



Our Hidden Biases Reflected in Our Work

Dori J. Maynard, 19 April 2008

In a recent post Lauren Williams editor of the black interest blog Stereohyped, wrote about the case of a black man accused of killing a white police officer in New Hampshire. In defense of the accused, Mahzarin Banaji, the creator of Implicit Association Test, a web-based test that measures an individual's inherent biases, testified that it would be virtually impossible for a black defendant to get a fair trial by an all white jury.

The movie Race to Execution makes a similar argument, noting that once the jury composition tips in favor of white men, the chances it will deliver a the death penalty verdict rises dramatically.

In this case, the Harvard Professor based her assertion on the results of the test she designed that measures your automatic reaction to images of diverse people and positive and negative words. According to her research, almost 90 percent of white people demonstrate a bias against African-Americans, <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>.

Many people, Banaji said, are not even aware they harbor these negative perceptions. "Are those people (who participate in the studies) bad? "No. . . . These names before us (in the tests) or these faces before us are going to pull from our gut thinking that's biased," she said, according to the Concord Monitor account of her testimony.

While Banaji was testifying in a death penalty case, it obviously made me think about journalism.

Only days before Williams wrote about Banaji's testimony, she and other black bloggers had taken exception to what they considered the disparity of treatment given to Sen. Barak Obama and Sen. John McCain at the combined newspaper editors and publishers convention.

"At the American Society of Newspaper Editors annual meeting yesterday, moderators Ron Fournier and Liz Sidoti, of the Associated Press, offered McCain a selection of sweets, as well as coffee with cream and sugar. Oh, and a standing ovation. From a room full of reporters. Guess who didn't receive similar treatment?" Williams wrote in her daily blog, <http://www.stereohyped.com>.

In fairness, each of the three presidential candidates spoke at the conference and the setting for each was slightly different. It should also be noted that the mixed crowd included publishers and editors, and not everybody rose to their feet for McCain. However, to some, McCain was perceived to have received preferential treatment.

At that same conference, ASNE released the result of its annual census that measures the percentage of journalists of color working at the country's daily newspapers.

While this year the census showed a fractional uptick in the percentage of journalists of color, from 13.43 to 13.52 the actual number of people of color working in the industry dropped by almost 300.

Each year the release of the census reawakens the call for the nation's newspaper staffs to mirror the nation's population. To put that in perspective, people of color now account for 34 percent of the population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The U.S. census also tells us that the majority of people living in this country live in segregated neighborhoods, meaning that the media tends to define what we learn about each other. The problem with that is that content audits performed by the Maynard Institute and other organizations consistently show that people of color are overrepresented in stories about crime, entertainment and sports and underrepresented in stories about business, lifestyle and everyday life.

Banaji's work helps us understand that try as we might, we still cannot compensate for any latent biases we all most likely carry. Williams reminds us that our audience is watching closely.

<http://www.pbs.org/idealab/2008/04/our-hidden-biases-are-reflecte.html>