

Barbara Reynolds: I was sent to cover a story on the West Side of Chicago and it was about a community protest and so I went and I phoned in my story to my editor, I came back that evening and I saw the headline saying, Urban gorillas storming the ghetto, the suburbs to see who they kill. I said what, that's interesting, and it had a double by-line so when I saw my partner I said, Wow, that was some story. Where'd you get all those facts? He said, Barbara, I thought you gave them those facts. And so I found out that these facts, which were not facts at all, but rumor, came from a poker playing buddy of one of the editors who just phoned it in and this wandered into my story and you can imagine how this information inflamed the community, and no one was ever held accountable.

So now, some 35 years later, I'm a Commissioner on the Katrina Truth and Justice Commission. And I go across the country and I'm holding hearings with other Commissioners and find out that many of the reports of rape, shootings, and violence just didn't happen, just didn't happen. And this information slowed down the response to disaster by creating fear in the minds of many who would have been there if they had not read this kind, of and heard this kind of, material.

It tarnished the image of some of the victims. It was directly for responsible for the National Guard being issued shoot-to-kill kind of orders. You know, there's one thing when you ignore people, but there's quite another when you do harm. And I do think that the media should have some type of Hippocratic Oath to at least do no harm. When you see people like Abado D'Alo shot down by police bullets and another young man killed on his, supposed to be going to his wedding, but they had to bury him. You're talking about racial profiling and where does the racial profiling come? From these continuous negative stereotypes fed by the American media.

I've been in journalism for 30 years and I have been at meetings where I saw something totally different. For example, I was at a meeting where people from the Federal Government came in and they gave a report about young black men who were saying no to drugs and were actually being models of young people being able to stop the use of drugs and I was in that meeting and I said, Wow, this is a wonderful story. African-American men who were declining their drug use, more so than even white guys their age, came out of the meeting, looked in the paper the next day and there was no story, no story. This was not news because it did not reinforce the stereotype found in American media of the black man as a gangster and a thug.

This conference is so good, we've talked about so many of the outer issues, but I should say something about the people who are the journalists in the newsrooms. There was a study, not too long ago, by the National Association of Black Journalists and this study said that journalists, news people in the media are so afraid to even talk about race, to even talk about blacks, and to talk about poverty that they don't even bring it up. The intimidation rate is so high that some of the journalists are afraid to even talk about it because they know that talking on these subjects will harm their career. So, you know, I don't -- people have talked about the extreme pressure, the devoicing was talked about -- I'm talking about the dehumanization and the depersonalization of some in the media themselves. The newsrooms, some of them are very tense, very hostile, there is pressure to have the view of the mainstream corporate media.

Since I've been in journalism, many of my colleagues - - I'm so glad to see Ellis Cose still here-- have left. Still here and still great. But, you know, I must also say that three of my colleagues -- and Ellis you might remember some of them -- did commit suicide. They were colleagues of mine and three did commit suicide. And I never will forget in the Chicago Tribune a young woman was so hurt by the constant browbeating to step into the newsroom and to think, there's a certain way that you're supposed to think, and she was actually going to jump out the window of the Chicago Tribune. And I said to her, I said, Look, you have to have a mind to lose one. Don't let the thinking get you down. And she went on to become quite a noticeable and recognizable executive in corporate America. But the pressure is so great to fit in.

We do live in two different realities and often as communicators, those of us to try to bring another reality in the other world, we are considered the enemy and resented.

Just a few statistics right quick. There was a time that American Society of Newspaper Editors set a goal to bring minorities as a whole into the newsrooms and represent the members of the country at large, but in 2000 the editors just said, Oh, never mind, we just can't do it.

Today newsrooms are now 11.5 percent persons of color and 5.4 percent black, while the country is 26 percent persons of color and 14 percent black. Of course, there's progress. In 1978 persons of color were only 3.9 percent of the total in America's newsrooms. In the broadcast media only three percent of all broadcast stations are owned by people of color, 5.2 percent of the general managers of local broadcast stations are people of color, only 5.2 percent. And reports are that minority -- I hate that word minority - - employees virtually disappeared from radio and those remaining work solely on minority radio.

But to wrap up, there are bright spots in journalism. I'm even proud to even share a life with Oprah Winfrey who has brought so much change to journalism to show that, you know, we talk about the negativism. Oprah has gone to New Orleans and built new villages with her Angel Network. I'm glad to share a life with someone like her. What can we do?

I was fortunate enough to work with Al Newharth who started USA Today and we went around the country starting the newspaper and he said that he believe that all people had value and all people had worth and he said he wanted to bring more people of color and women into USA Today. And some of the people said, We just don't know any, we just don't know anybody, we just can't, we just know ourselves , you know, and he said, Okay, well, when you begin to find people it will be reflected in your paycheck , and sooner or later it looked like, you know, people of color, minorities, we were all there.

So, you know, it can happen, there's a new program with Scripts Howard at Hampden University. They've invested \$10 million into a new facility so I do believe that it can happen, but I do say that at this point in American journalism, there is shame, it's a scandal that American journalism is not only omitting the issues of poverty and race, but doing harm. At least, for the very least, they should do no harm.