotional flyers, which were later posted in the Paul Robeson Cultural Center (PRCC), the HUB, college newswires, and the rest of campus. Powers incorporated language in the flyers that promoted inclusivity, such as how The Collegian is looking for more “voices and talents” and that they accept all skill levels.

Although The Collegian already has diversity trainings in place, Powers said she wants to better enforce them, with current staff completing one diversity training for the semester and incoming members finishing two. Powers believes it is important to implement several trainings when the recruits are new and impressionable, saying that she consistently reminds them of the trainings at all-staff meetings.

In terms of incoming members, Powers doesn’t believe that diversity and inclusion should be limited to African American reporters; instead, she mentioned that staff positions are based on qualifications, and whether the candidate has proved him or herself. She also takes the new recruits’ interests into consideration, which are listed on their applications. Ultimately, Powers makes the final decision about which department a new recruit gets assigned to.

## The Underground

According to Editor-in-Chief Stephanie Keyaka, The Underground has eight African Americans on its 40-member staff, with one in the marketing division and the remaining members on the news content production team. Keyaka said that the student media site uses various recruitment tactics to gain new members. Members of the executive board set up a booth at campus involvement fairs, while readers who are interested in writing for the site can become contributors or freelancers by emailing Keyaka. The Underground's number one recruitment method, however, is word of mouth. Keyaka said students might notice that their roommate is a current reporter for the Underground, prompting them join.

The Underground's visuals and arts department also employs innovative recruitment methods, such as creating QR codes or hanging posters around the HUB-Robeson Center. Underground editors will reach out to student organizations and departments, using them as a conduit to find new and talented members. For instance, editors and current members have attempted to expand The Underground's visuals team by asking the College of Arts and Architecture to send out promotional fliers to their email list serve. According to Keyaka, these methods have been successful. She said that the last major recruitment effort, which took place in the Fall 2018 semester, attracted 15 new members, a number she considered to be impressive. The Underground currently consists of 40 members, making it a relatively small student-run publication compared to The Collegian, which has 125 members.

Keyaka admitted that The Underground's limited staff size can present some challenges when it comes to having enough manpower to cover campus-wide events. "We don't have enough people to do everything," she said. "We may send a [photographer] to an event, but we won't have a writer, so we may do a visual series, or we may send writer but we won't have a

[photographer].” Despite these limitations, Keyaka believes that people find The Underground’s reporting style and mission statement attractive. “There’s so much freedom here as a writer and as a contributor to The Underground to what you can write,” she said. “Other sites, I think it’s hard to run large and do your own thing because you have to be assigned something. At such a big site you have somebody who is micromanaging you and they care a lot about their brand and their image, so everything has to be exact.”

Keyaka said that The Underground prides itself on having a diverse staff, which she believes is beneficial to the journalism process:

If you’re not hiring and dedicating your recruitment staff to diversity, it gets very easy to just ignore the fact that your organization is predominantly white or male. At The Underground, we’re always conscious of that so every recruitment season we’re thinking, are these multicultural recruits? Is our candidacy program diverse enough? Are they bringing not only diversity in how they look, but diversity in their experience?

Keyaka said that having members from diverse backgrounds naturally works out. Initially, people found themselves identifying with The Underground’s two black co-founders and wanted to support a predominantly African American publication. Many students discovered the organization through word of mouth, and participated to help the grassroots organization spread in manpower and influence. In the past couple of years, people are no longer joining solely due to race-driven reasons, but because they find the collaborative workplace environment appealing.

Keyaka said she promotes a family-oriented workplace culture by being direct and personable with her staff. Instead of going through a rigid chain of command, she said that writers can message her directly, and she will schedule lunch with them to discuss their article.

Keyaka said that The Underground staff enjoys “the small community feel of it all versus a really big site where you don’t get to talk to your Editor-in-Chief.” She said joining is less about race and identification, and more about having options as a journalist. Students are no longer restricted to large student-run media publications that are historically known for using corporate practices.

Keyaka said she hopes The Underground can attract more people in the near future, which can provide an increase in content. “We’re definitely more ahead than we were three years ago, but there’s always just more we can do with more people and more voices and experiences.”

Michelle Lin, The Underground chief of staff, also said that The Underground’s mission statement and humble beginnings helped attract new members. “One of the perks of The Underground is even though we don’t have as many resources, we still produce quality content, and the reason why is all because of our people,” she said. “The people that we do recruit, they’re here for our mission statement and they’re here to tell the untold stories of Penn State through their own multicultural lens.”

The Underground has scarce resources due to its age, size, and stature. The media site shares a small office with Valley magazine (another student-run publication) on the second floor of the HUB-Robeson Center. Lin said she isn’t concerned about the retention rate of new trainees because the explicit promise of the mission statement is so strong. She also views the lack of manpower as an asset instead of a weakness, believing that it creates a more intimate and relaxed setting for members.

Lin said that The Underground recruits new members from diverse racial, academic, and life backgrounds, saying these experiences and struggles help compose a coalition of voices. “It just contributes to our mission statement organically,” she said.

According to Lin, for many staff members, The Underground is the first news publication they joined. She also said that for people who left other student-run media organizations to join The Underground, their dissatisfaction stemmed from not being able to reach their full potential, lack of creative flexibility, and structural issues. They also wanted to be in a comfortable environment with a strong multicultural mission statement and people they identified with. New recruits undergo a mandatory candidacy program where they learn basic journalism skills, such as writing in AP style or conducting interviews. The program is three-four weeks long and is based on the candidate's availability.

The Underground has a board of directors, which largely consists of alumni, professors in the College of Communications journalism department, and a marketing and advertising department that is entirely different from their newsroom. Editors cannot handle the monetary funds or write promotional content in the newsroom; that is under the chief-of-staff's jurisdiction.



## Chapter 3

### **“Change the Narrative.”**

Chapter Three focuses on the coverage (or lack thereof) that The Collegian and The Underground gives to African American communities. This section will also analyze how editors decide which stories are newsworthy, and how reporters get assigned to a beat.

#### **The Daily Collegian**

Kelly Powers, a senior majoring in digital and print journalism and French, was named the 2018-19 editor-in-chief by The Collegian’s board of directors in 2018, Sam Ruland held the position before her. Powers served as the Collegian’s News Chief in the Fall of 2017 and its News Editor the Spring of 2018. She began writing for The Collegian during the fall semester of her freshman year (Aiken, 2018). Powers credits her steady rise to the position of editor-in-chief through building positive relationships with colleagues, finding stories that are significant to the community, and placing enthusiasm in stories “that deserve it.”

The Collegian’s mission statement is to “publish a quality campus newspaper and to provide a rewarding educational experience for the student staff members.” The student-run publication has been disseminating news throughout Penn State for over 100 years, with a long line of editors filling its ranks. Powers wants to be different from her predecessors, saying that her position as editor-in-chief involves advocating for diversity and inclusion, and that she does not want The Collegian to incorporate insensitive, racially-charged rhetoric into its content, which according to her, The Collegian has a history of.

During my sit-down interview with her at Starbucks in September, Powers mentioned how The Collegian has a troubled history regarding race relations. She explained that there has been a long-standing lack of effort in The Collegian when it comes to representation, resulting in

devastating consequences. Powers cited the November 1970 incident (see chapter one), but emphasized that this is only one of many subsequent actions, which ultimately led the student-publication to develop tense relationships with black student organizations. “Nothing specific did it alone,” she said.

Powers explained that in 2017, a reporter who was ignorant about the derogatory nature of her word choice, used the phrase “colored students” in her feature piece instead of “students of color.” Powers admitted that she is still perplexed at how this rhetoric passed the editing process. She said that although the reporter’s language was “inexcusable,” the day the story was published, she was contacted by her main source (who was a black student), and made aware of her mistake. According to Powers, the reporter apologized profusely and made the correction that same day. Powers said that this source later wrote an op-ed about his interaction with the Collegian reporter, which was later published by Onward State. Powers said she supposed he had every right to do this, but he “blind-sided” the reporter. According to her, many people were extremely upset after the piece came out because it made it appear as if the incident occurred recently. She also lamented that the reporter’s name was circulating around campus, ultimately bringing negative publicity to The Collegian. “So many people were angry at the Collegian -- for valid reasons -- though perhaps without the full story,” she said.

Powers confessed that regardless, it was a “ridiculous mistake” on the part of the editing staff that read the story, and that they should be the main ones held accountable.

I think the more important thing though is the long-standing history, a history like many old institutions, where they failed to have addressed, or cared to address, diversity and inclusion until incredibly late. It’s not necessarily one instance or mistake, and that

history is now an echo chamber really -- making any mistake by the outlet in regards to this topic much louder – and the institution deserves it, and still has work to do.

Powers said she reinforces the concept of diversity and inclusion to her staff during meetings.

“It’s just something that people kind of understand, then they get lazy so you have to keep reminding them, like ‘go search for stories, go talk to student orgs,’” she said. “I’m still getting the hang of it. I’m in no way perfect for this job and I know that [but], I feel like I’m getting into it.” She said the criticism The Collegian received for labeling a black student as “colored,” still follows them. “It hurts a little bit, because that’s how you see your org. I wasn’t directly involved in it, but it must have been one [screw] up by a reporter and an editor, that’s why each reporter and editor needs to realize that they are the paper,” she said.

The diversity training program that Powers proposed is a two-part process, starting with when is it necessary to include identifying markers such as race, religion and sexual identity, in the coverage. “Some of the times it’s completely irrelevant,” she said. “Almost saying it directly is taking away from the point of the piece.” Powers said the second part of the training is what language is acceptable to use when describing someone from a marginalized group or multicultural organization. “There are things that you don’t say and there are things that even if you quote someone saying it, you don’t say,” she said. “I know I take that as common sense, but I also know that I have to take two steps back, and be like, ‘okay, all these candidates that are coming here, some of these people that might already be working here, they might not know that.’”

I asked Powers if The Collegian was trying to improve their coverage of students of color in response to The Underground. “I respect The Underground a lot,” she said. “I guess on the day to day, I don’t view them as competition.” Powers said she is more focused on publications that

are in the same market as them, such as the Centre Daily Times (CDT) or Onward State. She said she is providing updates on events happening downtown in an effort to beat Onward State, which is also covering the same topic. Powers, however, is impressed by The Underground's feature stories. One that captured her attention was about a student whose family was directly affected by the travel ban. She said she regretted not thinking of that idea first.

Powers said she notices The Underground's booth at career fairs and always makes an effort to introduce herself. She said she does not see an issue with having more than one student media outlet.

Some [campuses] will have one student paper, so there's no competition and there's no reason for you to better your paper or better yourself. I think we're pretty blessed actually to have [several student papers]. OS (Onward State), their style can get on my nerves like nothing else because ethics-wise they're not there, and they're more of a blog. They're not even trying to be news so I kind just let it be, but The Underground is trying to be news, so there's more respect there.

Powers said having more student media organizations cultivates an environment where they are constantly improving and care more about the quality of their content. She also said it is beneficial for Penn State students because they have more options to choose from. "I do think that fostered competition is very unique to Penn State. I'm not an expert on other universities, but I don't think that's really very common, like three [student media outlets] that people actively do talk about?" Despite Powers' approval of the current media outlets on campus, she does not think that Penn State needs any more student news organizations.

Powers said diversity and inclusion is a problem that goes beyond student media. "It really is no secret that this has been an issue," she said. "[It's] definitely not limited to The

Collegian. I think The Collegian is a microcosm of this and on top of that, the fact that Penn State is a PWI (Predominantly-White Institution). All of it plays together.” Powers said she hopes to create change by highlighting the importance of diversity and inclusion to her staff members and successor. She is hopeful that when her time as editor-in-chief ends, she will have made significant improvements. “I get to say, ‘hey, I think I’ve made some progress. I think we have better relationships on campus,’” she said. “Please build upon that and don’t go back, just keep going forward.”

Powers said that she started developing a relationship with her predecessor, Sam Ruland, during the second half of her junior year, and later became her protégé. Powers said it was her idea to implement diversity strategies at The Collegian, including her decision to develop stronger connections with black student organizations on campus. “It was kind of my own volition to do more, but that was because I felt secure,” she said. “She didn’t really instill a lot of that in me as far as outreach, but it’s just something that I knew I wanted to do personally.” Powers, however, said she appreciates Ruland for teaching her the logistics of the position. Powers said her overarching goal is for The Collegian is to have it be a safe space for everyone. “I want it to serve all the people it can, you don’t have to care, but maybe it helps you anyway. It keeps people informed and also just make people feel like they’re included.”

Powers said The Collegian does not have a problem when assigning beats to reporters who are students of color, and often allows them to cover topics they are interested in. These topics are normally life and style, politics and sports. She said she is open to suggestions from recruits as well, who may write in their applications that additional coverage is needed on a particular subject. Powers listed some of the items the application may include. “They can give me a couple paragraphs on why they think they want [the beat],” she said. “What do they want to

bring to the beat, what do they think the beat lacks? What do they think has been done well?

What are some things they want The Collegian to improve on as a whole?"

Powers acknowledged that recruits may not like their first beat and that they have to be professional about it. "My very first beat was student government, and that's kind of where you say, 'this is also an organization that's trying to be an organization, so I might have to pay my dues before I can get that beat, I really want,'" she said. "If I really want diversity and culture then I'm going to have to work for it because they're not just going to let anyone [join]. You're not going to take your first stab at reporting in a serious beat that I care a lot about. I think that's understandable."

Powers believes in dispatching black reporters to cover black issues and events, only if they personally connect with those topics.

I feel like some political events can arise and it's like, that person's voice can be ten times more powerful than some white dude who doesn't know anything. Someone who can really connect with the stories they're hearing, but I wouldn't just say, 'hey you, I know that you write for baseball. You're black so go cover that,' like absolutely not, but I bet you 9 times out of 10 that individual wants to cover that.

She referenced reading columns from the New York Daily News that discussed the Black Lives Matter movement and police brutality. "A lot of times the writer would be a black man, and it would just make sense because he probably saw this issue that maybe some other reporters didn't see or looked away from." Powers said she would refrain from "blatant color matching" or profiling, reporters to certain stories, but would treat each situation differently. "That's almost something that I never thought about before because it would be just common sense that I wouldn't do that," she said.

Powers said there is a high chance a black reporter will make Collegian editors aware of an event happening in the black community, and insist that someone cover it. Powers mentioned that during her time as assistant news editor, a person of color approached her about writing a series about sensitive language regarding race and ethnic identity. Powers proposed producing a larger series, where one installment was about that topic, another installment was about sensitive language related to gender, sex and identity, and another installment revolved around sexual violence and mental health. The overarching theme was personal information reporters should not share and labels they should not use regarding their interview subjects. Powers said one could argue that she noticed the person of color and gave her the assignment, but emphasized that the reporter originally devised the concept.

After this initial interview, The Collegian published an article that received tremendous backlash from the black community. Powers and I met at Starbucks once again in October, this time the atmosphere was a little tense. Powers fiddled with her cup, her facial expression grim as she elaborated on the circumstances surrounding the incident, and The Collegian's response to it.

According to Powers, a member of D Team (digital team) arrives at the office each night to post stories on The Collegian's website, with the content being scheduled to go live the next day. Powers said the reporter who wrote the article in question had no artwork (or photos) to pair with the story, which discussed data published from the 2017 Clery Report. The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act is a federal statute that requires "colleges and universities participating in financial aid programs to maintain and disclose campus crime statistics and security information" (Federal Student Aid, 2019). As a result, the D-Team member decided she would search for photographs in The Collegian's content management system. The photo she chose depicted a black transgender student being

arrested by police, which happened to be from a demonstration. “It points to a clear ignorance in the fact that she didn’t see how choosing that photo would be problematic,” Powers said.

Powers noted that the D-Team member was a freshman and was not aware that the photograph was taken from a protest, but said she should have asked. She said the digital managing editor did not see how the photo was insensitive either until she brought it to his attention. The digital managing editor’s role is to prevent mistakes of this nature from being published. Powers said his job is not directly tied to checking facts, but ensuring that The Collegian’s website and headlines look presentable. This is usually done between when the story is posted, and 3 a.m. the following day. This particular article was already checked by two beat editors and the managing editor for any grammatical or AP style errors. The digital managing editor is the final person to inspect the article. “The biggest thing that baffled me when I spoke to the entire board of editors, independent of speaking to D-Team, I was just saying, ‘you guys are all editors You should have seen this on Twitter, maybe even seen some of the mentions, and let me know. I can’t be monitoring Twitter and the mentions on such a busy day. I need to know that I have people that are also here and I can trust to be aware.’”

Powers said as editors, these individuals should have had the proper education and resources to notice an issue. She said to qualify as an editor, students had to have taken diversity and bias recognition classes during the candidacy program. She also said as a journalism student, certain Penn State courses, such as COMM 260 (basic newswriting and reporting) and COMM 409 (an ethics), should have provided editors with proper problem-solving skills. Powers gave these editors the benefit of the doubt, acknowledging that these skills may not have resonated with the them and that they need periodic refreshers for how to operate at collegiate-level media.



Powers said she finally reviewed the article at midnight, although the story was promoted at noon on October 1. She mentioned how a busy workday was the reason why she examined the story so late. Powers said she instantly recognized that the article was problematic and issued an apology statement on all of The Collegian's platforms, which read, "this article – written in aims of analyzing crime data- was originally posted with a senseless choice of photo. It has since been changed. The Collegian, and its editors, sincerely apologize for this blatant misrepresentation." Powers wanted the apology statement to be heartfelt, saying that as a student organization, The Collegian needed to connect with its audience, something it failed at doing in this situation.

Powers said she was deeply concerned because people failed to recognize how the photograph was controversial. After Powers had several conversations with the staff, they eventually realized the issue with the picture. "I think it's some type of mentality like, 'who am I? So, and so must've okayed this, so they might not have spoken up,'" she said. Powers said she met with the Collegian's board of editors and had a serious discussion on the matter. She also contacted the digital managing editor and D-Team member and said that this mistake cannot happen again. "I suppose it a learning experience and we're students, but you need to understand that this is an issue and if you don't have this awareness, you're in the wrong business," she said. Powers said she was surprised to discover general ignorance amongst her staff, thinking it stems from a cultural and institutional component.

Once she performed damage control, Powers said the staff's response went exceptionally well. "I think I'm the type of person that doesn't often show too much in leadership really because it's not the place, but I think everyone could tell I was very disappointed," she said. Powers said one of the takeaway factors is realizing that she cannot conduct all the diversity and inclusion trainings, noting that it is enough for her to reference it in staff meetings and candidacy

programs. She already planned to have diversity, sensitivity and recognizing bias trainings for incoming members, but is now requiring the board of editors to attend the training as well. “It might be a touch demeaning mentally to go to this candidacy training, like this trainee discussion, but they’re all going to do it anyway,” she said. According to Powers, diversity and bias trainings happen every semester. There will be two separate trainings and it is mandatory for staff members to attend at least one. She said these trainings will be more intensive and purposeful with timing. She emphasized she will not lead the trainings, but will be a silent observer in those spaces.

Powers said she is arranging a cross-organizational discussion with black student organizations, outlining questions and determining how the conversation would be structured. Powers also said she had a productive conversation with her editorial team, a couple of reporters, and the executive board of Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC). “This is not a reflection on the mentality that I’ve brought into this position,” she said.

Powers said it is important for reporters to be cognizant of what they decide to include in their articles.

Working for a media organization, you have to take a step back. Are you reinforcing stereotypes, are you playing into your racist associations? That’s the part that didn’t happen. Also, you have to realize the negative history of the news organization itself, something you have to carry with yourself in order to make it? better. Not every person of color on campus, but for a lot of students, because of the negative history, one mistake is going to mean a lot more than some people’s mistakes and that’s just fair because of the history that you carry with the Collegian. It wasn’t the absolute most egregious thing

that a news organization could have messed up, but you have to think of all aspects of the situation.

Powers said she took personal ownership of the incident, but attributes the problem to systematic circumstances as well. She said people might not understand the complexities of the organization. “It’s not just six people that meet in the HUB or whatever,” she said. “It’s a staff of like, 100 people, and as much as you want to run this tight ship and that’s so important, and taking education seriously is important. Education is anywhere from ‘how to write a lead,’ all the way to recognizing bias.” Powers said she understands that how one responds to mistakes he or she makes is also important. “The only way that these students are going to learn is either from mistakes or learning about other people’s mistakes, so I’d much rather it always be the latter.”

According to Powers, avenues for discipline depend on the context. “It’s not too daunting to handle that case by case,” she said. “I feel like every situation is different and how individuals respond unprompted to situations makes things different. I don’t think this is the type of issue that can have an  $A + B = C$  type of thing.”

I asked Powers if she was able to recruit more students of color since our last interview, which took place on Sept. 13. She said she was slightly naïve to think that she could significantly change the Collegian’s recruiting style overnight. “People aren’t going to be like, ‘oh I trust the Collegian,’ just because this one girl says she wants to do that,” she said. “I feel like it makes sense that the change wasn’t drastic.” Powers said there were a few students of color who joined the candidacy program, although a couple withdrew, which Powers said is natural regardless of skin color. “I feel like some people just decide this isn’t for [them],” she said.

Powers said the Collegian recruited 14 videographers, with three of them being men of color. She said she was enthusiastic about these candidates because they had tremendous

videography experience. According to Powers, The Collegian never attracted new members with prior skills. Unfortunately, Powers said one of the individuals dropped out, but the other two remain. “I think it’s like a process, controlling the things we can control is the only way we’re going to start to see improvement.” Powers said this can be done by making an effort to reach out to people, and develop a relationship with student organizations that are centered on diversity and inclusivity. She said these organizations can help promote The Collegian’s tryout dates. She noted how Black Caucus already shared information about Collegian tryout dates on social media, which never happened before. Powers hopes these connections can form into lasting alliances, and help The Collegian access a wider audience.

Powers said The Collegian’s Fall 2018 candidacy program initially consisted of 62 reporters, but dwindled (she did not mention the number it declined to). She believed the decline had to do with indecisive freshmen, who were still exploring various student organizations on campus. She also said The Collegian is attempting to rebrand itself and not appear as exclusive. “We’re trying to change history a little bit. We want to show that we’re not a closed-knit, quiet group,” she said.

### **The Underground**

Stephanie Keyaka started her position as editor-in-chief of The Underground last semester. She mentioned that her vision, strategies, and leadership methods are different from those of her predecessor, Underground co-founder and former Editor-in-Chief Adriana Lacy. She notes that she has “big shoes to fill,” in following the legacy that Lacy left behind. She said during her first editorial meeting, she let the staff know that while she learned a significant amount from Lacy, she is not the same as her. She said she wanted to be editor-in-chief because she was inspired by Lacy’s dedication to The Underground. “I was writing for almost the entirety

of her stay as editor-in-chief. I knew I was going to be able to do it justice because I share the same passion for our mission statement as she did.”

Keyaka stressed that her leadership style is different:

I’m not a helicopter leader. I’m not going to hold your hand throughout the process. If you tell me you want to cover this story, I’m not going to check on you every single day about the story but I am going to hit you up at the deadline and be like, where’s the story at? Adriana was very much so like, God bless her heart, but [she said] ‘I’ll do everything myself.’ If something wasn’t going to get done, she’s going to find a way to pick up somebody else’s slack and if she had to run the entire organization herself, she’ll do it. I’m telling everybody this is a collaborative effort. If you fail, I fail, we all fail. I’m not going to stretch myself thinner than anybody else to get this job done because I want you to be as passionate or as dedicated to your craft as I am.

The Underground’s mission statement states that it is “a multicultural student-run media site devoted to telling the untold stories within the Penn State community. [They] seek to foster the multicultural student voice through creating an open forum of discussion and promoting diversity and community involvement.” The Underground recently devised a hashtag titled, “Change the Narrative,” which provides a platform for organizations and communities that do not receive enough coverage from other media sites.

On a mild February morning, I sat in The Underground’s HUB office waiting for Keyaka to arrive. One of The Underground’s staff members said she would be here shortly. I looked around the small space that they shared with Valley magazine, another student-run publication. There was an enlarged poster that featured one of Valley’s glossy magazine covers, it leaned against a whiteboard that had Underground editorial reminders scribbled on it in blue magic

marker. This space was very familiar to me, given that I was once a staff writer and the social media editor for The Underground during the Fall 2017 and Spring 2018 semesters. Before I could reflect on my time spent here, Keyaka entered the room, announcing that she was ready to begin.

Keyaka said The Underground is a student digital publication that was created in response to the lack of diversity in college media pertaining to coverage. “We have control over what type of stories we tell and who gets a say in what gets told,” she said. Keyaka said she tells her editors often to report on events that lack media coverage. For example, in the Identity division of The Underground, she concentrates on a series that highlights students on campus and marginalized communities. Another project, called “State College Stories,” is run by The Underground’s Visuals (Viz) department. For this project, staff members interview and take pictures of people around State College who are embarking on cool endeavors, such as turning a bus into a mobile home, becoming a new preacher downtown, or being a tattoo artist for 15 years. “One of my biggest goals this year was making sure we had more things that were highlighting our mission statement,” she said.

Each section in The Underground has a section editor, who Keyaka meets with every Sunday. The section editor runs ideas through the editorial board, where they devise the game plan for the upcoming week or month. Section editors throw pitches around, which ultimately need Keyaka and the managing editor’s approval. The section editors take the approved pitches to their direct team of writers, staff and photographers, who later assign themselves to those pieces via air table, which is a management device.

Keyaka said that although she feels a responsibility to cover the African American community and other communities of color, she constantly reminds people that The Underground is a multicultural student organization and not solely a black one.

We like to cover a range of different people, different cultures, and I don't think that has a race to it, but a big part of being marginalized and not being covered largely by the media is being black. The black experience is often left out in the media so I think that The Underground does a huge job of correcting that.

According to Keyaka, every semester, The Underground Identity editor reaches out to multicultural student organizations on campus, asking about the events they have planned so writers can either cover them, or write preview articles to inform the public about the event. "We like people to know that the community cares about them, and especially since we're usually the first organization they reach out to before any other organization. We feel like we have a responsibility to them to at least try to highlight their experiences."

Keyaka said she does not receive complaints from African American student groups on lack of coverage, although she admits that her reporters can cover them in different ways. "I think that they don't really understand how journalism works and manpower. We don't have enough people to do everything. There's tons of events around campus and we simply don't have the staff since we are a really small student-run media site to cover all the people of color events." Keyaka said that she might compensate for this by sending a photographer to do a visual series or send a writer to one event but not the other. When The Underground can't cover an event at all, black student organization members may question the news publication's absence, noting how The Collegian or Onward State was there and they were not. "It's hard convincing

them that we can't cover everything they do because obviously if you're an event coordinator, all your events are important, you think all your events should get covered," she said.

Keyaka acknowledges the challenges of covering communities of color, especially black people, due to their unrealistically high expectations. She believes people in general do not fully understand how journalism works, and assume that reporters are just covering whatever they want. She said people cannot distinguish news from enjoyment. Keyaka said while she can handle criticism, one thing she will not tolerate is slander. "I always tell people don't berate my writers for covering things that you don't agree with." Keyaka noted that people of color have many opinions, ranging from political ideologies to personal experiences, which can cause conflict. "If we put out something that's different from what they feel, I'm being [mentioned] on Twitter and dragged (meaning criticized)."

Keyaka emphasized that she avidly supports the topics people of color wish to see covered, but reminds them it cannot just be based on her personal preferences because that is a disservice to journalism, which emphasizes the importance of objectivity and covering both sides. "Eighty percent of the things we write about, is exactly the things we want to write about, the other 20 percent is what we think the community should know about, regardless of how we feel about it." Keyaka said communities of color are often confused about coverage that has nothing to do with them, but she said it's her job to provide a platform for those stories as well. She believes the key to dealing with those situations is to be authentic. "I never feel like I got to put on a face or do something that I won't do," she said. To address the backlash, she will issue a statement on Twitter defending The Underground's journalistic principles, saying that although she personally does not agree with what was expressed in a particular story, it is important that it



gets covered to better inform the community. She believes that she is respected in the community enough for readers to know that she would not publish any content that is not credible.

As a journalist and editor-in-chief, Keyaka recognizes that her audience has feelings and thinks that “any interaction with [The Underground’s] content is better than no interaction.” She views the criticism in a positive light because it entails clicks and views.

You’re thinking about it, you’re analyzing it. You should be enraged by things that are going on in your campus, and if you need a scapegoat to blame and that’s me, that’s fine, but I will never apologize for putting out news I think that the community should care about or know about, even if it directly contradicts with my own beliefs... It’s a hard thing to do to not let your own identity factors influence your news or influence your journalism.

Keyaka also faces additional pressure and scrutiny given that The Underground’s co-founders were African American and she’s an African American woman herself. “It’s a huge responsibility to that community who sees me and is like, ‘oh we look alike, you worry about the same things I worry about.’ When we do cover things that are not ideologically aligned with the people of color community it’s also a push-back.” Keyaka provided examples, stating that if she was covering a white supremacist group or other racist organizations on campus, she would get strong retaliation from black students, who question why these groups’ events need attention in the first place. “I try to explain to them the way journalism works you can’t pick and choose what you cover, you have to go out there and cover the news.” (except editors *do* pick and choose what to cover every day – especially, as she’s been saying, when you don’t have the resources to cover everything. The argument to be made in defense of covering a white supremacist group, if you’re The Underground, is that students of color need to know that these

groups are around.) She said this is difficult to do, especially being a student of color herself on campus.

Every time you're a minority person and you enter a space [like] Penn State that's predominantly white, it should be your responsibility to offer coverage or highlight communities of people that are like yourself, that are not getting enough coverage. It shouldn't be your sole motivator... It shouldn't be, being a journalist while black, you're a journalist, you also happen to be black... it's not my identity. It's a section of my identity, but it's not my entire identity.

Keyaka said The Underground's number one responsibility is to be a news site, with its second duty being to capture multicultural voices. She said that although the University Park Undergraduate Association doesn't have a huge diversity pamphlet, it is still a student government body on campus that requires substantial news coverage. "How can you respectfully tell yourself you are a student media site if you don't go to the meetings and you're not talking about their events?" she said. "People are going to be like, 'UPUA has nothing to do with transgender women or transgender men, or UPUA has nothing to do with the black community,' and it's like, yeah but we're still a news media site on campus."

She said to accommodate to students of color, she will try to find an alternate method to cover UPUA meeting that is relevant to them. She will specifically target what legislation is going to directly affect the black community or impact the people of color community. She said it is important to keep people of color at the focal point of The Underground's coverage, but it's an arduous task depending on the event.

Keyaka, however, believes consumers should be able to click on The Underground site for a wide range of news topics that pertain to the campus as a whole, not just for marginalized groups.

There are huge parts of campus that we aren't covering because it is detracting from our mission statement. It's a hard thing to be a multicultural news site because people think you should only be writing about things that have to do with cultures and communities that are marginalized, but that's just not something people want to read about every single day.

Keyaka said she ensures that The Underground is doing a balanced job. One month they may have a large number of multicultural pieces being circulated daily, while, another month might consist largely of hard news articles. Keyaka said that this is still a learning process.

In terms of an audience, Keyaka said The Underground still largely attracts people of color, but they now also cater to a liberal base. The Underground's largest support group was the African American community when it initially came out, now Keyaka said the publication is branching out to include all Penn State students, not just specific cultural groups. She said The Underground's success has led them to create newsletters, which are marketed towards professors and faculty members.

The Underground has sections that are meant to cover niche audiences. For instance, RISE magazine exclusively generates cultural pieces and news, while rallies surrounding anti-gun legislation would go in their Politics section. The website is formatted in a way where viewers have the option of clicking on a section they are most interested in. "We want to make sure that we have a little bit of everything for everyone," Keyaka said.

Keyaka believes she and her staff are adhering to their mission statement, but acknowledges that they could always do more. She said it's difficult to continuously cover multicultural events and organizations when communities of color only make up a small percentage of Penn State, which is still considered a predominantly white institution. She mentions that sometimes, there are only two events on campus that focus solely on communities of color; meanwhile, there is an abundance of other activities The Underground wants to devote its resources and manpower to.

We want to represent students, not just black students not just Latina students, not just trans[gender] students, but students overall. I want everybody to read our websites, everybody to subscribe to our newsletters and not just people who think that we only advocate for their voices or their rights. I don't want anybody to feel like their experiences don't matter because they think we're only a people of color site.

Despite these remarks, Keyaka said she does not think The Underground's mission statement will change because at the core of it, its founders strategically labeled their audience as "multicultural" instead of "people of color," allowing them to cater to a diverse demographic.

Sovereign, on the other hand, is a Penn State magazine dedicated to covering students of color on campus. The idea to create a media outlet that catered exclusively to communities of color was pitched in the fall of 2015 by student Adrienne Thompson after recognizing that there was not a media entity or publication on the University Park campus that was specifically meant for students of color. Penn State officially recognized Sovereign as a student organization on campus in 2016. The magazine receives financial support of Penn State's Paul Robeson Cultural Center (Sovereign, 2019).

Sovereign's mission statement is to "uplift, empower, inform, and entertain specifically the students of color on Penn State's University Park Campus. Sovereign's purpose is to create an artistic space, inclusive and cultural magazine outlet for people of color on Penn State's University Park campus regarding topics such as social justice, academics, fashion and beauty, fitness, entertainment, sports, campus highlights and other topics members see fit" (Sovereign, 2019).

Keyaka points out that Sovereign has a very specific target audience while The Underground does not:

Obviously when you open Sovereign magazine, you're not expecting to see largely white voices or white male voices in those spaces. If there's a student on campus who may be a white woman and she's putting forth events that are beneficial not only to people of color but the campus as a whole, I always say we'll cover her and go see what she's doing. I don't want to limit my staff to just coming up with things that have to do with people of color. Our mission statement changing the narrative isn't necessarily saying, only cover now just sects of people because that's also a disservice to journalism and I think that contradicts exactly what we're pushing back on.

Keyaka believes journalism isn't as holistic as it should be, meaning that it only caters to niche audiences instead of serving the entire community. She said she formatted the student media site to be holistic and to bring to the forefront news that isn't being covered. "If we in turn become a site that's just dedicated to one type of voice or one type of experience, that would just be contradictory to our mission statement."

Keyaka said she did not feel threatened by the rise of publications like Sovereign and remains confident that The Underground will continue to retain students of color. She said that

she actually embraces competing with media organizations who have a similar mission as The Underground. “It’s great,” she said. “There’s not enough of us to cover as much as what’s going on around campus so if there were two or even one more organization that came on the scene and they wanted to do the exact same thing, and they wanted to do it with more people, more manpower, that’s awesome.” She said she would love to collaborate with organizations like Sovereign, stating that the platforms on which they disseminate content are different.

Sovereign is a magazine while The Underground is a completely digital publication, although Keyaka hints that The Underground staff is branching out in the spring 2019 semester to create their own magazine, which is a semester-long process. She said the project will not necessarily resemble a magazine, but will be classified as a zine, a small circulation publication of original or appropriated texts and images that are usually produced via photocopier.

“[Sovereign] is obviously providing a service we don’t,” Keyaka said. “If people gravitate towards that because they like the digital or the visual aspects of it, that’s great. I don’t find that to be competition because they’re not doing what we’re doing. It’s cool to have multiple organizations that are dedicated to sharing untold stories of people around campus and I never think that it should be solely just us doing that.”

Keyaka said that she also feels a healthy sense of competition with The Collegian and Onward State because of their need to be first when reporting the news. She said the Collegian is now trying to tap into an underrepresented market by covering multicultural events, which directly places The Underground at odds with the newspaper. Keyaka jokingly admitted that she tells her staff to have better quality coverage and more in-depth reporting than The Collegian, but she called this is healthy competition and it promotes a stronger work ethic for both organizations.

She said she met with The Collegian's Editor-in-Chief Kelly Powers, and Onward State's Managing Editor Elissa Hill, for coffee a couple weeks before my interview with her. She said they traded advice on business and journalism strategies because they are all women in the journalism industry, which is an impressive feat. Keyaka even said both editors admired The Underground's web page and expressed their desire to incorporate similar visuals and formats on their respective pages. "I never really thought about it," Keyaka said. "Our job sorting of pushing [them] to go after [their] limitations and comfort zone." Keyaka also said the admiration goes both ways: "When I show up [to an event], and our writer shows up, and The Collegian has a tripod, and everything else on deck, and my writer only has a notebook and paper, I'm like, 'We got to get more stuff for us so we can cover things in 360 and do more visual things.'"

Keyaka acknowledged, however, that The Collegian has the ability to employ these additional resources because they have more funding and manpower. "We're always trying to figure out a way to make up for that deficit through coverage," she said. "It is competition, but not detrimentally. It's not like, 'oh my God, if we don't push out as much news as The Collegian does, we're bound to fail,' but just making sure that we're keeping up to par in being a competitive news site. Why should [people] click on us versus The Collegian? Why should they click on us versus Onward State?"

Keyaka said The Underground's coverage differs from its competitors due to its focus on marginalized communities. She said that The Collegian does not have people dedicated to covering these topics like her organization does. She emphasizes that the student newspaper has identity writers while The Underground has an Identity section. She also points out that The Underground's workplace culture differs from The Collegian, which is one of the advantages of being a small organization. "People are more inclined to email me or send me stories or dm me

because they know I'm going to be able to respond back quickly," she said. "The trust that the people of color community and the marginalized communities have in The Underground to do their story justice is a bit different than if they asked The Collegian."

Keyaka said she's more interested in long-range stories, not just "the one fluff piece and done." She said she enjoys following up on an event her staff previously covered, which is equivalent to a series. "You can't just put out this one story about this transgender coverage," she said. "I feel like we should do this more often. There's a whole community of people you can cover." Keyaka is always trying to push her editors to elaborate or continue an intriguing story. That way they can make it a feature series on Identity or Rise. She said in-depth coverage requires more effort, but that it can be beneficial to audiences as opposed to publishing a single story about one person and calling it "adequate coverage."

Keyaka envisions The Underground doing more original pieces and content in the future, which she said they are currently beginning to write.

In five years, I do see The Underground more as a competitive news site, not just focusing on putting out coverage pieces. [For example], this is the event that happened, I went to it, I covered it, but more so investigative pieces about communities around campus.

### **Coverage**

This section will examine three events that are of interest to the black community, and how The Daily Collegian and The Underground chose to cover them. I will discuss the story angles both publications decided to take, whether they omitted any facts, and if the coverage was biased or insensitive.



On March 20, 2019, Osaze Osagie, a 29-year-old African American man diagnosed with autism, was shot and killed by three State College police officers attempting to serve him a mental health warrant. According to the affidavit, Osagie was shot after he brandished a knife and did not obey verbal commands to drop the weapon. It also alleged that he “came after the officers” (Muthler, 2019). The warrant was served after his father, Sylvester Osagie, “reported earlier that his son was missing and has been acting erratically, similar to when he was off his medication.” (Muthler, 2019). Osagie’s murder represents another case of police brutality against black and brown people, raising dialogue among State College residents once again about the tense relationship between law enforcement and the African American community. Osagie’s death is also the first instance of a fatal shooting since the State College Police Department was formed in 1916 (Metz, 2019).

Osagie’s tragic death was a major story in the State College area, prompting residents to host a vigil and his family to create a scholarship in his honor. Both *The Daily Collegian* and *The Underground* covered this story, but there are major differences in the coverage. In *The Collegian*, Osagie’s death was reported under their “Crime and Court” section, along with time-stamped updates. In the original story, the race of the victim was not mentioned at all. The article simply said that a “29-year-old State College male died in an officer-involved shooting” (Metz, 2019). The lack of description could be because the incident just happened and *The Collegian* was waiting for more details to be released. The second update, provided on March 21, it read “The 29-year-old who died in the State College officer-involved shooting at the Marvin Garden Apartments on Wednesday has been identified as Osaze Osagie” (Metz, 2019) Although Osagie was now identified as the victim, *The Collegian* still did not disclose his race anywhere throughout the article. The last update was given on March 25, reporting that “the autopsy on

Osaze Osagie, the 29-year-old man who was killed by a State College Police officer on March 20, has been completed...No further details were provided” (Metz, 2019). Once again, Osagie’s racial description is not mentioned.

Meanwhile, The Underground did not even provide an initial story on the shooting itself. They briefly summarized the shooting in a related article, which covered the candlelight vigil held in remembrance of Osagie. The article fails to provide any racial identification of the victim, instead giving context clues by posting a picture of Osagie above the article, and writing how the people at the vigil held “Black Lives Matter” signs (Jackson, 2019). The article was also very short (as opposed to their articles on sporting events or University Park Undergraduate Association meetings). While it included quotes from two vigil attendees, it appeared as if the reporter just asked them how they felt about the shooting and why they were present at the vigil, which was obviously to offer solace and support. Underground staff could have approached the story from a different angle by interviewing members of the black community on why being black at State College makes them feel unsafe.

The Underground failed to report on other developments in the case, or the major events that transpired after the incident, such as Osagie’s family creating a scholarship in his name and his funeral. They only gave a short press release about a community gathering being held in light of the shooting. This time, however, The Underground staff provided a racial description, writing that Osagie was “an African American State College local” (McIlwain, 2019). The release provided the time and location of the event, and quoted an email that one of the event’s facilitators sent to the African American Studies department listserv, which reads, “There is no agenda, just a space to express our anger, sadness, confusion, or whatever else this event brings up amongst those who will hold space and hold you up” (McIlwain, 2019). This information

could have easily been printed on a flyer at the HUB instead of being written as an article.

Underground reporters could have elaborated on the story, asking the event facilitators why this discussion is vital to the black community, and the significance (or implications) that Osagie's death has for how police officers handle minority groups and people with mental health issues. The Underground noted that more details about the community gathering would be released soon. The event happened on April 2 and as of a week later, no follow-up article had been written. Given the Underground's mission statement, this would have been the perfect opportunity to detail the students' and faculty's perspectives on the Osagie incident and raise awareness about police brutality against black and brown communities.

The Daily Collegian did a better job of covering the Osagie story. Not only was the article about the vigil longer and more detailed, they also notified readers about the event beforehand in a separate article. The Underground only reported about the vigil after it happened, which does a disservice to readers who might have wanted to attend. Besides providing photos, The Collegian described the scene, noting that "candles were passed around in solidarity and celebration of the life Osagie lived. Supporters held signs that read, 'Osagie's life mattered' and 'Being Black is not a crime!'" (Allen, 2019). This description offers more depth, making it easier for the reader to visualize that moment. In comparison, The Underground wrote that "people stood in front of the Allen Street Gates holding lit candles [and] photos of Osagie" (Jackson, 2019). The Collegian article also described how the incident "sent shock waves through the community during a time when police brutality currently affects marginalized communities" (Allen, 2019).

The article quoted multiple sources, such as Black Student Union President Elliot Bruce, a spokesperson from the Osagie family, representatives from the Pan-African Professional

Alliance (PAN-APA), and students. The reporter provided a platform for students to address the issue, with one saying that the incident was a sobering reminder that as a black person in America, nowhere is safe” (Allen, 2019). She included the racial aspect of this incident, which is a crucial component of the story, quoting Bruce when he said that “a black man did not deserve to die yesterday.” The journalist takes it a step further by including the words spoken by a Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) representative, who highlighted that while many students do not utilize the resources that CAPS offers, they are present for the benefit of improving people’s mental health (Allen, 2019). The Collegian article made the vigil more personal, managing to localize and connect the issues of mental health and police brutality to the Osagie incident. The reporter mentioned that around 100 people gathered at the Allen Street gates for the vigil, signifying that Osagie’s death had a tremendous impact on the local community. This article provides in-depth coverage on a topic that is important to marginalized communities.

The Collegian provided ample coverage on the Osagie case, interviewing friends and family members, who described him as “the nicest, kindest, sweetest person you would ever, ever meet” (Miller, 2019). One article read that “Osagie’s death hit close to parents in the community who can’t fathom losing a child” (Miller, 2019). Collegian staff humanized Osagie, reminding readers that while he is a victim of a systemic problem in the United States, he was also a beloved son.

The Collegian brought renewed attention to mental health and police brutality, personalized the victim, and informed readers that Osagie’s parents were hiring civil rights attorneys, who argue that the public deserves full disclosure of the details surrounding Osagie’s death (Metz, 2019). Although their initial stories shied away from disclosing Osagie’s race, they

amended this by providing his racial identity in their future articles. They provided full insight into the incident, reinforcing its relevancy to the State College community. Conversely, The Underground, which advocates for telling the stories of underrepresented communities, failed to adequately cover an issue that is extremely important to black and brown communities.

Another incident that affected the black community involved Nazi posters circulating around the HUB-Robeson Center. On April 2, 2019, the flyers accused 10 students of belonging to an organization called American Student Front (ASF), an alt-right, anti-Semitic, fascist, white supremacist group whose members are labeled as “modern-day Nazis” (Messa, 2019). The flyer included the names of these alleged members, along with photos, social media handles and screenshots of derogatory comments they posted on social media. ASF is not recognized by Penn State as an official club and its social media accounts have been deleted (Messa, 2019). The individual(s) who posted the flyer remain anonymous, but his or her intention was to make everyone “aware of the dark threat lurking quietly on campus” (Messa, 2019).

Both The Collegian and The Underground published an article the day the flyers were posted, but, while The Underground released the names of nine out of the 10 students, The Collegian decided not to. In a statement, The Daily Collegian wrote that “at this time, [we] chose not to publish the names or photos of these students because it’s unclear who put up the flyers and if the allegations made against the students are true” (Messa, 2019). The original article also does not show an image of the poster, or the information written on it.

Meanwhile, The Underground included photos of the posters in their article, along with a tweet from a Penn State student who said that “whoever put these posters up is actually trying to help” (Benjamin, 2019). Underground staff claimed that they obtained exclusive documents “possibly connected to the poster,” which identified the five individuals referred to as the “Penn

State Nazis” (Benjamin, 2019). The article gives explicit details about each alleged member, including their year, majors, other student organizations they were once involved with, and the racist acts they have committed.

Due to journalistic principles, I will refrain from identifying the alleged members and instead focus on their actions. The Underground said evidence shows the alleged members using racist, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist language, with one retweeting David Duke, a prominent American white supremacist (Benjamin, 2019). They also point out that this same member tweeted white supremacist memes and attended the Charlottesville riots. On Aug. 12, 2017, a “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville resulted in a series of violent clashes between alt-right protesters and counter-protesters, turning deadly when a 20-year-old man accelerated his car into a crowd of counter-protesters, killing one and critically injuring five others (Keneally, 2019). The Underground also wrote that two of the alleged members are a couple, with one sending a Nazi-sympathetic meme and her fiancée running a white supremacist YouTube channel (Benjamin, 2019).

The Collegian provided additional coverage on the posters. Collegian staff wrote an editorial that criticized Penn State’s lackluster response to recent incidents involving pro-Nazi sentiments, arguing that it does a disservice to marginalized communities who have felt threatened, harassed or unwelcome. In September 2017, Identity Evropa, another white nationalist group, circulated flyers on campus that espoused far-right messages and rhetoric. The editorial piece, which was published a day after the incident, continued withholding the names of the individuals in question, saying that “the claims have not been substantiated yet” (Aferiat, 2019). They also wrote that calling someone a neo-Nazi is a serious allegation to make, and these claims should be investigated thoroughly before jumping to conclusions. The Collegian also

wrote a column about the recent Nazi allegations, saying that they undermine the University Park Undergraduate Association's recent diversity achievements. This column was written a couple of days after the incident, with the columnist writing that immediately after UPUA was applauded for "finally diversifying its general assembly," the campus is in an uproar after the circulation of these posters. The columnist noted that this incident is a "180-degree turn from a progressive election to a supposed link between members of our own community and swastikas, [which] bleakly demonstrates the ongoing struggle to keep hate out of Penn State" (Messa, 2019). The columnist said that while the students' identities were clear, once again, they will not be shared until the allegations made against them are verified. She offered a disclaimer, writing,

I will not say the allegations are true, because that would put me at risk for defamation.

However, I have met a couple of the exposed faces, and I am personally inclined to believe the case is substantiated. I recognize them from their involvement in other extremist organizations on campus and for their hateful, public bigotry.

In its article, *The Underground* also wrote a disclaimer, saying that "the claims made in the documents have yet to be verified" (Benjamin, 2019). This can be seen as an effort to avoid a defamation suit in case the allegations are false. Nowhere in the article does the reporter mention where *The Underground* obtained the documents from, which is as a vital aspect of the story since they are strictly reporting information from those documents. If the source chose not to be revealed for confidentiality purposes, that should have been stated in the story. In the news media, there is a constant need to be first. Media organizations want to be the first to break a story in order to attract audiences and beat their competitors, while it is important not to delay on a breaking news story, it is also imperative that a media outlet has the correct information. In media ethics courses, journalists are taught to fact-check their sources before broadcasting or

publishing what they say. If a source proves to be incorrect, this will reflect poorly on the media outlet and decrease their credibility.

Given their mission statement, which is to tell the stories of marginalized communities, The Underground probably figured it was their responsibility to inform students who their enemies were, so that they would be more cautious the next time they interact with them. But The Underground should have verified the source and the information provided before publishing it. The Daily Collegian, meanwhile, took the route of journalistic integrity, reporting on the story in a timely-manner, but waiting to identify the names of the alleged members until more evidence was released. Journalists need to be conscious of what they decide to report, and be prepared to face backlash, credibility concerns, damage control, and retracted statements if the information provided is incorrect.

The recent Nazi-poster incident leads to my third example, which is the story involving Identity Evropa. As mentioned earlier, Identity Evropa is a white nationalist group that displayed posters throughout campus in 2017. This incident was a major story at Penn State because according to university policies, Penn State “fully encourages the right to free speech and encourages expression in thoughtful and respectful ways, even when the university strongly disagrees with the opinions expressed” (Sales, 2017). The posters and Penn State’s response to them caused immediate backlash from students, who argued that there is a difference between free speech (the right to express any opinions without censorship or restraint) and hate speech, “abusive or threatening speech or writing that expresses prejudice against a particular group, especially on the basis of race, religion, or sexual orientation” (Oxford Dictionary, 2019). Penn State students said that the posters are a form of hate speech because they “threaten the mental and physical well-being of marginalized people and allies” (Sales, 2017).



There was ample coverage from both *The Daily Collegian* and *The Underground* regarding this incident. Both media outlets covered Penn State University President Eric Barron's response to the fliers, emphasizing "his strong opposition to the 'racist ideology espoused by those who are posting the fliers'" (Lacy, 2017). *The Underground* wrote an article about students questioning the "All In" initiative, which Penn State launched in 2016 to promote more diverse and inclusive events on campus. Marginalized students expressed their frustrations about the campaign and its authenticity, claiming that the initiative does not reflect the school's statistics and demographics. *The Underground* also reported that students created a petition on Twitter to pressure the university into publicly denouncing the white supremacist group, which it later did (Lacy, 2017). *The Collegian* wrote about the petition as well, along with an op-ed condemning hatred and bigotry (Jaramillo, 2017).

The differences between *The Underground's* and *The Daily Collegian's* coverage revolves around an article *The Underground* added a few weeks later. On Oct. 24, 2017, *The Underground* reached out to Identity Evropa for their response to the controversy their posters caused. They said that they were allowed to proudly claim their European roots, and that mobs of "black anarchists will attack anyone who politically might disagree with them" (Starr, 2017). *Underground* writers then published the group's response on their website, which resulted in backlash from students of color, who felt that they were exacerbating the situation by giving these racist organizations a platform. Keyaka mentioned earlier in this chapter that it is important for journalists to get both sides in order to avoid bias, even if it means interviewing racist organizations and white supremacist groups. She argued that editors cannot be selective on what they cover. This statement is untrue: Editors do pick and choose what to cover, especially an organization like *The Underground*, which has limited resources. They could have justified this

decision by saying that it is beneficial for people of color to hear the perspectives of their enemies, so they are aware of what they are dealing with.

## **Chapter 4**

### **“They like our rhythm, but they don’t like our blues”**

This chapter provides the perspectives of African American journalism students on the staffing and coverage of the people of color community. They relay their own experiences, critiques, and suggestions regarding how the student media can improve relations with the African American community. This chapter also includes an interview with Gary Abdullah, the College of Communications’ assistant dean for multicultural affairs, who offers insight into the collective experiences and challenges the African American community faces while navigating the student media at Penn State.

#### **Gary Abdullah**

It was a gray January morning. The trees were bare and the wind was so cold you could feel the chill settle deep in your bones. Students were still trickling back to campus, signaling the end to winter break. I sat in front of a wide oak desk in The Office of Diversity and Inclusion. Sitting behind it was the assistant dean, Gary Abdullah. The room was quiet and intimate, except for the occasional bursts of Abdullah’s laughter. Abdullah is a welcoming sight for every student of color in the College of Communications. His office promotes a safe space for students to come in and discuss anything, whether that is boasting about newfound achievements or venting about their problems and experiences on campus. It also serves as a resource for students who want more opportunities. There have been times when I have gone to Abdullah as a student looking for guidance. Today I am here for an interview.

As assistant dean for multicultural affairs, Abdullah strives to make sure that every student in the college “feels accepted for who they are [and that] they feel appreciated and they feel celebrated.” He works in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, a name that he helped kickstart in an effort to promote more community engagement. The office’s mission is to offer a wide variety of cultural events and programming, provide academic and career advising to students, connect students to clubs that promote diversity, and lead the Bellisario College in the recruitment and retention of a diverse community.

Statistics from the Office of Diversity and Inclusion reveal that in 2018, out of 571 journalism students in the College of Communications, 67 identify as African American, which constitutes 11.7 percent. This is about a 5 percent increase from 2008, when only 56 out of 770 journalism students (about 7.3 percent) identified as African American. Ten years prior to 2008, only 17 out of 257 journalism students identified as African American, which is equivalent to 6.6 percent (Abdullah, 2018). Abdullah said there is a false narrative that the number of African American students is decreasing. He said that people use journalism to accomplish other objectives, like getting accepted into law school. He said his main priority is recruiting more African American students in the next few years by actively contacting them and individualizing people using videos and letters. “It’s going to be tough to have them join journalism because people are talking so negatively about journalism,” he said. “People think we’re dying, we’re just switching everything to a different format.” He said the way to appeal to prospective students of color is to be personable, meaning organizing one-on-one sessions and letting them know the college cares.

For current students, he said he would like to restart student groups such as the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) chapter to encourage underrepresented individuals to

invest in their craft. His other goals include increased community engagement. He said he wants to have more speakers in the College of Communications, and to be the catalyst for student involvement by providing safe spaces, which can help create dialogue.

Abdullah, who is a Penn State alumnus (B.A., 2003, M.A., 2007), said there is more coverage of the African American community, although problems still occur, such as people being identified incorrectly (i.e. being called “colored” instead of “students of color”). He said the biggest improvement is people being held more accountable for the things that they say, largely due to the era of social media. He said social media allows the black community to give more scrutiny and feedback on how they are being depicted in the media.

He also noticed how the overall sensitivity, appreciation, and understanding towards people of color, has increased since he was a student. He said one consistent issue that students complain about when they enter his office is that when student media organizations cover events in the black community, they do not stay to learn more about the event or speak to the hosts; they simply snap some pictures and leave. Students have also lamented that student media do not understand the essence of what they are doing, resulting in shallow coverage. They say that this shallow coverage makes it appear that their events are unimportant. He also noted that the only time they will interview students of color is when something negative happens and they want someone to serve as a community representative. “It’ll be like, ‘what do you think about this person being called a n\*gger or what do you think about these race relations?’” he said.

Abdullah also highlights how the recruitment of African Americans has not significantly improved since his time as a Penn State student. Abdullah, who was graduating when “The Paper” was released, claimed that what people refer to as affirmative action is not really affirmative action. “Affirmative action is taking affirmative steps to make sure people are aware

of possibilities and opportunities,” he said. “When you start talking about hiring specific groups of people, that’s called quotas.” He said he believes that media groups like The Collegian and Onward State need to be aware and purposefully recruit people of color to be a part of their organizations. “Representation matters,” he said. “No matter how capable you think someone is, unless they had a certain set of experiences, they’re not going to understand why certain things happen or certain things won’t work, or certain things can’t be said, and that’s important sometimes.” This task may be difficult given some African American students’ resistance to joining the media.

Abdullah believes African Americans are averse to joining the media for many reasons. “A lot of young people don’t trust the media. In addition to that, a lot of people of color, we’ve historically been misrepresented, underrepresented, or the media has been slanted completely against us,” he said. “When you see bad coverage, you simply don’t want to be a part of that.” On a systemic level, he acknowledges that African Americans are not proportionally represented at Penn State, although he said there are a lot of factors that contribute to this so he is not going to place all the blame on the university. He said some of these factors have to do with affordability, but he did not want to elaborate further on this issue.

Abdullah has also served as an adviser for The Underground since 2017, supporting them monetarily with funds provided by The Office of Diversity and Inclusion, or bouncing off ideas in an effort to see the bigger picture. He expressed the same sentiment that Keyaka said previously, which is that The Underground is not a black newspaper, but a publication that caters to multicultural individuals who want to tell stories that are not often told in some of the more mainstream papers, such as Onward State, The Collegian, or Centre Daily Times. He said they tell similar stories, but from different lenses or angles. “They have a responsibility to a large

variety of people, not just one group, and that can be tough to understand sometimes for people who are not a part of the media.”

He said students of color expect 24/7 coverage from The Underground because of the increased number of Caucasians working there despite it originating from black women. “They did position themselves as an outlet for those who previously didn’t have voices up here. They still are, but folks have to realize it can be a bit different,” he said. He compares The Underground’s situation to former President Barack Obama. According to Abdullah, blacks expected Obama to liberate them from institutional and racial oppression and when this did not happen, they grew frustrated. “Anytime you’re a black person who’s achieving a high level of success, you just have additional expectations placed upon you by your own people,” he said.

Abdullah elaborated further, stating that people are never going to be satisfied with how they are covered.

Some people are going to say you’re not covering [them] enough. A different group of people will say you’re splitting it, you’re doing too much. One group will say you’re not black enough and then at the same time, you’re not really a credible news organization if you’re only covering things that pertain to a particular group of individuals. You can’t please everyone, you can only do your best to do what you can and do what you think is right, and live by your decisions.

Abdullah said The Underground publishes high-quality work and is trying to accomplish a lot with minimal resources. Abdullah hopes that The Underground will continue to exist. He believes that its conception and mission statement to tell untold stories will inspire traditional student newspapers (i.e. The Collegian) to cover more underrepresented students.

Since his time as an undergrad, Abdullah said that people of color wanted to be “seen by anybody, they just wanted some type of coverage. Now that we have The Underground, we have a lot of other individual ways. We could produce our own news stories...They don’t need traditional media anymore,” he said. Abdullah also mentions Sovereign (which was noted in chapter 3) as another publication that caters to students of color. He thinks both The Underground and Sovereign exemplify the community of color’s direct response to the current landscape of media. “If you don’t like what you see, just go do it yourself,” he said. He said on a national level, publications like Griot and The Root are offshoots of the mainstream media, and are meant to cater to underrepresented parties. Abdullah believes that these grassroots media organizations exhibit a fracturing of the market by publishing original content to disseminate to niche audiences. He emphasized that these groups took the initiative to provide a platform to their communities “instead of waiting on somebody else to do it.”

Despite the creation of publications that cater to underrepresented students, and the mainstream media’s effort to follow suit, Abdullah is unsure if many students of color care about how they are depicted in the media.

There are many students that don’t have respect for some of the more mainstream media up here. If [the media] does something that is messed up, oh they’ll let them know about it, but I’m not sure if they have a specific message of, oh, this is how I want people to portray us. Your generation likes to tell their own story, they’re not really big into having other entities express their story.

Abdullah said his goal will continue to be have a higher representation of people of color in the College of Communications, and have them graduate so that they can best serve the community.



### **Focus Group**

On a balmy spring afternoon, I met with my focus group in Room 003 in the Carnegie Building, home to the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications. Sunlight was spilling into the large room as pizza boxes, desserts, and sodas provided by the Office of Diversity and Inclusion covered the elongated oak table. Five women gathered around, each of them harboring different stories and experiences but having at least two things in common: they were African American journalism students. I informed them from the beginning that this was a safe space meant to stimulate their thoughts and opinions, and that they did not have to share anything they didn't want to. To facilitate dialogue and protect the confidentiality of these women, I have created pseudonyms for each of them. As I sat with my small group, I noticed the unease, excitement, and anticipation radiating from each person, indicating that we were ready to begin. They were all in that room for a reason, and that was to discuss the staffing and coverage of African Americans in the student media.

Interestingly enough, when I was recruiting members for my focus group, only black women responded. I placed advertisements for my focus group in the Black Community at Penn State GroupMe chat, the Black Women/Femmes at Penn State chat, and the Black Student Union (BSU) Business (Flyers/Promotion) chat. All three of these chats combined consist of over 2,000 members, but only two women responded, which was discouraging. My thesis adviser, Russell Frank, suggested I ask the Office of Diversity and Inclusion to send a mass email within The College of Communications, offering pizza and drinks in the flyers to attract people. After sending this email, posting more flyers in the chats, and forming connections with classmates, I managed to get a decent-sized group of women who were willing and eager to share their

thoughts. Planning a good time for all of us to meet was challenging since I had to accommodate to everyone's schedule. Ultimately, four of the nine members could not attend.

The people who ended up participating in the focus group were a dynamic and passionate group of young women who hailed from different backgrounds and carried various career aspirations. Jackie, a senior, hails from Clarksville, Tennessee, and is an aspiring producer. Lisa is also a senior from Pittsburgh, who dreams of being a CNN anchor. She said she wants to focus on politics and race issues. Macy is a Jackson, New Jersey, native and a senior, with plans to pursue a social media sports coordinator job after graduation. The last two members of the group are Tamera and Aaliyah. Tamera is from Orange County, New York, and her goal is to become a public intellectual, speaking about race issues on television or in an academic setting, while also pursuing a career in entertainment news. Meanwhile, Aaliyah originates from Paterson, New Jersey, and hopes to become a photographer for a fashion magazine, eventually starting her own publication. As black women, each had to deal with the triumphs and lows of being a minority in a predominantly white journalism industry. Here are their thoughts and personal accounts of the student media at Penn State.

The largest student media publications on campus are Onward State, The Underground and The Daily Collegian, so the first question I posed to the group is what student media does each person consume. This was met with a thoughtful silence. There were mixed responses, with some sheepishly admitting that they don't engage with student media at all. Onward State was mentioned by a couple of them, but that was immediately followed by harsh criticism. "I don't read it seriously, I read it as the joke that it is," Macy said. "They are more of a satire than actual news." Issues with Onward State ranged from formatting to their failure to uphold journalistic standards.

Macy said that Onward State uses clickbait titles to draw people in. The moment she reads their articles with missing facts, she gravitates towards The Collegian. Lisa said when she was on their site, she was unimpressed with the setup and content. “It seemed like a lot of what I’d call puff pieces versus actual news stories,” she said. “When I put it up side by side with The Daily Collegian, it’s so different. I feel like Onward State is just regular students doing a newspaper versus journalism students.” Macy attempted to give Onward State the benefit of the doubt, admitting that they have a lot of divisions spanning business, news and public relations, and that while a large portion may not be journalism students, many are still loosely based in the communications field.

Meanwhile, Jackie said her problem with Onward State is their failure to differentiate themselves. “On the top of their website it says PSU news and then it says student blog. Blog is opinion, news is factual, you cannot put those two things together,” she said. “That’s basically what their product is, is a mix of opinions and facts, and sometimes fabrication and misinformation and it’s not accurate, so don’t say you’re PSU news and associate yourself with the university then don’t follow standards.” In contrast, Jackie said The Collegian exemplifies journalistic values, saying that there are people in editorial positions who are most likely journalism majors, and have undergone substantial training for at least a year. She said that their length of professional experience is unmatched, given its traditional roots. Returning to Onward State, Jackie lamented that it is “a lot of satire and getting people riled up. [They] have made mistakes before to the point where it irritates people.”

Macy cited the time when Onward State tweeted out that Penn State Coach Joe Paterno died a day before he actually did, prompting critics of the publication to denounce it as a credible news source. Major news outlets such as CNN and ABC ran with the story, quoting Onward

State as their only source, until the Paterno Family released a statement saying that these claims were false. This example led to a three-minute conversation about the questionable journalism practices that both legitimate news organizations and Onward State engaged in, which includes Onward State “learning” about Paterno’s death through an anonymous hospital source.

Besides Onward State, focus group members also mentioned Valley magazine, Penn State’s only student-run life and style publication, and The Underground as media sources they occasionally consume.

In terms of recruitment, Lisa said a representative from The Underground came to her COMM 260 Newswriting and Reporting class to provide more information about the publication. “She didn’t say this per se in her words, but I could tell the staff was of a different race for the most part, it was more...ethnic,” she said. Lisa did not elaborate on why she made those assumptions. After the recruiter spoke to her class, Lisa decided to check out The Underground’s website. She enjoyed exploring the page because its aesthetic was “urban” and “hip.” Despite her approval of the site, she was unable to join due to other commitments. According to Lisa, the recruiter mentioned that people were not even aware of The Underground’s existence because of better-known student publications, such as Onward State and The Collegian.

Lisa admitted that if she were to join a student publication, one major factor that would influence her decision would be the racial composition of the staff. “If it’s a staff of all-white, or majority-white, the stories they’re going to cover are going to cater more to their people, or the way they perceive a story is not going to be the same as how I might perceive it,” she said. She cited a recent incident that involved State College borough police, who shot and killed 29-year-old Osaze Osagie after they “attempted to serve a mental health warrant” (Helm, 2019). This

homicide has caused a community uproar because Osagie represents another black man who was a victim of police brutality. Lisa said she did not read what Onward State and The Collegian wrote regarding this incident, but she “can tell it’s probably different from what The Underground wrote, it’s probably two different perspectives.” Lisa said she glanced at the headlines about the incident from each publication, saying that while she could not remember the wording, The Underground appeared to be more sympathetic than The Collegian.

Macy said when she came to Penn State, she was told to join Onward State because it was “fun and easy and relaxed.” As a freshman, Macy was a film and video major, so she had no desire to join any media publications. When she switched over to journalism, she still had no interest in writing for them. “When you’re writing for somebody like The Daily Collegian, you have a responsibility because it’s university-funded,” she said. “When you’re writing for Onward State, it’s kind of like more free and chill, so I couldn’t find a balance between the two that I liked. When The Underground came around, I was just too busy with other [things].” Macy said race did not play a role in her decision-making. She chose not to join any publication due to personal reasons and time constraints.

Meanwhile, Aaliyah, who went to a Penn State branch campus her first two years, did not join any media organizations because she has limited experience in the communications field. She said her old campus did not really offer a communications program.

Tamera, a broadcast journalism major, did PSNTV her freshman year for one semester, but stopped because she thought it was becoming extremely disorganized. Like Macy, she said that racial composition did not matter to her because she was used to being in predominantly white spaces. “It’s frustrating when you take time out of your day,” she said. “I can use my energy, my time and my talents a different way.”

Jackie has been in PSNTV since she was a freshman, but she is reconsidering being a part of the broadcast network for the same reason. “It’s really hectic and trying to reframe the organization is a lot of work. I have other things to do, I need to graduate,” she said. Jackie is also a member of Valley magazine’s video division and works for Comm Agency. She said her expertise is mainly in video, but she wanted to join these organizations for professional experience. She also said she is used to working in predominantly white spaces due to her upbringing as a military child and having to relocate often. She said that in Valley, there is a “strong, strong white presence” and they struggle with diversity. Jackie also said that Valley’s video division is the most diverse, and that there are roughly four people of color across all departments.

Jackie said she has spoken with Valley’s editor about their diversity and inclusion issue. “There are plenty people of color who want to be in Valley, who are interested in fashion, but may feel uncomfortable with joining because there’s nobody else that looks like them,” she said. “They’re not openly telling people like, ‘hey, this is a thing on campus.’ It seems very exclusive, and their content is very geared toward the white majority, but then on your cover you have a person of color. I always find it very interesting and I just think they tokenize people, which I think is harmful.” Jackie said this tokenization makes it appear as if Valley is a diverse publication whose mission is to tell the stories of underrepresented students at Penn State. “Their whole entire organization is not reflective of the university. We are marketable for the sake of meeting a quota,” she said. “It would be one thing to say we’re marketable because we do a lot and we’re a powerful group of students as a whole, but I don’t think they believe that. I think it’s just, ‘hey we need someone to say there is black people here!’”

Jackie said she was crestfallen when Lisa and Aaliyah expressed their reluctance to join any student media, and was adamant that racial stigmas were the cause. She said student media organizations were losing potential talent due to their exclusion and ignorance, saying that not everyone has the capacity or the drive to transcend these invisible barriers like she did. She also accepts that her upbringing and environment strengthened her resolve and determination to access these spaces. “It just disadvantages students of color and that bothers me,” she said. Let’s not talk about ‘we’re All In,’ let’s not talk about, ‘oh we’re very diverse,’ but how diverse are we in our relationships? How diverse are we in our organizations? It bothers me that students are disenfranchised even here, students aren’t treated equally even here, and they’re not given equal opportunities. “All In,” is a university-wide initiative that encourages Penn State students, faculty, and staff to show their “commitment to cultivating a diverse and inclusive environment,” regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, etc. (All In at Penn State, 2016). Jackie advocates for more equity, and for recruiters to extend an invitation to black students so that they feel wanted and accepted. “That’s what student media struggles with, but overall, that’s what the university struggles with.”

In light of this discussion, Tamera thinks that Valley and other predominantly white publications are only hurting themselves by excluding different voices. “I get it, we go to a predominantly white school, but that doesn’t mean you should cater towards [predominantly white people],” she said. “That’s an excuse.” She said if Jackie informs her that Valley is tokenizing black people on its covers, then she has no desire to read it. Tamera believes that publications like Valley and other non-inclusive student organizations can continue to prosper because the black community is the minority. “Yes, it would be beneficial if they had us, 100 percent. It sounds terrible, but they can still be successful without us,” she said. Macy said she is

tired of majority-white organizations making false promises when it comes to recruiting students of color. She said she is reluctant to join certain organizations because there is no one who “looks like her.” Macy said that the word “trying” rings hollow because there is no real progress being made. “Until I see consistent diversity in something, I’m not going to want to join,” she said.

The entire group lamented that predominantly white student publications and organizations are not making an outward effort to recruit students of color. “Are you going to the PRCC (Paul Robeson Cultural Center)? Are you going to MRC (Multicultural Resource Center)? Are you asking advisers, people like Gary, who know these students well? What can we do to have these students come into our spaces and feel comfortable?” Jackie asked. “They don’t want to recruit us because they don’t think we’re valuable enough,” Tamera said, which caused the group to sit in a reflective silence. “They have never had to have a student of color’s voice in their work, or they never had to interact with students of color to be successful, so why should I have to reach out to students of color now? If I’m killing the game why does it matter?”

Tamera said during her freshman year, she brought two of her friends who were white into the PRCC to study and they were uneasy because everyone noticed them, which Tamera claimed was false. Her friends eventually said that they were uncomfortable and she responded by saying, “well, welcome to my life.” She noted that Caucasian students are used to being the majority. “They’ve always been comfortable, but they don’t want to push themselves outside of their comfort zone,” she said. “Just for us to be here is a lot, you know? We have a lot of things on our plate just in general, like microaggressions and things like that. The last thing we’re going to do is go out of our way when we already know we’re talented...and then be like, ‘hey let me tell you how good I am.’ Like no, you come to me.”



She explained how the president of a campus organization wanted more students of color on his team, and at the suggestion of black students, sat in the PRCC to interact more with people and discuss his organization. Tamera was impressed because he took the initiative to extend himself to areas that may have caused him discomfort. “At first black people might be like, ‘why are all you white people here?’” she joked. “But at least they’re making that step and I think that will go far.”

To further examine this point, I asked the group if there should be affirmative action when recruiting more black reporters, which was met with an uneasy silence. “I think when you tag the word affirmative action on hiring staff...” Jackie said. “It gets negative,” Lisa interjected. Jackie continued, explaining that affirmative action has a negative connotation in society. “I think they should put a priority on saying, ‘Okay, this person has the same credentials as this person, but this person so happens to be black. I think this would benefit us more as a university than hiring somebody who looks like a hundred other faculty members,” she said “I want to see professors, especially when it comes to COMM (communications) that look like me because it feels like I can make it.” Jackie said this example traces back to the importance of representation, and paving the way for another black person to inhabit uncomfortable spaces.

Macy said when it comes to student media recruiting African American reporters, the task should be split 50/50. She said it is partially on the organization to “recruit, hire and empower” people of color, but it also on people of color to place themselves in these uncomfortable positions in order to gain professional experience and have their voices be heard. “Yes, I should be putting myself in these uncomfortable situations to make sure I’m thriving and doing my very best,” she said. “At the same time if I walk into a job that’s hiring and I’m walking through the hallways and I don’t see anybody that looks like me, I’m not going to want

to be here.” She also mentioned the importance of empowering and motivating people of color who are already working in that organization so that they can serve as better representatives to possible recruits.

Macy said people of color are less inclined to join student publications and organizations if they don’t have a representative who is of the same background.

I think that’s the problem with diversity in student news. If you don’t see it, if you don’t go to those booths at the involvement fair and see a black girl, a black guy, two of them, four of them in front of this booth about joining Onward State, joining The Collegian, joining The Underground, Thon whatever, why the [expletive] am I going to walk up to you?

Macy compared this scenario to representatives at the Black Caucus booth and the Multicultural Greek Council booth. She said she was more inclined to join these organizations because the representatives resemble her, therefore increasing her feelings of acceptance.

Jackie said what motivated her to get involved is providing representation. “I can’t help other people of color, particularly black people on this campus, do greater things if I don’t set an example, so I push myself into these spaces,” she said. “Yes, it’s hard. Yes, I’ve had a lot of instances when people got on my last damn nerves, but I did it, and I’m doing it for somebody else. I’m the person you can see that I wish I saw.” Jackie said she had to make herself uncomfortable to be the trendsetter for others.

The group emphasized that it is the white recruiters’ responsibility to push themselves into black spaces given that they go to a PWI. They said that while it may be uncomfortable for white staff, it will be beneficial in the long run. “If I’m the head director of Daily Collegian and I go out for a job and they’re like, ‘oh, how inclusive was your newspaper? And you’re like, ‘oh,

well we didn't really have [a diverse newspaper], and as an employer, I'm going to be like okay, so how do I really know that you can work well with nonwhite people?" Tamera said. She mentions that these questions are important because as a journalist, you need to cater to the entire community, which may have various cultural backgrounds.

Macy said that if Adriana Lacy didn't set the precedent as the first black female to create a student-run publication, she would have never pushed boundaries by applying for executive board member positions in her student organizations. "If people see that there is diversity and that it's in the forefront in the majority roles or the position-holding roles of an organization, yeah, I'm going to join, but it doesn't make sense if the editor of The Daily Collegian is white. That's fine, power to you, but somebody else in a higher position needs to have diversity," Macy said. She also recommended bringing that person of color out to events, classrooms, and booths to encourage more people to join.

In terms of recruitment, Lisa said diversity should not just extend to people of color, but should include other marginalized groups, such as women, people with disabilities, the LGBT community, and people from different age groups. "If you get the same kind of people – student white male [and] student white female- the stories you read are going to be as diverse as the staff." Jackie agreed, saying "It's just a better reflection of all students. You may still have 95 percent be about typical, generic events on the campus that cater to most majority students, but you at least have five percent that are talking about the five percent of students that are on this campus."

Jackie questioned how often publications such as The Underground and Sovereign were elevated and given recognition from their peers. "You always have people saying, "Oh yeah Daily Collegian did this, Onward State did this, 'Oh, I work with so and so at The Daily

Collegian,” Macy said. “You never hear, ‘oh yeah, The Underground is great, everybody should go to The Underground. The last time I heard any promotion about The Underground was COMM 260, last spring.” Lisa recalled that The Underground representative who came into her COMM 260 class last spring had to reach out to the professor, the professor didn’t request her. The representative was traveling to different classrooms asking journalism professors if she could present The Underground to their students. “One of the people in our class was with The Collegian [and] she was like, ‘well, I want to present.’ I was like, ‘no, we know about you,” Lisa said. She confessed that she refused to accept a flyer that The Collegian staff member passed out. “There’s things you know,” she said. “When you look at face value, step back and see who’s on your staff and if you don’t see a problem with that, then that is the problem.”

Most of the group learned about Sovereign and The Underground through word of mouth and people passing out print copies of Sovereign. Tamera said Candice Crutchfield, one of The Underground’s co-founders, was her mentor and also her informational source about The Underground. Aaliyah said she only heard about The Underground through Gary Abdullah and Michelle Lin, who she went to Penn State York with for the first two years before transferring to University Park. She said she does not see The Underground’s promotional materials or content anywhere, which prompted other group members to say that she needs to actively search for them. The focus group said they see The Underground at involvement fairs but never Sovereign. They also never see their content circulating, prompting them to believe that the publication discontinued. Lisa suggested that they were unable to compete in a tight student media market that was already dominated by The Collegian and Onward State. She also said it did not help that The Underground was directly competing with them by catering to the same audience. Until this focus group, Lisa said she never even heard of Sovereign.

Focus group members debated whether there could be other student media publications that catered to black audiences. “I think there could be more, I just don’t think they would flourish,” Macy said, which prompted agreement from other members. “I think we’ve already established that The Daily Collegian is dominant and Onward State is second and The Underground is chilling in third.”

Tamera, however, slightly disagreed with this observation. “As students of color, we’re too divided, I think if we keep together and we were like, ‘we’re going to put on a really great media company and it’s going to be organized and we’re going to reach out to people, and we’re going to become for lack of a better term like the shit, we [could] 100 percent do it!’” She said to achieve this goal, black students need to solve their issues as a community first. She also said once black people realized there was a lack of representation in student publications, they started heading in different directions. She said despite being the minority, black student publications could flourish due to “quality over quantity.”

Macy remained skeptical. “No matter how amazing our production would be as black student media, we still go to a PWI so what, we’re getting, maybe 10 percent of the student population?” Macy said even if they did include international students and the rest of the nonwhite community, that still constitutes a small percentage of student viewership. In 2018, The Collegian reported that 70 percent of the entire undergraduate population at Penn State is white and that in a group of 100 Penn Staters, “an African American student would on average only find about 5 others who look like them” (Moody, 2018). Macy also discussed the importance of the black publication appealing to its target audience in terms of coverage. “We put out our first issue of whatever, our 20 percent viewership might see it and be like, ‘no this is shit, I’m going back to The Collegian, I don’t care how white they are,’” she said. “You know how black people

are.” Lisa voiced her agreement, saying the support is not always there when it comes to the black community.

Jackie touched on another point regarding the black community’s white-majority peer biases and how that may be reflected in student media outlets. “It doesn’t necessarily capture the narratives that we experience on this campus,” she said. “That’s really what’s kind of lacking. Are you reporting on the things that are also important to us?” Jackie said she’s not particularly interested in sports, but would tune in on a story if it had a diversity and inclusion angle. She also said she would be interested in knowing how many professors of color had tenure on the University Park campus (a story that The Daily Collegian recently did). Jackie said the narratives can often be switched to reflect the lives of black students on campus because of the staff that is producing the content.

Lisa provided a counterargument, saying that while The Collegian and Onward State are too white, if they devised their own predominantly black publication, it might be considered too black, thus excluding the white student population. “We don’t get a whole lot, so this is for us, but then I feel like that would start a[n] issue.” Other members agreed, saying that the hypothetical black publication could increase racial tensions, and give students the impression that they are divided. Macy said that while she would completely support the black publication, it would have to cater to a diverse demographic of blacks, not just a stereotypical trope of what a black person is supposed to be. “I grew up in a PWT (predominantly white town), I have a very white cultural upbringing,” she said. She compared her environment with one of the other members, who was raised in an urban setting. “We grew up in very different backgrounds and yeah, we’re still black. I’m still black, but there’s different upbringings of black.”

Tamera said environment is one of the main dividing factors in the black community. In one instance, an African American can be growing up in an area that was surrounded by people of color as opposed to someone else in North Carolina. “If we came together then you can see that different narrative and kind of break that image of there’s only one black, or there’s only one type of way to be black.” Lisa thinks this universal image of black people exists at Penn State because it is a PWI, versus if she went to Howard University, there would be different spectrums of the black community. Tamera feels like this stereotype is reinforced because most black people she knows hail from urban areas, so when there is a black person who is not from that area, it is more difficult to be heard.

Macy said that being black and having a white cultural upbringing is one of the reasons why she did not join any black student media or other black organizations. She said her mother actively persuaded her to join these groups when she entered college. “I don’t think that I’m black enough besides my skin color to go into the PRCC, to join the Black Caucus, to be a part of AKA. I don’t feel that I would fit in,” she said. Macy believes people are comfortable in spaces that are similar to their hometowns so they assimilate to those surroundings, which for her, involved befriending predominantly white groups. This could also cause divisions within the black community.

Aaliyah said despite growing up in an urban area, she did not have a good relationship with a lot of black people because of rampant gang violence. She said moving to Pennsylvania was her first time being around white people, but she felt uncomfortable due to microaggressions, which came in the form of hateful comments and looks. “Over [in State College], can I say I’ve been marginalized outright? I can’t say so,” she said. “I wanted to join Valley, and I was looking at their ‘about us’ page and ‘meet our team,’ and I was like, can she be

mixed? That's what it looks like, I'm not sure, but I felt a sense of uncomfortability. I couldn't point out why I felt uncomfortable." She said she might reconsider joining next year after a black acquaintance recommended the magazine and said that she was also in it. Aaliyah was also inspired by the focus group discussions, saying that it is important to provide representation as a person of color and place herself in uncomfortable spaces.

Lisa said if she were the only black person at Onward State or The Collegian, she would capitalize on that and discover what media department she's good in. She said that while this approach often works, it can have its pitfalls. "If I am the minority in the room, and something black comes up, I'm automatically the go-to person for black things," she said. Lisa said one time she was putting two stories side-by-side on the same topic; one headline included the description "African American male" while the other article did not give a race. "I actually don't mind them not saying it just now because as soon as they put African American male, then the person message[s] you like, how does this make you feel? And I'm like, well I'm not that person, and I can't speak for them or their family."

Lisa gently advised Aaliyah to use her discomfort to her advantage. Macy said it can also inspire effective change. She said that representation matters because it can be used as a platform to vocalize the opinions of underrepresented students. She tells Aaliyah that if she is at Valley, she will be in the position to voice her concerns. "You're going to have the chance to be like, 'hey, I've realized that this office, this staff, super white, all of our stories, super white, can we please change something?'" Macy said. "And you know what? They might say no, but at least you brought it to their attention."

I transitioned to another discussion point and brought up the photo The Daily Collegian used in one of their articles, which depicted a transgender African American student being



arrested. This example was met with sounds of surprise and disapproval. “Oh gosh,” Tamera said. This led me to ask if the women noticed any issues in the student-media coverage regarding the African American community. Before I could finish my question, Macy responded.

“Honestly, I don’t think there’s any coverage besides the events that are going on,” she said. Lisa interjected, adding the word “tragic” to Macy’s description of events. “Tragic events that involve African American students, events that involve African American athletes,” Macy continued. “Or MLK,” Jackie joked. “MLK! MLK day!” Macy sarcastically added.

Focus group members agreed that every student, adviser, and faculty member should have diversity sensitivity training. Jackie said diversity sensitivity classes should be part of the programming for incoming freshmen, who may experience a culture shock at Penn State. Macy said if there can be a freshman seminar, there can be a mandatory sensitivity workshop in either Eisenhower Auditorium or the Bryce Jordan Center, Penn State’s basketball arena.

Jackie said that student media editors who purposely fail to incorporate diversity and inclusion training into their orientation is “irresponsible, inappropriate, and a disadvantage to the publication and their audience.” It also feeds into the biases, microaggressions, and prejudice that the organization may have.

“America’s getting more and more diverse as we go along,” Aaliyah said. “No one’s going anywhere, we’re going to stay right here and more people, more black people, and people of color are going to be coming to the university, and it’s going to be at a point now where in America we’re going to have more ethnic people than we are going to have white people and they’re going to be the minority.” Based on this demographic shift, Aaliyah suggested that student media outlets provide additional resources for the future. Macy interjected, saying, “I

think to say that you don't have time for sensitivity training means you don't give a f\*ck. You don't care enough to make sure that people aren't getting offended by what you write."

"We try to make it seem like we're on polar opposites and we're not," Tamera said." Our experiences have shaped us differently, [but] at the end of the day we're humans. Race and gender and all of those things separate us, or have created this really strong divide, but it's our experiences. We clash because we don't understand each other's experiences." Tamera said that having sensitivity training and advisers can facilitate those conversations.

Jackie said these perceptions stem from a systemic issue. "It comes from people's backgrounds then they bring it here, then they put it to the media." She said journalism students do not take the race, gender and media studies classes in the College of Communications seriously enough, thus highlighting a broader problem. "Who are the people that oversee these students who write these stories, who run Valley, who run these organizations? They're all students too and they're usually white students, and how often do they really pay attention to that class COMM 205? I highly doubt that they do."

Jackie said that race and gender are discussed frequently in her courses, especially COMM 271, which focuses on multimedia reporting, and her ethics class. She does not agree that a course on race should be called a sensitivity course. "A sensitivity course implies that people are sensitive about these things, but calling it 'Social Awareness: How to Report on Race [and] Gender in the Media,'" she said. According to her, the class can teach journalists how to frame stories depicting black men and women in order to avoid bias. She said if this hypothetical course is unable to be a semester-long, it can be a module or section of another course. Jackie also advised against "parachute journalism," where reporters travel to an urban neighborhood and cover a community with limited knowledge about it. She said these journalists only discuss

crime and not the positive aspects of the community, such as mentorship programs or community building projects.

Lisa said she notices, however, that when race and gender are brought up in one of her courses, white people will mentally check out. “Either they get uncomfortable, or they’re just like, ‘this doesn’t pertain to me, so I’m going to shut down,’” she said. “I noticed that not even just COMM class [or] AFAM classes, any class, if race is brought up, even the teacher is like, ‘I don’t want to start something.’” The group does not think that the topic of race should be politically correct. “Why do we look at race as political?” Jackie said. “This is social, socially this is how we interact. Race is a thing because people made it a thing, not that it actually exists. To call somebody a black man rather than a Negro is not being politically correct. That’s just being socially accurate.”

The conversation transitioned into what terms should be used to label blacks in media coverage. I briefly mentioned how The Collegian was once caught using the term “colored” in one of their articles a few years ago. The women agreed that the term “colored” is outdated and offensive, instead preferring the phrase, “people of color.” “Colored’ implies that there’s a lack of humanity and that I’m simply less than a human and simply a color,” Jackie said. She said she recently heard the word on two separate occasions, which included work and the MLK event. Jackie believes that the use of this word is a microaggression that stems from a lack of education and one’s upbringing. The group also felt that the word “blacks,” is a derogatory term and a form of objectification. They preferred the phrase “black people” as opposed to “African Americans,” saying that this description is too politically correct and implies government ownership of the black community. Jackie said college is a place meant for understanding language, institutional racism, and racial oppression. “We’re here to dismantle the things that we were comfortable with

prior to, and I think that has a lot to do with again, education. We have a whole AP style guide, why did you not use it?” Lisa said despite being handed the AP style guide in COMM 260, her professor advised the class the first day that “there’s just some things you just don’t say in journalism.”

The group branched off into the descriptions the student media uses when covering the black community, focusing primarily on African Americans and crime. Conversations became heated during this segment because of the sensitivity of this subject. “We know there is a lot less we can get away with,” Macy said. “Football players [get] reported on that they got busted in their dorms for having weed, but how many other white kids at this campus have gotten their dorms busted for having weed? Why is that we focus on African American students, and especially African American athletes?” Jackie thinks race is only important in particular stories. She said mentioning Osagie’s race was important because mental health is a topic that is often ignored in the black community. She said a reporter can write a story without including the subject’s skin tone. “If they just arrested this person just ‘[a] male 26-year old allegedly stole such and such thing from a convenience store last night,’ does it matter that he was black? No. We’re just saying a crime happened, [which is] what’s really important.”

Lisa said the media coverage of black criminal suspects has increased her skepticism. “If I read an article that doesn’t have race and it’s a crime, I’m automatically like, ‘was he black? Was he white?’ If it was like, ‘man arrested for weed in his house,’ I would be like, ‘was he black?’ One, because he’ll probably go to jail longer and I want to know more about it, or if he’s white, he’s about to get a slap on the wrist.” She said she personally likes to know the race in order to determine which direction the coverage is going to steer in.

Jackie asked how The Collegian framed the Osagie incident, for example, and what actually occurs during the editorial process regarding the coverage of the black community. “I think it all starts here in college,” Jackie said. “I think the majority needs to be a little more serious about how they report, or how they write about things, or how they frame the stories, or who their audience is, because they’re going to carry that same mindset to mass media companies.” Jackie said that this perpetuates the cycle and forces editors to address recurring issues regarding the staffing and coverage of the black community. “I hate the media honestly, but I’m working for them, I want to change it, it’s a dichotomy you know?” Jackie confessed. Macy jokingly suggested that she work in sports.

Jackie said student media outlets should create community output and feedback groups in efforts to improve their coverage. She said these diverse groups can be beneficial in increasing emotional intelligence towards people. She also said she wishes student media outlets would invest more time into learning about the black community. She conceded that it takes time to adjust the organizational culture depending on its staff members, but believes substantial change is possible with real concentrated effort. For instance, small events hosted by black student organizations would gain more traction and attendance if student media outlets covered them. “If student media did that more, and broadcasting our experiences and our narratives in a[n] accurate way then we would be more appreciative, and we would benefit from it,” she said.

Members unanimously agreed that Daily Collegian and Valley staff members can research information about black community events independently, instead of coming to them (or any other black student) for verification. When it comes to topics white staff members are entirely unsure of, then they can go to a black community member for reference. “I’d rather you ask than make assumptions about what’s going on, or what the purpose of an event is, and do so

in a respectful way,” Jackie said. She also emphasizes to white staffers to report on those events, which can sometimes get ignored. She said these events are important to the black community, and that substantial coverage raises awareness among the majority about things that are happening in black spaces.

Lisa said her issue does not pertain to white reporters seeking her approval on what items to publish, but being the source for all black news. She said she is unaware of everything happening in the black community and should not be held accountable for that. She stresses the importance of self-knowledge and self-teaching. “Even if you’re at a PWI, taking an African American class, it’s not that hard,” she said. “I’ll walk into an AFAM (African American studies) class and I’ll have white people, and sometimes I’ll ask them ‘why are you taking this?’ And I’m like, ‘thank you for trying to educate yourself.’” Macy suggested that all white students should take an African American studies course as an academic requirement and that it would be beneficial in developing their understanding.

The group debated whether student-media coverage extends to events hosted by the PRCC. “Did they talk about Touch of Africa?” Tamera asked. Lisa said she noticed the Black Community at Penn State group chat was having a debate recently about the coverage regarding the Osagie case.

At the time, they said that The Collegian or Onward State (Lisa could not recall) did not have an article about the incident on their page, and failed to post information until five minutes before the vigil for Osagie was about to begin (although this is actually something that The Underground did). “It should have been the head thing,” she said. “As soon as you went on the website, that should’ve been the first thing you saw, but you had to scroll to find it.” Macy said she always gives student media outlets the benefit of the doubt. “Do I expect them to have a post

written about the vigil hours before the vigil? No, because we're students we all got shit going on. I had shit to do before this, I had shit to do all day today," she said. "They got it up right? At the same time, yeah it should've been up at least an hour before the vigil was happening in the event that any students did want to pay their respects, and want to go, and show support of the students within the community care about this event that happened, but honestly I'm not surprised."

Lisa elaborated on her initial comment, saying she was not surprised either, but she expected the article about Osagie to be the front story on the webpage. "But at the same time, Collegian gives a shit an f\*ck ton more about sports that are happening with Penn State than they do about non-student-related community events," Macy said. When I asked her why that is, she said The Collegian's audience are students, making them less likely to focus on an event that did not concern a student; however, Jackie and Lisa pointed out that Osagie was an adult learner. "That says a lot even to their audience," Jackie said. "Are they including all Penn State students?" This question prompted the entire group to emphatically conclude that The Collegian's target audience is specifically undergraduate students. Macy was still firm in her belief that stories like Osagie's don't matter to Collegian staff because it does not appeal to their readership, although members quietly reminded her that it was still relevant news because it happened in the State College area. Lisa agreed with Macy, joking that The Collegian and Onward State only write puff pieces, like pumpkin patches, which caused some laughter amongst the group. "[Who gives a] f\*ck about that! What about the man who just got shot?"

Jackie said The Collegian and Onward State's lack of coverage about Osagie's death stems from people failing to bring the story to their attention.

For our community, that's something that's sensitive to us, that's something that needs to be talked about. This is another case of a black man being shot and he shouldn't have been, but is there anyone in the newsroom saying anything about it like, 'hey can we talk about this beat? Can we get on this?' I think there's a kind of disregard for things that happen to people of color on campus, specifically black people because nobody's talking about it. Nobody's bringing it up in conversation.

Aaliyah also mentioned the large amount of black and multicultural student events that happen on campus that never get coverage or a good turnout because of a lack of awareness. "If there's no people of color as reporters, they don't even think to look for that stuff because it's not [them], it's not a little flyer in a hallway. They don't look for that kind of stuff." Aaliyah previously interviewed international students as part of a multiculturalism beat.

They don't see themselves represented in the media so they don't go out and look for it. When you don't see [yourself] in the media and you don't see [yourself] represented in the school and it's supposed to be a community, you feel alone. A lot of them want to share their culture with people but they feel like they're quieted. A lot of them are too scared to speak because they don't want to feed into stereotypes.

I asked Aaliyah if she considered the student media to be community publications. "No, I don't," she said. "If people [have been] here for years and don't feel like they're being represented, then no."

Jackie mentioned that she has a friend who is a staff writer for The Daily Collegian who always writes diversity and inclusion pieces. She noted that her friend wrote an article about why there are not more black professors at Penn State. Jackie emphasized that her friend is a white student, but feels comfortable and passionate discussing these topics. "She's bringing these



conversations up, and I think it takes those types of students to talk about those things, and to articulate and write those stories, and frame it in a way where it's not, 'oh it's okay,' but saying 'this is a problem,'" Jackie said. Lisa strongly agreed. "The issue with that is that it takes the white person to do it because if a black person keeps bringing it up it's like, 'oh, you're talking about race da da da da,' but let the white person do it and it's like, 'oh, you see something that we didn't even think about,'" she said. "I'm like, 'well what if I just said that? They're like, but it's tired when it comes from a black person I guess.'" This scenario prompted Macy to say, "It falls on deaf ears!" They both began mocking white people's astonishment when another white person speaks on racial injustice, something that the black community has been campaigning against for decades.

I asked if Macy and Lisa felt that they did not have a voice on issues affecting their own communities, which was met with a strong objection from Macy. "Oh no, I make people listen to me," she said. "You're going to understand my experiences and you're going to listen and you're going to get the f\*ck over it. You're going to think for the rest of your life about how something that you maybe said to me [is the reason] why I brought up my past experiences. You're going to remember that!" Macy brought up a scenario. "If I was talking to a huge group of white people, maybe four of them would take my message and understand my experiences and feel something for the other members of the African American community," she said. "Whereas then if I got a white girl to come in right after me share my story and switch everything but her name, everybody would leave with it."

Lisa said she does not mind white reporters speaking on the African American experience "as long as they get it right." She said these reporters need to do proper research as journalists before spreading misinformation. "I can't go on air and you give me a story five seconds before

I'm supposed to read it and I know nothing about it," she said. "If you don't do your research beforehand, you'll go up there saying someone's story and you don't know what you're talking about. Then it doesn't register to you, and it doesn't matter to you."

Aaliyah believes white reporters should be allowed to speak on topics that resonate with the black community; she also thinks the opposite should be true. "I think that keeps the door open," she said. "I mean why is [it] that black people can only cover black topics and white people [can cover] only white topics? It closes facilitation. I think that it should be free and open for everybody to talk about." She notices that white students avoid the PRCC "like the plague," promoting shouts of agreement from the group. "What can we do to make them go in there that makes them feel less intimidated? Me going there I was intimidated and I grew up around black people," she admitted.

Tamera, however, does not think that it is the black community's responsibility to make white students feel comfortable, arguing that the PRCC is "our space." She elaborated, saying, "We're constantly putting ourselves in predominantly white spaces. When we don't have to do that and we can put our guard down, that's a place of comfort for us." Tamera referred back to her previous example of her white friends entering the PRCC, saying that white people never had to face uncomfortable situations in regards to race. She said this is analogous to Aaliyah growing up in a predominantly black area and never really having to interact with white people.

For white people that's their entire life. When you think about it, they can work themselves all the way up to a president of a corporation and never even talk to a black person, but meanwhile [for] black people, if we want to reach that level of success, we have to navigate through that world. We have to know how to navigate through the white world while also being marketable for the black world too so we don't go too far off this

way to the point where they'll discredit us, so it's like we're constantly balancing both, so I don't really think it's our job to make white people feel like, 'Come! You're included in this space, you're welcome,' because they need to do that for us.

Towards the end of the discussion, Tamera, who had other commitments, needed to leave, so I brought up the African American student in "The Paper" who said that "unless we're singing and dancing, we are not going to be represented in the media here in State College fairly and adequately enough to get our voices heard." I wanted to gauge her, and the rest of the group's reaction, to this statement. Murmurs of agreement went around the room.

Tamera said that this comment is true, comparing it to a recent situation in which the adviser of her organization only reached out to this black student so he could do a rap performance at their event. "It just was like a little cringey, you know? To have all these 70-year-old white people and then you have this young black student up there rapping. To me, it's like a show, it's a performance it's like black people are a circus." Lisa chimed in, saying, "we are, we're entertaining."

Tamera said she was proud to see the media cover a black man who was accepted into several Ivy League schools, proving that African Americans' abilities go beyond sports and entertainment. "We're so intelligent in so many different ways," she said enthusiastically. "[People] say 'what can you do?' What can't I do?" Lisa added.

Lisa said the African American community is only the focus of news coverage if it is involving entertainment or tragedy. "It's never like, 'oh, local Penn State black student got into Ph.D. program,'" she said. "It's not an uplifting thing, it's more of a Sambo." Macy brought up the Colin Kaepernick issue as an example. NFL players were kneeling during the national anthem as a form of protest against racial injustice and brutality, but the owners denied them the

right to make this statement. The demonstration also received backlash from people on social media, who said that it was disrespectful to military veterans. Fans, owners, and President Trump demanded they rise, warning them that they would not get paid. “If it’s not for entertainment or something bad happening, we’re literally useless,” Macy said. “We’re the backburner,” Lisa added.

Jackie agreed that with Penn State student media specifically, coverage of the black community normally revolves around unfortunate circumstances or amusement. “I don’t see too much coverage of us achieving, or us being great, or us doing something good for our communities, or success,” she said. “I don’t see a lot of positivity. I see somebody got shot...I see MLK, I see something very generic.” “Like Saquon,” Lisa interjected. Saquon Barkley was a star college football player at Penn State for three seasons before being the 2018 number one draft pick for the New York Giants. He received a substantial amount of media coverage for his athletic achievements. Lisa’s comment caused an uproar in the room as focus group members repeatedly shouted his name with sarcasm dripping from their voices.

After listening to what the other focus group members said, Aaliyah recalls a quote she heard often growing up.

They like our rhythm, but they don’t like [our] blues. They like the culture, it’s very entertaining. It’s something that a lot of people want to have, but they can’t exactly replicate because it’s not theirs originally, but they don’t like to hear the struggle, they don’t like to hear about our tragedy, they don’t like to hear all the bad things, they just want to [enjoy] the culture because that’s what’s fun to them.

## Chapter 5

### **“I’m going to always look for opportunities to advance my people.”**

This chapter will examine newsroom staffing and coverage of the African American community on a national level. Walter Middlebrook gives his insight on the representation and coverage of black people in the media, and provides his experiences as a black editor working in a national newsroom. He also evaluates the staffing and coverage of African Americans by the student media at Penn State. After Middlebrook’s section, this chapter further examines the staffing and coverage of African Americans in national newsrooms by providing information from scholarly articles and research journals.

### **Walter Middlebrook**

Middlebrook was a professional-in-residence at Penn State’s College of Communications for the Fall 2018 semester. He has held editorial positions in multiple newsrooms, including The Detroit News, USA Today, Newsday Media Group, and The New York Times. I interviewed him in his office in late November. The temporary office space was limited and boxes were stacked against the wall as Middlebrook prepared for his fast-approaching departure. As the university bell chimed, signaling that it was half past 2, I gently shut the door and began.

Middlebrook discussed how he moved people of color around in the newsroom, saying it could get touchy. “Sometimes your folks are ready, and sometimes they’re not,” he said. “The question that falls on us, the managers, is do I take the chance now with this person, or do I try to roam this person along somewhere else? The other half of that too is, if the person realizes that they’re not ready yet, and is willing to follow.” Middlebrook said he normally pushes that person

to prepare for the position by providing mentorship and guidance. If the person is ready, they will transition to the next level, but he said this is not often the case.

Middlebrook said most of the papers he has worked at have not displayed any biased attitudes when assigning stories to black reporters. From his perspective, many black reporters wanted to cover black community events. “This is one of the things I try to teach all reporters,” he said. “You can do the black community; I don’t care what your beat is. You just got to work it into the system so you can do the majority stuff, but you can also do minority stuff at the same time. You’ll find a good reporter will probably, and should, try to find minority contacts in whatever beat he’s going in and use that as a jumping-off point to finding other stories in his beat.”

Middlebrook said if a topic is worth covering, the reporter should have developed a relationship with his editors so he could pitch a story. He said if the story is significant and relevant, the editor should encourage the reporter to cover it. Unfortunately, that does not always happen.

In a daily routine, when I walk in the office and an editor walks in the office – now we’re talking [about] a majority of those [who are] white- they walk in the office, they have no idea [about] what’s going on in the black community. What they see is what’s on their calendar, and that’s what the [reporter] is going to get assigned for that day.

Middlebrook noted that if a black editor is not present, it is the black reporter’s responsibility to bring the story to the editor’s attention. He said strong communicative relationships provide a steady exchange of topics and story ideas, which most newsrooms do not have. He explained that he worked at a destination paper (Newsday Media Group), where people were employed at three or four other media organizations before finally being relocated to “one of the good jobs.” He

said at that point, journalists are confident in their careers and understand their abilities. He said the staff is more experienced, thus demonstrating a greater amount of professionalism. He was able to work in an environment that allowed people to openly pitch stories and feel a sense of purpose, contrary to media organizations like the Centre Daily Times (CDT) or a small Gannett paper. “They don’t know what they’re doing half the time and they don’t know how to do it,” he said. “The reporters have to come up to the table, the editors have to go out and find out what’s going on, and that’s not always happening in the small markets.”

He said racial bias could be systematic in all media markets, regardless of size.

I worked with white editors who were horrible. They could care less about the black community. I also worked with some black editors who could care less about the black community. You have to weed through your individual situation and you work around it.

I worked around it as a reporter. I worked around it as editor. As an editor, you learn who your allies can be.

Middlebrook said if he has done his job correctly, he can enter meetings and remain silent because the editors he has worked with, or editors who have developed relationships with other minorities, can examine a story in the black community, recognize the issue, and bring it up in the meeting themselves. He said this has happened often with senior editors, who pushed for additional coverage of their communities.

Middlebrook said he has personally dealt with these challenges. He has addressed complaints from the black community about lack of coverage. He said he would meet with community leaders and tell them upfront, “we’re not always going to see eye-to-eye. There are going to be times where you’re going to want to just kill me or whatever. I understand this, but even though we have our differences of opinion on certain subjects, we are still in this together.”

He said if the community accepts this statement, media outlets have a good working relationship, but it depends on the community that a reporter is covering. For example, the black community in Detroit is distinct from the black community in Long Island or Minneapolis. “The black community in Minneapolis was dying for coverage and we had really good relationships. Whereas the black community in Detroit demanded [that] ‘every time you do a story it should be about us,’ you had those different dynamics,” he said. Middlebrook said there was never a defined black community in Minneapolis or Long Island because they were spread out geographically. Meanwhile, Detroit had a majority-African American population, with each subgroup carrying a separate agenda. “You have to adjust in each market how you cover that market,” he said.

Middlebrook said the black community will never be satisfied with how much news coverage they receive. “I always say to them, ‘we’re doing more than you think we are, you just don’t see it until it’s the bad story.’ On the other half of that, we could always do better,” he acknowledged. “The coverage should reflect the community. If I have an 80 percent minority community, we should be doing a better job.” He also highlighted that a similar situation can occur where his organization, The Detroit News, can have an ample amount of coverage on the black community, but not the Arab population, which is also a large demographic there. He said the Arab community could make the same argument. One of the solutions Middlebrook suggested is The Detroit News expanding its reporting and coverage area. “Is that being done today, I don’t think so,” he said. “If you don’t have an old head like myself in the newsroom now, the young folks have no clue about the idea with coverage.” Middlebrook said covering the fault line is not taking place in the newsroom. The fault line means covering all demographics of the community (race, gender, age, etc.).



Referencing the fault line, I brought up the incident where people criticized The Daily Collegian's choice of photo of police officers arresting a black transgender student during a riot. The picture was unrelated to the article, which discussed the 2017 Clery Act, a crime report academic institutions have to file if they engage in federal aid programs. Black student organizations accused The Collegian of promoting racial stereotypes and the editor-in-chief released an apology statement the following day. I asked Middlebrook what steps could have prevented this situation from happening. He had this to say:

In every newsroom, we should be bringing folks in to talk to them about what stories are out there. I mean that's part of community relations. I urge all my community folks to do this, don't wait for the paper to call you in, you call the paper and say, 'we want to come in and talk to you. We want to catch up. We want to talk about issues in our community. Middlebrook said this form of reverse-community outreach should happen in newsrooms and editorial boards. He said sometimes communities actively engage with the media and other times, depending on the market, they do not. He said newspapers should also contact community organizations and take time to meet them. He said at the same time, the community has to understand that news organizations are still evolving and that there is a complete turnover of staff and management every 10 years.

As newsrooms are shrinking, Middlebrook said copyeditors are disappearing. "In the old days, you had a copy desk. After the editor had done his thing, copy editors would look at it and [go] 'oh no, no, no, no, we can't say this. They would try [to] stop it.' We lost that desk." He said the editing process now strictly goes from the reporter, to first read, to publication. "All the safeguards that used to be there are gone," Middlebrook said. "Those safeguards were good because the copydesk would generally contain three or four really old reporters who just didn't

want to go in the streets anymore. They knew all the tricks of the trade.” He said these editors were able to identify problems based on sensitivity training and experience; these gatekeepers are gone because there is no place for them. Middlebrook emphasized incidents similar to The Collegian’s will occur more in the newsroom unless veteran reporters do a better job at training recruits.

Middlebrook worried about university newspapers, saying that even when he was in school, student media outlets were social clubs that were not always inclusive towards people of color.

People of color are not willing to fight the battles that they fought back in the ‘60s. If the students of color don’t get involved in these activities, then you get what you pay for. The fact that I go over there and I don’t see any people of color on the staff, now I can blame it on The Collegian, but I also can blame it on the students. You can’t call it if you’re not in it.

Middlebrook said black journalists have to take accountability for refusing to participate in student media. Although it can be an arduous task, he said it is important for black students to encourage their peers to join, which is part of the team-building dynamic. He stressed that black students should not put themselves in a box, or else they will never advance in the professional world. “I broke a lot of [racial barriers] 30 years ago when there were no black students on the campus paper and got involved,” he said.

Middlebrook vividly recalled an experience he had as a staff writer for the Minneapolis Star. He was driving through the suburbs with a white photographer in search of a story.

A cop pulls up behind us [and said] ‘what are ya’ll doing?’ My photographer is crazy because he can’t understand why this cop is pulling us over. I’m like ‘dude, it’s a DWB

issue, I'm driving while black in a very white neighborhood. I recognized it right away.

My photographer who's never seen this type of thing before can't believe it so he's on a rampage for three or four days because we almost got arrested.

Middlebrook said he faced several forms of workplace discrimination as well. "Sometimes you'll say things that people will just ignore. I had to deal with that a lot, people just don't listen to you, or people will try to take responsibility for your work, I've dealt with that," he said. "You get the worst shifts, I had a black editor do that to me, [he] put me on the weekend shift and I would be the most experienced person on our team. I've gotten it from both. I've gotten it from white editors and black editors in that regard." Middlebrook said he once had a promotion taken away from him by another editor in an effort to promote one of his colleagues. "I had to suffer through that for a couple of years to get to where I was, but I have no regrets," he said.

Despite these challenges, Middlebrook emphasized that it is every black journalist's responsibility to provide representation in national newsrooms. "[This is] the job I'm not getting paid for, and that's to sensitize my newsroom and to represent my organization outside to the community," he said. "I have to do this because it's just part of the job of being a black person in this business." Middlebrook said he attempts to recruit more people of color, which might not happen due to economic reasons. He emphasized that when positions were open, he would make an effort to bring more black journalists in; however, they also had to have the right qualifications for the job. He said there is a limited pool of qualified black applicants, so it is also a matter of competing with rival news organizations for talent. When working for The Detroit News, Middlebrook said it was particularly challenging to attract new candidates because of the social stigmas surrounding the city of Detroit.

Middlebrook said there is not a newsroom in the country that reflects the community that they are in. “When we were in Detroit, about 20 percent of our staff [were] people of color in a city that’s 80 percent black.” He said Newsday was one of the better representatives, with 30 percent black staff representation. Meanwhile, at the Long Island newspaper, only 10 percent of its staff was African American. He said some national news organizations are dishonest about their African American staff representation, inflating their numbers by including secretaries and other non-newsroom personnel. He said lack of representation became a huge issue, prompting reporters to quit.

In terms of the recruitment and retention of African American reporters, Middlebrook said he is lucky to have higher numbers than other news organizations. “I don’t think there are any news organizations that can brag about their minority numbers,” he said. He mentioned that The Detroit News and Newsday specifically, have better comparatives of African American staff than media outlets across the country. He admitted that there are not enough black editors nationwide, which according to him, is an issue in the journalism industry.

A lot of the reporters don’t want to be editors. They’re afraid of it, it’s too much work. Most of the reporters, I hate to say this but, they’re all about themselves so the beat allows them to be out and about. Editing puts you behind the scenes, and not in the picture. Most reporters don’t like not being in the limelight. It’s very prominent in the African American community, if you talk to a lot of reporters, I would bet less than 10 percent of them want to be an editor.

Middlebrook admitted that being an editor, especially a black editor, is a daunting task. He noted that it is an editor’s responsibility to set the tone of a news organization. He said reporters may be upset because they did not get a promotion and verbally confront him about it.

He explained, however, that it was a bureaucratic decision and that he could not disclose the reasoning behind it to the employee. Middlebrook said he would often fight to save the jobs of people of color. "I've seen people do some really stupid stuff, and they should've been fired, but because I was in the room, I know that person's still working today," he said. Middlebrook said back when he worked at Newsday, there was a limited number of people editors could have on their staffs. In an effort to recruit people of color, Middlebrook created an over-hire system where he could convince an editor to employ someone who was overqualified. This individual would then wait for a staff member to retire so he or she could replace them. He said he would also send reporters to training programs and other activities in an effort to reward them.

Middlebrook said that he never displayed favoritism and dealt with his staff accordingly, regardless of race. "I would recommend special activities for white folks just as quick as I would recommend special activities for the black folks, but I'm going to always look for opportunities to advance my people. I'm going to also look for opportunities to advance the stories that my people are doing, that's what a good manager should do," he said. When he was working at Newsday, Middlebrook was hosting a training program for minority journalists. Due to his active recruitment of people of color and various forms of community outreach, people viewed him as a black community resource. He said this also occurred when he was the director of recruitment at The Detroit News.

Middlebrook warned that black editors cannot demonstrate too much support of the black community because it can be perceived as a bias. "There's a very fine line and each of us has to be able to tread that line," he said. "I've had editors that I've worried about because they were too pro-black community. They pushed everything and they let the white side of their job dwindle away. We all got a white side of our jobs. You kind of got to cover that piece of it too."

He said some people are pro-black all the time, while others manage to remain non-identifiable, which is a personal decision. He acknowledged that how this decision is received factors in as well. “I’m pretty sure there’s some reporters that would say, ‘oh he don’t care nothing about nobody,’ and there are other reporters that know that you’ve helped them and their careers. I’m pretty sure that every [black] editor you meet will have both those stories to tell.”

Middlebrook said some black editors are forced into a restricting role where people only confer with them on stories affecting the black community. “That can be a plus or a minus depending on the newsroom,” he said. Middlebrook cautions white editors that they should not put pressure on people of color to be the liaison for the black community. “There should be a shared responsibility between all the managers. That can be divisive,” he said. “We try to teach managers that’s not what [they] want, you don’t want a newsroom like that. You want everybody to be looking out for everybody. You want everybody to be aware of everybody else’s problems, and you want to be able to have a management team that can talk to each other through those kinds of problems.”

### **African Americans in the Newsroom**

This section analyzes the media’s relationship with African Americans through a national lens, using information and statistics from scholarly articles and journals to reinforce certain observations.

According to a lead essay from the print issue of the Columbia Journalism Review, which focuses on the media and race, American newsroom staffs look nothing like the demographics of the communities they cover (Cobb, 2018). The article notes that people from marginalized communities typically do not have agency over their own stories. Cobb (2018) wrote that “‘Diversity’ is often partnered with the word ‘inclusion’ in our racial vocabulary. Since the

conflicts of the 1960s, it has been increasingly apparent that our political, educational, and media institutions should not *appear* to be monochromatically white. But appearance is not the real problem. A democratic media is.” Among the 1960s conflicts that Cobb (2018) is referring to is the public unrest surrounding the Civil Rights Movement. President Lyndon B. Johnson formed the Kerner Commission, an advisory board that was meant to address a series of race riots taking place across the country.

The creation of the Kerner Commission implied that the predominantly-white media had failed in their role to cover the cause of the unrest. The commission called on the media to diversify, warning that “the press has too long basked in a white world, looking out of it, if at all, with white men’s eyes and a white perspective” (Glasser, Awad & Kim, 2009, p. 58). The commission emphasized that the American newsroom was vital to democratic society, encouraging news organizations to “begin the painful process of readjustment that will make the reality of integration ... in both their product and personnel” (Glasser, Awad & Kim, 2009, p. 58).

Unfortunately, 50 years later, ethnic minorities are still chronically underrepresented in the print and broadcast media. Statistics in 2017 show that “only 16.6% of journalists at daily newspapers were people of color; in the US population, more than 37% of people are non-white” (Cobb, 2018). A 2015 poll reveals that three-quarters of guests on Sunday daytime shows were white, while CNN correspondent Don Lemon is the “only person of color hosting a weeknight primetime show on the three biggest cable news networks” (Cobb, 2018). The American Society of News Editors (ASNE) also found that “25.5 percent of the news organizations reported having at least one minority journalist among their top three editors.” These statistics raise the question

of how many people are actually qualified to work in the media industry but have not had the opportunity to try (Cobb, 2018).

The lack of diversity has historical precedence. In 1978, “racial and ethnic minorities comprised less than four percent of the newsroom staff” (Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015, p. 399). The ASNE responded to these low numbers by mandating that journalism organizations in the United States recruit more ethnic minorities in an effort to diversify potential hires and coverage. In 1977, the ASNE appointed its first diversity committee and the following year they created a five-point mandate, stating that news organizations needed to be actively recruiting people of color for ethical reasons and profit. The mandate also advised ASNE to annually count minority employment and the type of positions held, increase the number of minorities in executive positions, encourage small papers to hire more ethnic minorities on their staffs, and urge newspapers to have an attainable goal of minority employment by 2000 (Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015).

The Accrediting Council on Education in Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) revamped journalism and mass communications programs in 1984 to cater more towards diversification (Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015). The late 1970s and 1980s promised significant structural change in the media industry, placing environmental pressure on journalism institutions. The ASNE started an annual census of minority staffing, adding minority retention rates by 2000. Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson (2015) wrote that

In 1994, an alliance formed between the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ) and the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), later joined by the Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA), the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA) and the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA);



the resulting coalition is now called UNITY Journalists for Diversity” (p. 401). UNITY journalists held their first annual “Time-out-for-Diversity” by the turn of the century. The week-long event is meant to raise awareness for diversity issues still plaguing the journalism community (p. 401).

ASNE insisted that national newsrooms must reflect the racial diversity of American society by 2025, warning that the press will experience eroding credibility if they do not adopt more open and inclusive journalism (Glasser, Awad & Kim, 2009).

ASME’s efforts to improve minority staffing were partially futile. From 2000 to 2010, the newsroom minority staffing remained at 12 percent, temporarily peaking at 13.7 percent before falling once again to around 12 percent (Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015). The superficial staffing and coverage of ethnic minorities appeared to be an internal issue as well as a cross-organizational one.

Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson (2015) found that over half of the 613 journalists they interviewed had no clear concept of what diversification meant in their organization and could not clearly define what diversification meant in relation to journalism (p. 403).

Many reporters defined diversity in journalism as demographically representative coverage, with editors giving priority to stories that are significant to communities of color. Reporters, on the other hand, placed more emphasis on demographic representation, deeming that incorporating diverse elements into a story was the editor’s role. This delegation of responsibilities caused reporters to concentrate less on impact issues that affect marginalized communities (Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015). Without a unified definition on diversity in journalism, the chances of enforcing effective mandates on it become very slim.

Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson (2015) note that during their research, interview subjects did not view diversity as an ethical imperative, focusing more on the three journalism principles of “balance, accuracy, and objectivity” (p. 404). Only a small percentage mentioned diversity in relation to journalism ethics. “Balance, accuracy, and objectivity” are viewed as role-defining objectives for professional reporters; however, journalists do not connect these principles to the coverage of marginalized communities (Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015).

In terms of relevance, a minority of journalists (21.9 percent) tended to separate their reporting roles from diversity, saying that diversity-related issues were topical and of little importance. Some labeled diversity as “advocacy journalism,” which to them suggested biased reporting (Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015). Meanwhile, other journalists did not even know how to diversify their content. A majority of journalists (78.1 percent) believed that diversity is important, but cannot always be implemented in their work, with only a small percentage saying that it requires personal action, and the remaining percentage saying that it is the editor’s responsibility to promote more diversity and inclusion (Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015).

Newsroom staff who wanted to create a stronger and more diverse workplace lacked the adequate resources to do so, resulting in ineffective change. Many reporters said that

Editor-input was often the only resource provided for “ensuring the representative portrayal of underrepresented groups.” This is a resource problem for two reasons. First, close to half of all editors (45.1 percent) agreed that they found it “problematic” to do so, and felt unable to provide meaningful help. Second, as previously mentioned, more than

half (56.5 percent) saw diversity as irrelevant to their editorial work or as limited to monitoring overt bigotry (Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015, p. 407).

The absence of organizational resources has prompted journalists to independently seek diversity trainings, workshops and seminars at their own expense. According to Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson (2015), the lack of developmental funding, material and personnel support has “entrenched anti-diversity attitudes to contribute to bias, hostility, or other negative dynamics in the newsroom environment experienced by reporters working on stories with diversity issues” (p. 407). This is evident in the news coverage of underrepresented communities, especially communities of color. In Don Heider’s *White News*, he defined incognizant racism as everyday racism applied to newsrooms. There is a racial hierarchy that prioritizes white voices and spaces while relegating people of color to festival and crime contexts (Dixon, 2003). Heider suggests that “it is the result of years of training and practice, of decades of cultural orientation, and of a well-documented history of systemic and institutionalized neglect” (Dixon, 2003, p. 218). News organizations failed to accurately cover African Americans primarily due to ignorance.

For instance, after unarmed black teenager Michael Brown was gunned down by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, an image of Brown throwing gang signs began circulating online. In response, the black community devised the hashtag, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, posting dual photos of themselves

...one playing on stereotypes, the other capturing more positive depictions—underscoring the message: Which photo would the media use if I were gunned down? The social media campaign turned a critique of the mainstream media’s portrayal of African- Americans into a viral lesson about racial stereotypes” (Smith-Richardson, 2015, p. 27).

African Americans are a diverse group within themselves. They are medical professionals, lawyers, scientists, advocates, parents, and even the former president and first lady of the United States. The media, however, places black people in one-dimensional compartments. “Whether by omission or commission, news coverage frequently reinforces stereotypes” (Smith-Richardson, 2015, p. 27). Coverage of the black community mainly consists of poverty, gang violence and crime, exacerbating color lines and once again depicting African Americans in a negative light. According to Smith-Richardson (2015), “in Pittsburgh between March 1 and April 30, 2011, 73 percent of broadcast stories featuring black men were about sports or crime, according to the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, which reviewed nearly 5,000 print and broadcast stories” (p. 28).

African Americans are overrepresented in criminal roles, with coverage of African Americans breaking the law heavily influencing viewers notions regarding social policy (Dixon, 2003). Intergroup comparisons involved comparing the depictions of African Americans to Whites. Each group was relegated to a certain role: perpetrator, victim and officer. Dixon, Azocar and Casas (2003) show that blacks have higher chances of being photographed in the grip of a restraining police officer than their white counterparts.

Inter-role comparisons involve comparing the number of positive portrayals within a racial or culture group to the number of negative ones within that same community. In the criminality context, Dixon, Azocar and Casas (2003) analyze the number of victims (positive) within an African American group, to the number of African American perpetrators (negative). After conducting a 14-week content analysis for three stations in Philadelphia, it was discovered that “African Americans were more likely to be shown as perpetrators (72 percent), than as victims (47 percent) in the news” (Dixon, Azocar & Casas, 2003, p. 504). Inter-reality

comparisons focus on the accuracy of media representations. Dixon, Azocar and Casas (2003) say it may be the case African American perpetrators might be more likely to commit a crime compared to whites based on what the context of that crime is.

The mainstream media ignores stories that portray African Americans in a positive manner. For example, a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published in 2013, indicated that black fathers were as present in their children's lives as fathers from other ethnic groups. This study garnered minimal coverage because it would have debunked the perception that black men are absentee parents (Smith-Richardson, 2015). According to Glasser, Award and Kim (2009).

In an effort to tell their own narratives, black people devised their own forms of alternative media, which have existed for decades. Black-owned media outlets have provided a more holistic view of the black community. Through the black press, black people managed to establish a sense of identity, and give their perspectives on issues that directly affected them. Some of the pioneers for black journalism include Ida Wells, Langston Hughes, W.E.B Du Bois, and Robert Abbott (Kovarik, 2018). Black journalists discussed a range of topics, including assassinations of black leaders, integration in the South, African diaspora, the refusal of black men to enlist in the U.S. military, etc. There was a commercialized black press and more radicalized black press, "but censorship and white backlash undermined this emerging unanimity, leaving both wings of the African American press struggling to survive as they faced the same rising costs and media competition that diminished the white press in the 1960s and 1970s" (Kovarik, 2018, p. 381).

Black-owned media still serves to inform readers about topics such as cultural identity, race relations, and political activism. Today's black press includes The Root and Griots

Republic. The Root is an Afrocentric progressive online magazine that launched in 2008 by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Donald E. Graham (The Root, 2019). Griot Republic is a monthly digital publication that offers original and curated content about black culture and travel (Griots Republic, 2019).

African Americans created their own spaces to engage in thoughtful political, social and cultural expression. They operated outside of an exclusive mainstream market by embarking upon their own inclusion efforts. In the *Journal of Communications*, Glasser, Awad, and Kim (2009) discuss a multiculturalist view of justice and its two distinct views on the principle of inclusion, noting that there is a strong link between a group's social position and its ability to assert its interests, "such that all groups share an aversion to the conditions that silence or weaken any group's voice" (p. 61). This is evident in the mainstream media, which preserves the status quo, essentializes culture, and trivializes diversity (Glasser, Awad & Kim, 2009). Inclusion from a multiculturalist perspective also requires the assertion of interests to take into account the interests of other social groups.

[There has to be] a recognition of the relationship between the multiplicity of social perspectives in society and the basic social structures that position many people in similar ways whether they like it or not. Careful to avoid the essentialist logic that reduces cultural groups to a set of common attributes that all their members share and that constitute the identities of those members (Glasser, Awad & Kim, 2009, p. 62).

Glasser, Awad, and Kim (2009) focus on the "experience, history, and social knowledge" that "provide a general orientation on political issues" (p. 62) Black-owned publications have created their own counter public sphere in response to the diversity issue, catering to black audiences.

These niche media outlets symbolize a fracturing of the market to better serve underrepresented groups.

## **Conclusion**

After conducting my focus group, as well as compiling interviews from multiple sources in the College of Communications, The Underground and The Daily Collegian, I would conclude that the staffing and coverage of African Americans in student media has experienced gradual and incremental change since the filming of “The Paper” in 2004-05.

Under new leadership, The Collegian is slowly abandoning its history of racial tensions with the African American community. Editor-in-Chief Kelly Powers fully acknowledged and took responsibility for the Collegian’s tumultuous past, and seeks to diversify the publication’s staff and coverage. She had overarching goals to revamp The Collegian’s organizational structure and form connections with black student organizations. She has enacted swift damage control when reporters include insensitive rhetoric, and required diversity trainings for all personnel. Powers seemed disappointed that people of color were still significantly underrepresented in The Collegian’s team of recruits, but effective change takes time. There is the issue of transferring leadership, which Powers will eventually have to do. Every leader’s style, vision and strategies are different. If Powers wants to ensure that efforts towards diversity and inclusion continue to be made, she needs to pass her knowledge and aspirations down to her successor.

The Collegian’s coverage has also improved. The quality of reporting is better, with the student-run publication advancing the narratives of black students more often. Collegian staff also apply journalistic integrity when reporting on the black community, refraining from jumping



to conclusions before all details are released. If the Collegian continues to actively mobilize its resources towards strengthening its relationships with marginalized communities, then it can rebrand itself as an inclusive space that advocates for telling the stories of underrepresented groups.

The Underground initially served as a response to The Daily Collegian, saying that their goal was to provide a platform for multicultural groups. This mission statement exclusively targeted students of color, causing the people of color community to have high expectations for them. The Underground depicted themselves more as a form of alternative media that catered to niche audiences than a publication that adhered to the status quo. Underground staff originally sought support from the black community and is now one of the top three student-media publications at Penn State; however, they have attempted to expand and include more demographics, leading the black community to feel abandoned.

Underground Editor-in-Chief Stephanie Keyaka said that as an African American woman in a high position of power, she felt additional scrutiny and pressure to cover the black community, which is to some extent, unfair. It is understandable that The Underground wants to extend their coverage to diverse areas. They are aware that a larger audience warrants growth and opportunity. The black community cannot expect The Underground to remain stagnant, especially when they do not have the university funding and resources like The Collegian. In order to stay financially stable, The Underground must rely on advertising and increased sponsorship only occurs when there is a sizeable audience reading your content every day. Only five percent of students at Penn State are black. Even if all of those students were to consistently gravitate towards The Underground's website, it is not a substantial enough group to keep the

news organization in business. They have to tap into the majority-white student population at Penn State.

The Underground, however, must be transparent about the need to grow their consumer base and revise their mission statement. The Underground reaps the benefits of being called an advocate for communities of color, but its coverage calls that label into question. If The Underground does not want to change its mission statement, then it should cover events through an angle that directly affects communities of color. On a final note, just because The Underground is no longer exclusively catering to people of color does not mean that it can provide inadequate and lackluster coverage. The Underground's coverage of the Osagie incident was insufficient. Even though they have limited resources, this topic directly correlates with their mission statement, meaning that there should have been high-quality reporting.

One of the major themes I noticed throughout this paper is representation. All of the people I interviewed stressed the importance of representation, with some saying that they purposely applied for positions in predominantly white organizations in order to provide minority input. Representation matters. Having people from diverse experiences, ethnic groups, and backgrounds can enrich coverage and provide unique perceptions on a topic that a reporter may have personally dealt with. Representation is imperative and must be achieved on both ends. News organizations must work on having representation on their staffs. They cannot question why they have difficulties recruiting more people of color if they are not actively traveling with a staff member who looks like them. It is also a black journalist's responsibility to transcend those spaces so that they can break institutional barriers, dismantle stereotypes, and exemplify to other black, aspiring reporters that they can join too. An effective way of decreasing predominantly white spaces is to provide more representation. The black community cannot complain about the

media failing to accurately portray them if they are not reaching out to engage in insightful discussions, forming advocacy and feedback groups, or extending representation.

Representation has to be an active concentrated effort. It may take time, but its benefits are immense. The landscape of media is changing and media outlets have to begin including diverse communities, not just because it is profitable but because it's the right thing to do. Media organizations cannot call themselves community papers if they are not actively reflecting or serving the entire community. Five percent of the population may not seem significant, but that five percent is still a part of the community, whether it's in terms of staffing or coverage.

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