



GETTING REAL ABOUT TALENT AND DIVERSITY

10 RECOMMENDATIONS

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Talk about innovation is all pervasive in journalism. But usually this term is used in the context of everything tech. Rarely do editors and media managers talk about or even invest in other kinds of innovation, some would call them the “soft” kinds: innovation in leadership and talent management for that matter. While lots of attention in digital transformation focuses on tools, much less is devoted to people – who have to master these tools after all. This is a mistake.

The talent challenge will be one of the next big challenges for the media industry. With declining revenues and battered business models perspectives for job seekers are worsening, but many opt out voluntarily for other reasons. Better working conditions and career opportunities at tech companies, a lack of role models, the stretch of resources in newsrooms accompanied by ever rising demands and last but not least attacks on journalists in the context of the “fake news debate” are not exactly contributing to making the profession attractive.

Journalism doesn't sell its story, Sven Gösmann, editor-in-chief of the *German Press Agency* said for the study on talent and diversity these recommendations are based upon¹. A survey among media leaders by the Reuters Institute for the

Study of Journalism taken in December 2018 revealed that roughly three quarters of them were worried about the attraction and retention of talent in their newsrooms and publishing houses. More than 60 percent were concerned about burnout within their existing staff².

At the same time editors worry about the low level of diversity within their teams. If newsrooms reflected a broader range of perspectives, media outlets could regain trust with audiences they lost and gain credibility and trust with those they have not reached before, the assumption goes. This is important for the role of journalism as a public good and a pillar of democracy. And it is essential at a time when publications increasingly rely on their audiences to pay for news in the digital sphere. The very survival of the industry is at stake.



¹ Alexandra Borhardt, Sabine Kieslich, Julia Lück, Tanjev Schultz, Felix Simon, '[Are Journalists Today's Coal Miners? The Struggle for Talent and Diversity in Modern Newsrooms. A Study of Germany, Sweden and the United Kingdom](#)', Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Johann Gutenberg Universität Mainz, Deutsche Telekom Stiftung, Juli 2019. The study contains several links and sources to other materials.

² Nic Newman, '[Journalism, Media and Technology Trends and Predictions 2019](#)', Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, January 2019

It is necessary for editorial teams to better reflect today's society. Caricaturing this, it would seem that what we have at the moment is a press dominated by white journalists producing 'mono-form' information mainly for a male readership. This is a finding that has emerged from the surveys conducted among our member organisations on diversity in editorial teams and content diversity. Strangely enough, there are parallels here. Our current media production, our current press companies, our current journalists no longer reflect the society they write about.

Ricardo Guitérrez
EFJ Secretary General

But when attracting talent is a challenge in the first place, attracting and retaining the right people is even harder. This holds particularly true for an industry that traditionally hasn't placed much emphasis on management skills. To the contrary, a certain disdain for the strategies and tools of professional human resource management has been prevalent in

newsrooms that have staffed most of their management positions with editors and reporters. These tend to be self-taught and many of them abhor any kind of "management speak". "There is almost an anti-management ethos in the media industry," says the Zurich-based media researcher and adviser Lucy Küng.

Concern about talent and diversity in the newsroom



Q9 Rate your level of concern about the following issues (showing code for concerned and very concerned)
Digital leaders survey, N=196

Nevertheless, the pressure is on for everyone and with rising dissatisfaction an appetite for strategies, tools and solutions is rising. So what can newsrooms do to tackle the talent and diversity challenge? Drawing on strategies, steps and thoughts from a variety of organisations, here are ten recommendations:

1 Commitment from the top is essential

As with any other kind of business challenge. If top leadership doesn't make a point of changing practices and culture and serves as a role model internally and in public appearances, nothing will happen. Talent and diversity strategies must not be delegated to the HR department or some "Diversity Editor" who most likely will be a "diverse" person herself. Core people in the newsroom need to be on board.

2 Cultural change is critical

Diversity candidates who make it all the way through the funnel and land a sought-after job tend to be those who are most capable of adjusting to prevalent norms and practices. But nothing is gained if diversity remains a pure box-ticking exercise. Leadership needs to make it clear that diversity of perspectives and thought are appreciated. They need to change communication channels and practices accordingly, for example by implementing reverse mentoring, encouraging small-scale workshops where participants dare to speak up, delegating and rotating responsibility. Studies show that with minorities a critical mass is needed for them to feel safe and have an impact on the dominant culture. Resistance to these efforts must not be tolerated, particularly when coming from informal leaders others look up to for cues about what's acceptable behaviour.

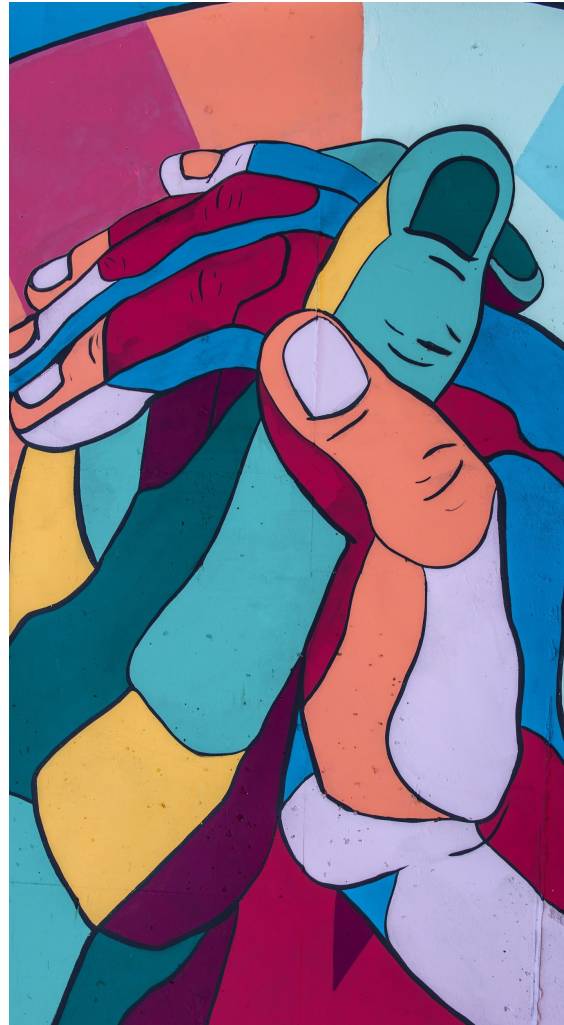


3

Metrics are key to change

What isn't measured, doesn't get done. To improve a situation you need to know what the status quo is, and you need a goal. It's hard to imagine doing this without numbers and timeframes attached. Admittedly, with quite a few aspects of diversity this is a bit tricky. Ticking the gender box is easy, but what about social background or even political affiliation? And then there is data protection. You can't require someone to tell you about their parents' occupation or sexual orientation, for example. Nevertheless, leaders should be able to provide for some statistics on the composition of their newsroom with respect to diversity. And diversity strategies need to be evaluated, of course. Gut feeling is not enough when assessing whether something has had an impact.

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4

Diversity needs to be managed and supported

Diversity candidates might need support others can live without, particularly when young and entering the industry. This could be language training, financial help for trainees from disadvantaged backgrounds or legal support when things get tough. Not everyone can rely on that network of parents' friends young people with a privileged upbringing fall back upon so often. This is where for example foundations that are thinking about investing in quality journalism can come in with financial help.

5

Recruitment strategies need to be professionalised

Instead of sifting through piles of applications for the best candidates who show up on their own, active efforts have to be made to attract talent from communities where a journalism career has not been on the list of young job seekers. A student of engineering, computer science or related fields might not even have thought about joining a media company. It is equally important to revamp selection processes and account for cultural or gender differences when interviewing candidates³.

6

Diverse career tracks help to attract diverse talent

Modern newsrooms have a need for very different kinds of talent, since many roles are not covered by the one-size-fits-all reporting education that used to be the standard entry into journalism. There are tech-, data- and product-focused roles, managerial roles and others that have to be filled beyond the traditional reporter and editor careers. Defining, developing and advertising these roles will attract candidates that might not have envisioned themselves as journalists before, for example when they have never excelled as writers.

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7

Revive career tracks for non-academics

Journalism used to be a profession for candidates from a variety of social backgrounds before it became an almost exclusively academic profession. Some perspectives have been lost on the way. With the number of jobs declining, increasingly it was only the candidates with a high-profile education who made the cut. A record of unpaid internships became an entrance requirement for many jobs. Consequently, today's newsrooms are more socially homogeneous than ever. This is detrimental to diversity. Certain tracks should be explicitly made available for non-academics, for example in the form of apprenticeships with opportunities for future advancement.

³ About opening up new channels for recruitment, also see: Carlett Spike, '[4 steps newsrooms are taking to boost diversity](#)', *Columbia Journalism Review*, February 22, 2017

8**Diversity needs to be looked at not only in numbers but also with regard to status**

It is not enough to proudly present a variety of faces and names on the homepage or in company publications. Diversity in leadership is essential. This also means that injustices like the gender wage gap need to be openly addressed. Gaps in income levels are an indicator for inequalities of opportunity.

9**Different aspects of diversity must not be played off against each other**

The research showed that most editors thought gender diversity had already been taken care of by demographics – a cohort of very talented women pouring out of universities – and that other aspects of diversity needed to be prioritised, in particular diversity of political views. But it is important to keep an eye on all kinds of groups. The assumption is that the diversity of gender, ethnicity, social background, religion and rural vs. urban background will result in a diversity of political views if followed through in earnest effort.

10**Diversity of content has to be monitored separately**

The assumption is that diversity of staff automatically results in diversity of content. This is likely but not a given. Norms to conform to an unwritten industry consensus on how things are done are hard to overcome at times. This is why content should be monitored, for example with regard to male/female sources⁴. There are software tools to measure output, and there is an audience research. Diversity doesn't help to better connect with audiences if the journalism stays the same.



⁴ A model project to increase the number of female sources and contributors is the BBC's [50:50 Project](#). It was a grassroots project that started out as an internal, non-mandatory competition and evolved into an international effort.



«Many companies have taken a variety of steps toward a better mix of staff and subsequently perspectives in their newsrooms»

Attracting and retaining diverse talent for newsrooms is a challenge, and there is no model media organisation that has tackled it perfectly. Lots of efforts have been confined to the US-context; as a culturally heterogeneous country tackling diversity in newsrooms and content has enjoyed higher priority there than in more homogenous cultures⁵. In Europe the BBC is very advanced in setting targets and following up on metrics has many “diverse” employees to show for. Despite all this a controversy in September 2019 surrounding star news anchor Naga Munchetty demonstrated that there was still a long way to go to achieve real cultural change⁶. But many companies have taken a variety of steps toward a better mix of staff and subsequently perspectives in their newsrooms. This is important, because talent is the key to quality journalism. If there is no quality journalism, there will be no trust. And without trust, there will be no business model for journalism.

⁵ A good resource about American efforts and projects is [Journalists' Toolbox, Diversity Links](#), assembled at San Francisco State University.

⁶ Naga Munchetty was reprimanded for indicating on screen that she felt offended by some comments by Donald Trump. A subsequent, widely publicised campaign in favour of the anchor made BBC Director General Tony Hall revoke the verdict. Jim Waterson, “[BBC staff challenges managers over racism in Naga Munchetty row](#)”, *The Guardian*, 3rd October 2019

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Alexandra Borchardt is an experienced journalist, keynote speaker and media advisor. She is a consultant for WAN-IFRA and a Senior Research Associate at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford. As their Director of Leadership Programmes she developed and led on courses for senior journalists and media managers. Prior to this she was managing editor of *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), Germany's leading quality daily.

Alexandra teaches "Leadership and Strategy in the 21st Century" at TU Munich, gives lectures and keynotes on digitisation and the media and regularly publishes commentaries and essays, for example with *Project Syndicate*, *European Journalism Observatory* and *ada*, a German magazine for digital life. She is the author of *Mensch 4.0 – Frei bleiben in einer digitalen Welt* (*Freedom in a digital world*), Guetersloher Verlagshaus/Random House, 2018. She serves as vice chair on the Council of Europe Committee of Experts on Quality Journalism in the Digital Age.



At SZ she held several functions in the politics and business sections. She was also the founding editor of *Süddeutsche's* 'Plan W', an award-winning quarterly magazine for women and business. In 2015 she published *Das Internet zwischen Diktatur und Anarchie: Zehn Thesen zur Demokratisierung der digitalen Welt* (*The Internet between Dictatorship and Anarchy: Ten Assertions about Democracy in the Digital World*), Süddeutsche Zeitung Edition Streitschrift. Before joining SZ she worked for *Financial Times Deutschland* and *Deutsche Presse-Agentur*.

Alexandra holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from Tulane University, New Orleans (1994), and in 2013 completed a Programme for Management Development at IESE Business School, Barcelona.