

More Troubles for Diversity at WNYC

THREE YEARS AGO, when the American workplace at long last began to clean house, sweeping away the vestiges of “Mad Men” habits, WNYC, the most popular public radio station in the country, pushed three of its leading on-air personalities into the dust heap where so many bad men were piling up. A long period of turmoil and self-reflection followed, one that staff members referred to internally as the Troubles (“troubles with a capital T” as one producer put it to me, borrowing the phrase from the violent conflicts in Northern Ireland).

How an institution so central to the identity of progressive New Yorkers had allowed harassment, predation and benighted attitudes to fester for so long had become an ongoing and vexing question. The cleaning that got underway at the end of 2017 eventually led to a renovation that installed new leadership, and with it the hope that the voices of the staff would be elevated.

This chapter began with a sense of promise. Last year, New York Public Radio, WNYC’s parent organization, named a new chief executive, Goli Sheikholeslami, a woman and Iranian immigrant who came via Chicago public radio and Condé Nast. At the same time, Andrew Golis, a white man who arrived via Harvard and Vox Media, was made chief content officer.

In the new spirit of inclusiveness, they asked the staff, last fall, who should lead WNYC’s daily news coverage. There were listening sessions that had come after all the committees and task forces and studies during the Troubles.

The response was unambiguous: reporters and producers sought a person of color, someone who deeply understood New York and who had experience in public radio. So it was with great consternation that the staff greeted the news, delivered on June 11, when the rest of the world would hear it as well — and 45 minutes or so before they met their new boss on Zoom — that the editor in chief of WNYC was going to be a white woman who lived in California, grew up in Kansas and was not from the world of audio.

“We were blindsided,” Richard Yeh, a supervising senior producer, told me, “really befuddled by the fact that our leaders chose someone who didn’t meet any of our qualifications.”

The anointed, Audrey Cooper, has had a distinguished career in print journalism, having become the first woman editor of The San Francisco Chronicle five years ago, when she was still in her 30s. But Ms. Cooper’s radio experience is notably tenuous. In her first memo to the WNYC staff, she explained that she had worked the phones for pledge drives at her local public radio station in college and enjoyed “Car Talk.” She credited public radio with introducing her to “the awesome power of fact-based storytelling to confront wrongdoing.”

Her appointment quickly set off a second revolution built on the laments that were never sufficiently addressed during the first. In a letter delivered to top management and the board of trustees on Wednesday, which has since amassed more than 145 signatures — including those of high-profile figures like Brian Lehrer — staff members expressed a sense of betrayal.

They had listened to rhetoric about the need for greater diversity for years. “Some of us for decades,” the letter stated.

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Audrey Cooper, WNYC’s new editor in chief, doesn’t match the most essential criteria that reporters and producers, in consultations with management, had sought in their next boss.

Now the signers were demanding more than the incremental change they had witnessed for so long — an expansion of the team of reporters and producers to reflect the city WNYC serves, one that has not had a racially monolithic population in more than a century. The letter did not call for WNYC to rescind the offer to Ms. Cooper, but it seems clear the staff hopes she takes the hint.

After the talk-show hosts John Hockenberry and Leonard Lopate left amid accusations of sexual misconduct, WNYC replaced them with Tanzina Vega and Alison Stewart, both women of color. But

The staff is feeling betrayed by the public radio station’s choice of a new editor in chief.

newsroom leadership remains almost uniformly white and most reporters are white. Only one person of color currently has direct reports; across the station’s content division, which includes its podcasts and cultural programming, three do. There are 157 staff members on the content side, and 15 of them are Black. The staff specifically demanded two Black reporters and two Black producers to be hired within 100 days. During that time frame, the staff also asked that a concrete plan be developed to retain Black staff members.

Part of what has also left so many at WNYC upset is the corporate, inorganic nature of the search that resulted in Ms. Cooper’s appointment. It was led by an outside consultant, a Harvard M.B.A. and headhunter — the station’s diversity and inclusion officer was not brought into the process. Too often, media and cultural organizations insecure about their own management abilities default to handling

things the way the protocols would require at Procter & Gamble or Citibank, with little consideration to how alienating that can be to a creative, passionate and politically minded work force.

Ms. Sheikholeslami, who is well liked, repeatedly said that she was committed to diversity and believed that the staff was unequivocally right in its current demands. But she defended the station’s selection of Ms. Cooper to me on the grounds that she was “an exceptional newsroom leader.” With the publisher of The Chronicle, Ms. Sheikholeslami said, “she did an amazing job of taking a newspaper that almost was not going to exist and bringing it to where it is today.” And over and over she heard that Ms. Cooper was beloved by reporters.

WNYC — home to “Radiolab,” “Morning Edition,” “On the Media” — is an institution worshiped by a vast and incredibly knowledgeable audience, and it stands for a set of values that extend beyond the payment of lip service to principles of equality and fairness. If it cannot live up to those values in terms of its own operations, what is the hope for those companies and organizations speaking to the vast world beyond Brooklyn?

To those invested in the hope of profound social transformation that recent weeks have suggested is now possible, the tumbling of statues and the renaming of buildings at Princeton can begin to feel hollow if not even a progressive media company can adjust its power structure.

As Rebecca Carroll, a cultural critic at WNYC, put it in a note appended to the staff letter sent to management this week: “The WNYC site states that we are ‘America’s most listened-to public radio station’ — if this is in fact true, it’s unconscionable that our newsroom and the organization at large fails so miserably to reflect the racial makeup of America, but perhaps even more pointedly, that of New York City. In the year 2020.”

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