MEDIA SYMPOSIUM

Morgan Grenz

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@magrenz1

SYRACUSE, N.Y. – National Public Radio newscaster Lakshmi Singh told aspiring journalists attending Syracuse University that no progress has been made in diversifying newsrooms since she attended the university over two decades ago. Singh spoke Tuesday night at the university’s S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications as a part of a two-day symposium on race and the media.

“The bottom line at that time was that newsrooms were overwhelmingly white, and now, standing here some twenty-five years later, the makeup has barely changed,” Singh said.

Singh expressed her disappointment on the lack of change by quoting NPR’s fall 2018 figures of their demographic makeup. She said that out of roughly 400 people who work for NPR’s news and information division, whites account for more than 72% and people of color make up only 27%.

Although she said these numbers were a slight improvement from last year, “it’s far off from reflecting the demographics of the communities we are responsible for covering,” Singh said.

In her speech, Singh recalled the media’s coverage of Hurricane Maria. She said that when referenced, the Puerto Rican’s affected by the storm were often mistakenly called immigrants rather than citizens of the United States.

Singh said, “A newsroom significantly diverse enough to reflect the communities it covers would catch that issue.”

Singh emphasized the importance of diversity in the newsroom because of the impact she believes it has on what stories are actually chosen to be covered and how the stories are covered.

She went on to discuss the recent interview of R. Kelly conducted by Gayle King, co-anchor of the CBS news morning show. Singh said that in NPR’s newscast unit, a debate began over the words used to describe the portion where the musician jumped out of his seat, yelling and cursing.

“It led to questions about whether we would be talking about the physical aspects of that exchange if the subject was not a tall, black man,” Singh said. She told the students that she sees situations like these, confronting subtle biases and challenges of race relations in the newsroom, as teachable moments.

To conclude Singh’s keynote speech, a group of five panelists, who consisted entirely of Syracuse graduates, answered audience questions based of off their own experiences regarding diversity in the newsroom.

They agreed that progress begins with having what they called “intentional conversations” about diversity, which they believe Newhouse needs to make a point to focus on in the classroom.

Davia Murthy, a senior majoring in magazine journalism in Newhouse, said she has seen a lot more of an effort from the communications school to discuss diversity within the last two years.

Because of the change in the general political and social climate, “It’s become less taboo and more necessary to talk about this more often.” she said.

Murthy agreed with Singh and the other speakers that there is still a long way to go.

Interviews:

Davia Murthy – [dmurthy@syr.edu](mailto:dmurthy@syr.edu)

Elliot Williams – [elliotcwilliams@gmail.com](mailto:elliotcwilliams@gmail.com)

Lena Pringle – [lena.pringle25@gmail.com](mailto:lena.pringle25@gmail.com)