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UNITY: Embracing Newsroom Diversity cannot Continue to be a Slow Process

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Tomorrow, the American Society of Newspaper Editors (ASNE) will issue its annual survey of journalists of color at the nation's newspapers. Once again, the numbers will show that newspapers have fallen woefully short of ASNE's 29-year-old goal of reaching racial parity in newsrooms.

How do we know? Did we receive an embargoed copy of the report? Are we capable of publishing an early edition press release that can predict the future?

The answer is neither. Common sense dictates that unless there has been a seismic change in the last year of which we were somehow unaware, newspaper newsrooms will have reached barely 43 percent parity with the nation's Asian American, black, Hispanic and Native American population. In 2006, only 13.87 percent of the newsroom workforce was made up of journalists of color, compared to 13.42 percent the year before and 12.9 percent in 2004. The figures represent an increase of about 0.5 percent every year for the past five years in an America that is 32.8 percent of color and rising.

"At this rate of increase," UNITY Journalists of Color Inc. said in a statement last year, "it will take another 40 years before newsrooms reach parity with the current U.S. population. But in another 40 years, the U.S. Census Bureau projects that people of color will no longer be just a third of the population, they will make up about half the people in the country." Allowing for even an earth-shaking increase of 1 percent in the last year, there is little reason to amend that statement and no hope that ASNE's goal, first set in 1978 for parity by the year 2000, then postponed to 2025, will be achievable.

For its part, UNITY and its member organizations stand ready to help, offering resources and assistance for any news organization or executive seeking to train, recruit, retain and promote journalists of color. We set a particular challenge of seeing journalists of color represented in at least 15 percent of newsroom supervisory positions in the coming year and are willing to assist any newspaper or editor serious about achieving that.

Perhaps we are wrong. Perhaps we will wake up tomorrow morning to find that newspapers did make tremendous strides to reach ASNE's initial parity goal, and that the cynicism of a before-the-fact press release is unwarranted.

And that Thomas Dewey defeated Harry S. Truman for president in 1948.