

Double trouble

DAMIEN GAYLE is looking for a journalism career, but he's got to break the colour bar. He is smart and ambitious, but he's black, from a single parent family. Lacking qualifications the only option he can see is unpaid work experience. And that he can't afford to do

IN 2006, after graduating from university, I made the noble decision to become a journalist. I faced just two problems: I'm poor and I'm black.

The press has an uneasy relationship with minority groups. Newspapers are often guilty of casual but shocking racism. Even when not openly racist the national press often tacitly reproduces racist stereotypes: the hooded black youth; the fundamentalist imam; the downtrodden Asian woman. All this fuels a perception among minority communities that the national press is "by white people, for white people".

This perception is not far off the mark. Far more than the BBC, the British national press is "hideously white". According to the NUJ, fewer than 2 per cent of journalists on national newspapers are black. The situation is even worse at senior levels; a recent article in the Guardian's Media supplement could identify just two black section editors in the whole national press.

Naïve and hopeful, still I dreamed of working as a journalist. I had a rude awakening. It seemed I wasn't the only kid who wanted to write the news.

Entry to journalism is highly competitive. Junior reporter jobs ask that candidates have both significant experience and costly journalism qualifications. I had neither. Graduate schemes look for candidates with impressive academic records, considerable journalism experience and, increasingly, post-graduate degrees. Definitely not me. Even positive action grad schemes like those run by the BBC and Guardian seemed only open to candidates with bulging clippings books and 2:1 degrees in English.

It seemed that the only way to get a foothold on a career was to put in months of unpaid work experience. The print media have taken heavily to the use of work experience to vet candidates. The NUJ has estimated that 7-8 per cent of the industry is staffed by unpaid labour.

I could not afford to work for free. Although Mummy welcomed me home after university, now I was expected to pay my share of rent, bills and food. What's more, I had considerable bank debts, and the interest was mounting up. I had to find full-time, paid work immediately, or go on benefits and face a Jobcentre advisor choosing a career for me.

I got a job as an editorial assistant with the Financial Times, and joined the NUJ, but that didn't last long.



Damien Gayle: what chances for young black people from poor families?

My dilemma was that faced by many other black and minority ethnic graduates. In 2001 as many as 68 per cent of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis lived in low-income households. The same survey found the highest proportion of single-parent families, like mine, among the mixed ethnic group, at 61 per cent, followed by black-Caribbeans, at 54 per cent. Like me, graduates from these backgrounds cannot entertain the possibility of working for free.

Unpaid work experience is really only open to those with a high level of financial support – typically white, middle-class candidates. White graduates are four times more likely to be offered a graduate job at a top 100 British company than their ethnic minority counterparts. Internships exacerbate this inequality by giving the children of the mainly white middle classes an unfair head start in their careers. They are a barrier to social mobility and make a mockery of meritocracy. Industries that rely heavily on internships for recruitment, like the media, effectively exclude poorer candidates.

Effective journalism requires understanding. Journalists need to identify with the issues affecting their audiences, and the best way to ensure this is to recruit from the entire breadth of society. But the terms of an unpaid position make it available to only those applicants who can afford to work for free. A significant pool of talent remains untapped.

Joseph Harker, head of the Guardian's Positive Action Work Scheme, told me that the problem is one of complacency. "Racism is never discussed properly any more. Newspapers claim to adopt a colour blind approach, but this results in an approach that is merely racism blind." He is keen to talk up his positive action scheme and says that the situation is slowly getting better for new recruits. But, he says, significant steps still need to be taken at executive levels.

The schemes run by the Guardian and others are just a drop in the ocean of media recruitment. A few positive action programmes can't reverse a trend that has become institutionalised.

What is needed is a total overhaul in recruitment to journalism. Graduate level candidates should expect a fair wage for their services, and media companies should take responsibility for training their staff. This is the only way make a career in journalism accessible to the best candidates, as opposed to just the richest.

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