

Testimony on Hollywood Diversity  
Hearing on the Proposed Combination of Comcast and  
NBC/Universal

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For nine years, I have served as Director of the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African American Studies and Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Prior to my tenure at UCLA, I chaired the Department of Sociology at the University of Southern California (USC), where I was a professor for seven years.

For nearly 20 years I have worked to better understand the state of diversity in the Hollywood entertainment industry. I have collaborated with both industry insiders and community advocates to generate reports on the Hollywood industry aimed at documenting patterns in minority employment, access, and earnings. I have also worked to identify best practices that might facilitate increased industry diversity. My earliest work was as a staff member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, which investigated diversity trends in Hollywood for a 1993 hearing largely focused on the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings. I followed this work up with a 2000 study on African Americans in television, "The African American Television Report," which was commissioned by the Screen Actors Guild (SAG). Two follow-ups to this study – part of the Bunche Center's "Prime-Time in Black in White" research series – were produced in 2002 and 2003. Since 2005, I have worked with the Writers Guild of America, West (WGA) to produce its "Hollywood Writers Report," which examines trends in employment and earnings for minority, women and older writers in television and film. I have also served as a consultant throughout this period to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) "Out of Focus, Out of Sync" series, which is designed to monitor industry progress on the diversity front and to inform the organization's advocacy efforts. These experiences, over nearly two decades, have given me firsthand knowledge about the state of diversity in the Hollywood industry.

### **Business As Usual: The Case of Network Television**

In a world where neither race nor gender matters, we would observe a Hollywood industry in which minorities and women participate at rates comparable to their shares of the general population.

Unfortunately, we do not live in such a world.

Our world is one in which race and gender continue to play profound roles in the choices people make. These categories tend to define the risks we are willing to take to pursue our dreams; they also motivate our tendency to feel more comfortable working with those who seem similar to ourselves. These realities are particularly salient in the Hollywood industry. It is a highly competitive industry dependent upon creative talent, freedom of expression, and more than a fair share of good luck. It is also a profoundly insular industry that white males have traditionally dominated, where employment opportunities rest squarely on personal networks largely defined by race and gender.

Consider the case of primetime television. On May 28, 1999 an article appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* that would have a profound impact on the politics of prime time. Television beat reporter Greg Braxton revealed that the four major television networks – ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox – planned to introduce twenty-six new situation comedies in

the fall 1999 season. Incredibly, however, not one of the new programs would feature a minority in a lead role. “A White, White World on TV’s Fall Schedule,” as the story was headlined, was clearly out of sync with a society that was more than 30 percent minority and becoming more diverse by the minute. Not long after this revelation, public discussions of the profound disconnect between the nation’s demographic makeup and prime time portrayals of race reached a feverish pitch.

By the end of that summer, the networks had reacted quickly to address the situation by adding minority characters to the previously all-white casts. As at least one content analysis of the 1999 season would later suggest, however, these eleventh-hour additions were largely window dressing, tokens that facilitated the business-as-usual, white world of prime time television to continue largely unscathed.<sup>i</sup>

Indeed, a month later the NAACP anchored a nineteen-member “grand coalition” created to press for the diversification of network television.<sup>ii</sup> A report from the NAACP’s “Out of Focus, Out of Sync” series would later explain how the coalition focused its efforts on increasing minority employment in the industry as a means to the age-old end of producing more progressive images for minorities:

The current initiative has focused primarily on the greater inclusion of racial minorities in the broadcast network television industry. Although the accurate depiction of minorities in front of the camera continued to be a critical consideration, the impetus behind the current initiative was the belief that once integration took place behind the camera in executive and decision-making positions, the proper portrayal of the American public would naturally evolve.<sup>iii</sup>

Following the coalition’s threat of network and advertiser boycotts, a 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Emmy Awards program in which a few of the virtually non-existent minority award winners publicly criticized the lack of industry diversity<sup>iv</sup>, and the employment guilds’ public pledge to join this latest push for increasing minority employment in the industry<sup>v</sup>, voluntary agreements were signed between the coalition and each of the networks. The non-binding documents stipulated, among other provisions, that the networks would strive to increase minority casting, create programs to develop young writers, develop plans to increase purchases from minority vendors, and appoint network diversity executives responsible for implementing the other plans.<sup>vi</sup>

By the end of 2003, the diversity agreements—which some critics had described as “lacking teeth” -- had been in place for nearly four years. The networks had established vice president positions focused on diversity, and periodic reports by industry watchdog groups revealed possible signs of progress, albeit amidst considerable industry inertia.<sup>vii</sup>

But the coalition itself had largely fallen apart.<sup>viii</sup> Member advocacy groups had begun to feel the tug of group-specific interests, prompting them to issue separate report cards on industry efforts to diversify. Latino, Native American, and Asian American evaluations of the industry were generally negative, while a 2003 NAACP report was cautiously optimistic about the progress made in network television.

Meanwhile, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) moved forward with its plans to further deregulate the media industry, a development that would most likely retard efforts for meaningful diversification by further consolidating media ownership in a few hands, thereby reducing the points of access for those traditionally excluded from industry participation.<sup>ix</sup>

Little of the concern surrounding minority exclusion from the industry was new. A series of studies by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in the late 1970s had documented the insular nature of the television industry, showing how the absence of minorities behind the camera was intimately connected to problems with the images in front of it.<sup>x</sup> But this realization seemed to result in minimal change at best. Testifying at the 1993 Los Angeles hearing on which I worked, the head of entertainment at CBS echoed a common industry refrain —while much work remains to be done, the industry is committed to diversity:

I think that there are and have been some successes and there are things that the industry, I think, still has a lot of work to do on. I think that certainly one of the great successes is that there is much more awareness and concern about the problem. I don't think there's a development session that I attend or a casting session that I go to where the issue of minority representation and portrayal is not discussed.<sup>xi</sup>

Meanwhile, other witnesses were less optimistic about the industry's commitment to diversity and the resulting prospects for meaningful change. An official for the WGA — an industry labor union whose own membership was only about 4 percent minority at the time —suggested that the talk of “progress” was little more than an attempt at public relations. Reports documenting the involvement of minority writers, he noted, showed only “miniscule incremental advances”:

I mean, we're sitting here going over and playing this numbers game. If you look at the last two reports that preceded this one [a prominent guild study on industry diversity], you could see some really miniscule incremental advances in certain areas for certain groups.<sup>xii</sup>

### **The Bottom Line**

What I have witnessed over the years is a clear pattern concerning responses to the issue of diversity in the Hollywood industry. This pattern is defined by five basic moments connected in a circular chain: 1) periodic circulation of outrageously insensitive and offensive portrayals of minorities (usually black Americans, as other nonwhites were virtually invisible), 2) public outrage and/or pressure, 3) the release of depressing statistics about minority exclusion from or underemployment in the industry, 4) token or symbolic industry diversity initiatives designed to appease critics, and 5) a return to business-as-usual practices, which virtually guaranteed the conservation of a radically insular industry dominated by white males.

Indeed, if we consider the latest available statistics, we see that we have made little progress on the Hollywood diversity front (in some cases we have gone backwards<sup>xiii</sup>), despite the continuing diversification of the American population.

In 2007, minorities accounted for about a third of the American population (33 percent), but only 9 percent of its employed television writers and 6 percent of its employed film writers. In other words, minorities were underrepresented among employed television and film writers by factors of nearly 4 and 6, respectively (see Figures 1 and 2).

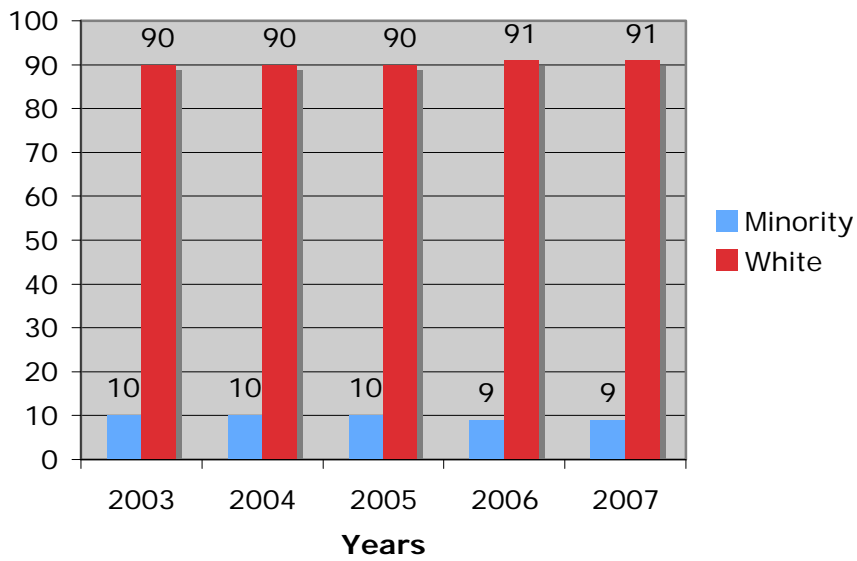
Meanwhile, women writers continued to lag behind their male counterparts, accounting for only 28 percent of employed television writers and 18 percent of employed film writers (see Figure 3) – under-representation by factors of nearly 2 and 3, respectively.<sup>xiv</sup>

Although relatively little research is available regarding diversity among Hollywood directors, a recent study by the Director's Guild of America found that white males – who as a group comprise only about 33 percent of the U.S. population -- directed 80 percent of the episodes from the Top 40 television shows during the 2004-2005 season.<sup>xv</sup> Anecdotal observations suggest that the state of diversity within the directing corps is even more troubling in film.

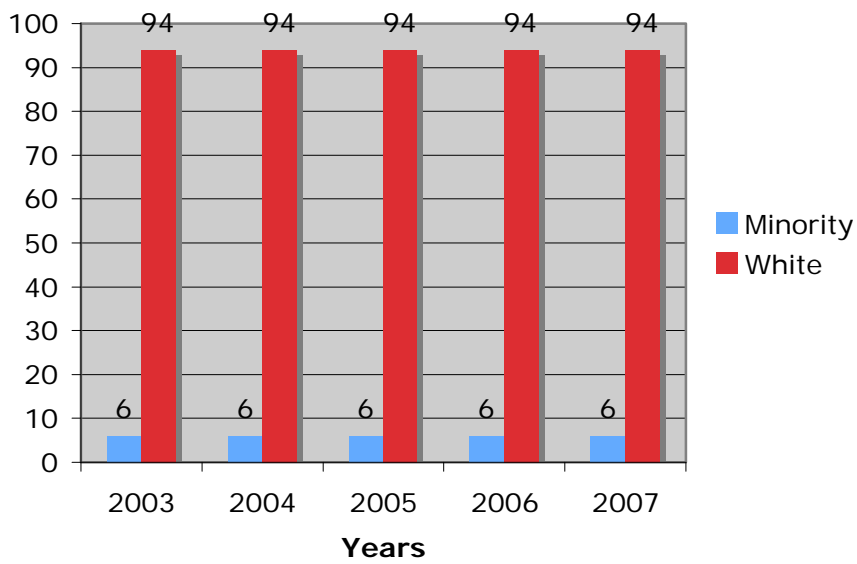
While at first glance, the numbers appear to be better in front of the camera, when we look more closely we see a similar pattern of underemployment and exclusion among minority actors. That is, although the white share of all television and theatrical roles in 2008 (72.5 percent) was only marginally greater than the white share of the population (67 percent) (see Figure 4), when we look at the most important, leading roles we see that white dominance was more pronounced. Here, whites accounted for 76 percent of the roles, and minorities combined for only 24 percent (see Figure 5).<sup>xvi</sup> These figures are consistent with other studies noting that white characters tend to dominate not only in terms of the on-screen population but also in terms of *time* on the screen. Minority characters, by contrast, are typically relegated to being the co-workers and/or friends of the more prominent white characters, the characters around whom stories usually revolve.<sup>xvii</sup>

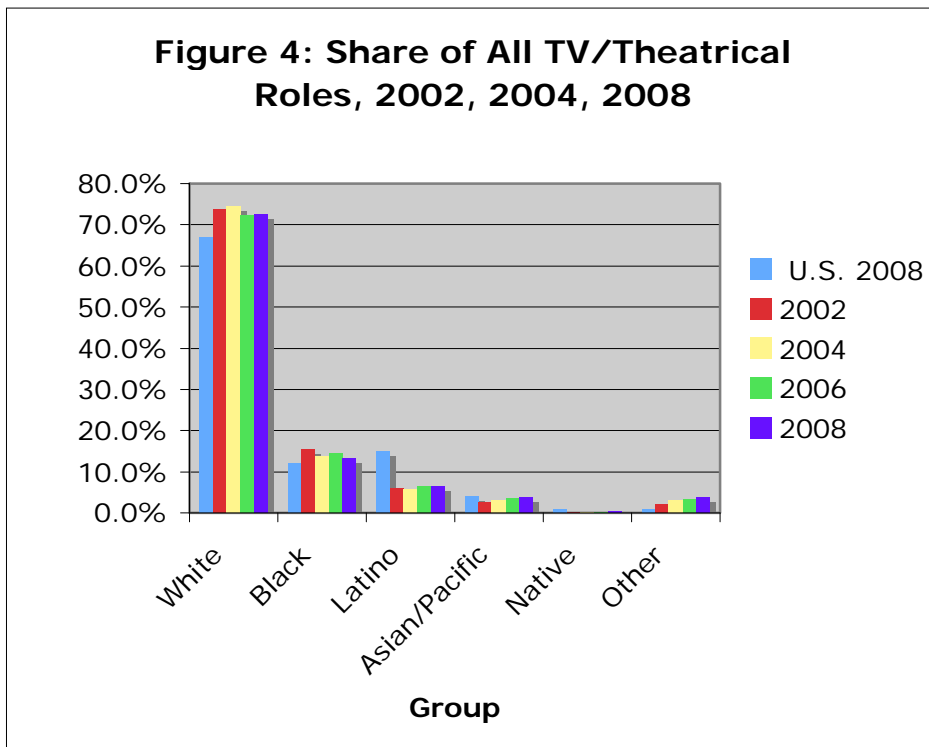
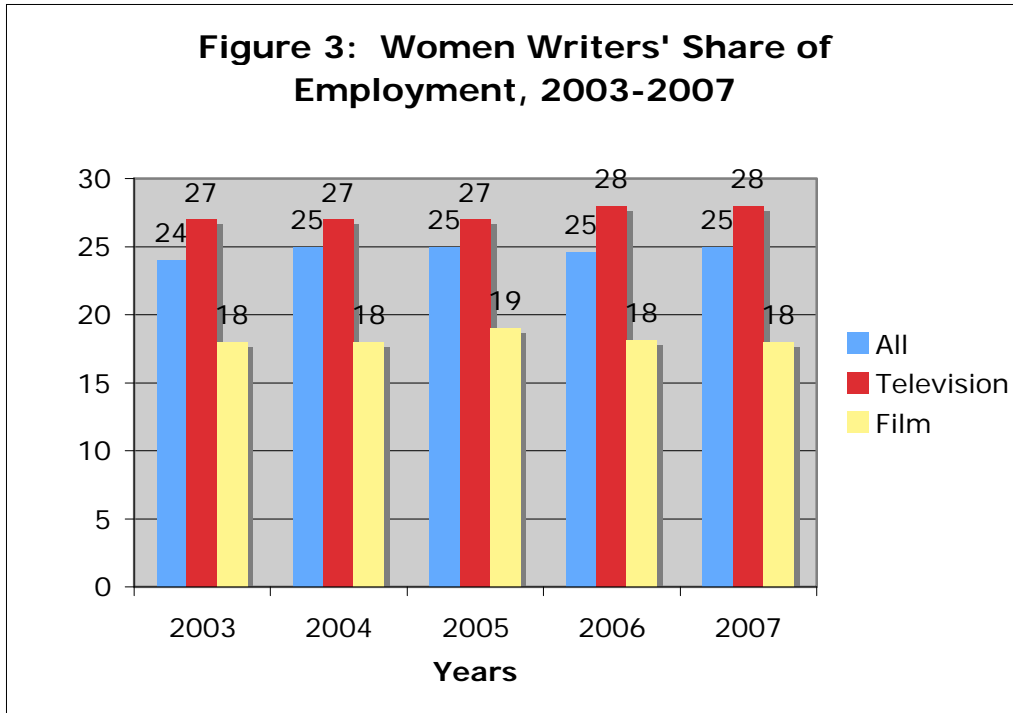
In short, my experience has convinced me that business as usual in the industry is wholly inadequate for addressing the stagnation in Hollywood diversity. A new paradigm is needed that understands diversity as a public good and a sure bet for the bottom line. This new paradigm would move beyond symbolic pronouncements and token gestures; it would establish realistic goals, reasonable timetables, and effective mechanisms for an industry truly committed to catching up with a changing America.

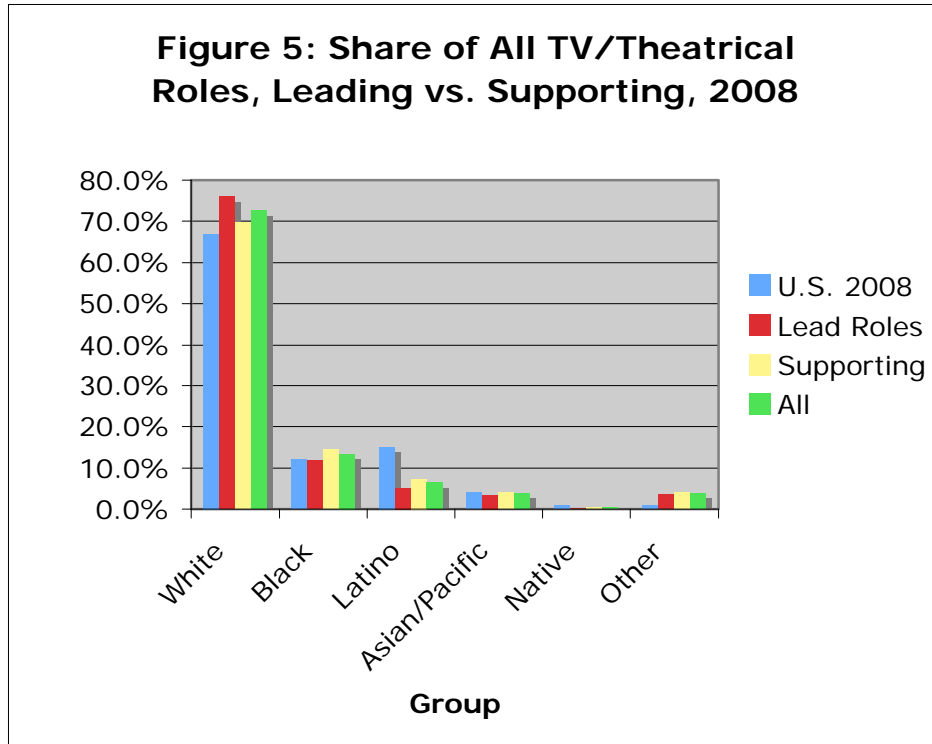
**Figure 1: Employed Television Writers by Minority Status, 2003-2007**



**Figure 2: Employed Film Writers by Minority Status, 2003-2007**







<sup>i</sup> *The African American Television Report, 2000: Progress and Retreat*, Screen Actors Guild.

<sup>ii</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, September 11, 1999, p. F2.

<sup>iii</sup> *Out of Focus – Out of Sync: Take 3*, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 2003, p. 7.

<sup>iv</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 1999, p. F13

<sup>v</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 1999, p. F1.

<sup>vi</sup> For example, see *Los Angeles Times*, January 6, 2000, p. A1; *Los Angeles Times*, January 7, 2000, p. A1; *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 2000.

<sup>vii</sup> Throughout the period, a number of studies were produced by the employment guilds (e.g., the Screen Actors Guild, the Writers Guild of America, West, and the Directors Guild of America), advocacy groups (e.g., Children Now, the Asian Pacific Media Coalition, the National Latino Media Council, and the NAACP) and other research organizations (e.g., the Bunche Center for African American Studies at UCLA) that chronicled lackluster industry progress on the diversity front.

<sup>viii</sup> See *Los Angeles Times*, October 14, 2003, p. C2.

<sup>ix</sup> See Bielby, William T. and Denise D. Bielby, 2003, “Controlling Primetime: Organizational Concentration and Network Television Programming Strategies,” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, 47, 573-596. See also *2009 Hollywood Writers Report: Rewriting an All-Too-Familiar Story?*, Writers Guild of America, West. This



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latter report discusses a 34 percent decline in the employment of black television writers following the merger of UPN and WB.

<sup>x</sup> *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*, U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1977.

<sup>xi</sup> Hearing Before the United States Commission on Civil Rights, “Racial and Ethnic Tensions in American Communities: Poverty, Inequality, and Discrimination – Los Angeles Hearing,” June 15-17, 1993.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xiii</sup> See the *2009 Hollywood Writers Report*.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xv</sup> Directors Guild of America Television Diversity Report press release, February 21, 2006.

<sup>xvi</sup> *2008 Casting Data Report*, Screen Actors Guild.

<sup>xvii</sup> See, Hunt, Darnell M. 2005, *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, New York, Oxford University Press.