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Obama election drives diversity at outlets

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The historic 2008 presidential election, which resulted in the election of Sen. Barack Obama (D-IL) as the nation's first black president, has helped to accelerate the increase of diversity in the media.

“With Obama's campaign, [media outlets] had to bring in more African-American contributors, whether right or left,” says Gwendolyn Quinn, founder of the African-American Public Relations Collective. “It doesn't work if those always reporting the news and commenting on the news are not representative of the people making the news.”

Quinn praises CNN as a diver-sity leader.

“You have [anchor and host] Soledad O'Brien's great work with *Black in America* and more and more commentators from the African-American community,” she says. “But, I don't expect to see any breakthrough [anchor on] new, major shows... of color.”

Coinciding with the first years of the Obama presidency, Manny Ruiz, president of Hispanic PR Wire, expects the results of the 2010 US Census to buoy the demand for diversity, both in newsrooms and at PR agencies.

“Revised projections already show that even the highest population projections of two years ago for Latinos were too low,” he says.

However, Ruiz adds that while there are more black journalists on TV, Hispanics are often the subjects of negative reports.

“I consume a lot of news from many sources... and I can tell you there is clearly a healthy uptick of African-American voices appearing on the TV networks,” he says. Ruiz adds that CNN has been a prominent example of diversity, even though it also broadcasts *The Lou Dobbs Show*, which has been accused of fanning anti-immigration tensions.

“[CNN has] added many [diverse] faces to their news coverage. Even Fox News is jumping on the

bandwagon,” he says. “[Yet], during an incredibly active news year, with the exception of CNN's Rick Sanchez and maybe one or two others, you rarely see Hispanics on TV or radio.”

When considering the influence of women in media, viewers shouldn't confuse progress with the realization of equal air-time, warns Jennifer Pozner, executive director of Women in Media & News.

“We are still a long way from proportional representation,” she says.

Pozner points to political commentator Rachel Maddow, who turned corporate heads at MSNBC this year while guest-hosting *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*. The stint propelled her to her own program, *The Rachel Maddow Show*, which replaced Dan Abrams' *Verdict* in August. The change doubled MSNBC's ratings during its 9pm slot.

“Rachel Maddow has a show, which is great, but that's still only one show – only one progressive, or at least only one calling herself progressive,” she says. “One person does not symbolize equality.”

Still, Pozner recognizes, and even applauds, the moderate progress – if anything because it forces media owners to re-evaluate their companies' diversity from the top down.

“I am not in the prediction business,” she says. “But if I had to guess, my guess is we will see a little uptick or leveling off, but not a decline in people of color and women being asked to comment on news.”

The increasingly diverse journalism workforce and a broader range of coverage will result in a dramatic increase in demand for multicultural PR, Ruiz says. Agencies without strong multicultural outreach programs will have a difficult time competing for national and regional accounts, especially for programs focusing on “the big five diverse states of New York, California, Texas, Florida, and Illinois,” he adds.