Slim prospects for Black, curly-haired TV journalists in top markets

Ashley Graham

As more black women embrace the natural hair movement and wear their natural curl textures more often, there is a constant conversation around what makes a “professional” hairstyle. Viewers of different demographics increasingly call for more representation in the media, and it’s on the rise in movies and television shows. But the rise in curl representation hasn’t fully caught on in TV newsrooms.

A survey of the top 25 TV markets in the United States found that 25 percent of local ABC and Fox affiliates had black female reporters with curly hair on their teams. The St. Louis ABC affiliate, KTVI topped the list with three natural on-air personalities out of a total of six black women on their on-air staff.

Of the six news stations that currently have natural reporters on staff, four are ABC affiliates. Half of those six stations are in three of the Midwest’s major cities: Chicago, St. Louis and Detroit, making the Midwest the most diverse region in terms of on-air style choices. The six cities (including Dallas, Portland, Oregon and Los Angeles) all have significantly high African-American populations, with Detroit topping the list at 82 percent according to the 2010 census.

Black women in and out of media cite several reasons for wearing their natural hair textures including cost and health. Georgiaree Godfrey, a TV reporter in Spartanburg, South Carolina says she went natural almost three years ago in graduate school to protect the health of her hair.

“I often wore it straight because I felt it gave me an edge,” Godfrey says. “I cut it off in 2012 because it was damaged, however when I got my first on-air job I felt the pressure to look a certain way and started straightening it again.”

After suffering heat damage a second time, Godfrey decided to cut her hair again and consulted with managers at her station about wearing her natural hair on air. “They were all for it,” she says, “and once I debuted my new look I got a text from my assistant news director saying she loved the cut.”

Other journalists say it takes too much time and effort to maintain straight hair. “Wearing braids under my wigs was making my scalp very tender,” says Tiffany Tarpley, a reporter at Cleveland’s NBC affiliate who has been natural since 2012. “I work out on a regular basis so wearing my natural hair straight wasn’t a viable option either.”

Whatever the reason, many journalists say the decision to go natural is not one they take lightly. In addition to talking to management, they have to consider how the choice will impact their careers. Godfrey says she knows her choice to wear her natural hair will have consequences. “I think know many directors are still not on board with these ‘modernization’ of the industry,” she says. “I know I will miss out on opportunities for not having straight hair.”

Journalism students seeking a career in television news have to take their look into consideration as they start applying for jobs. News directors, the ones usually in charge of hiring reporters, agree that while looks are not everything, they do play a part in the decision-making process. Some say that the feedback they get from news directors has a significant impact on their job hunt strategies.

“I had a producer show pictures and my reel to people,” said Louanna Faine, a radio and entertainment journalist working in Phoenix, Arizona (market #12). “They said ‘She’s pretty but too urban.’ My senior year I was told this by a few news directors and anchors at a conference.”

“From professors and professionals, [the feedback] was always good,” says Alexis Scott, a recent graduate of the Newhouse School at Syracuse University. “Nothing crazy because I usually had my hair in a low bun, or high bun. The few times I had it in a pineapple/puff they would always ask me to remember what my brand would be because they knew I switched up my hair. They would say some companies are ready for this and some are not. Some professors would ask me which hair did I wanna keep because I can’t switch back and forth.”

Scott says her goal is to work at a TV station in a larger city in the Southeast, which currently holds eight of the top 25 spots on the DMA ranking list. The South also has very few natural reporters at its ABC and Fox affiliates: only two reporters at the ABC affiliate in Dallas, Texas wore their curly hair in headshots taken for the station’s website. In the Southeast specifically (stretching as far west as Mississippi), there were no natural reporters at the ABC or Fox affiliates.

Scott says the numbers give her some apprehension, but not enough for her to stop wearing her natural hair entirely or change her target long-term destination.

“I feel like there are young girls out there who are the same age as me, who want to do the same thing as me but they’re afraid,” Scott says. “So later, I will wear my [natural] hair more often. But I like to switch, so weave and hair don’t define me.”

Young black female journalists are finding more opportunities to go on air, but the majority of those opportunities are in smaller markets (below #100). Entry-level markets in smaller cities are more likely to accept journalists with different hairstyles, but moving to higher markets is another challenge these journalists have to face.

“To be honest it really depends on the market,” Faine says. “I was told if I identify as a Mexican I could’ve blown up. But I am proud of being biracial. That goes for radio and TV.”

But there is optimism among black female journalists about the future of the industry. “I do think it could change though,” Scott says. “It just still needs some more time…more allowance.”

“I went natural while on-air at a station in market 90,” Godfrey says. “I got hired in market 36 with natural hair. So I think my work will hopefully speak for itself.”