

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: “I HAVE AN EXTRA LEVEL OF CONTEXT THAT SOME REPORTERS DON’T HAVE”: JOURNALISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE OF IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE IN THE PRODUCTION OF MORE EQUITABLE NEWS COVERAGE

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In the summer of 2020, Alexis Johnson and Miguel Santiago, Black reporters at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, were removed from covering ongoing racial justice protests. The following year, Felicia Sonmez, a *Washington Post* reporter who had publicly identified herself as a survivor of sexual assault, was barred from covering stories about sexual misconduct. In both cases, management at their news organizations invoked a safeguard against bias as the reason behind the removal of the reporters from covering certain stories or beats. In other words, management feared that these reporters would not be able to perform basic journalistic duties because their proximity to the subject matter, whether through similar lived experiences or certain identity markers, would render them unable to relay a suitable and accurate account of events. However, the journalists in question protested their coverage bans by arguing that their identity- or experience-based connection to the issue would have been advantageous to their

journalism. For example, Johnson said: “as a [B]lack woman, as a Pittsburgh native, as the daughter of a retired state trooper and a retired probation officer, it was a shame I wasn’t able to bring my background to cover this story.” In essence, the journalists argued that, rather than their proximity to the stories rendering them unable to produce proper accounts of events, their personal identities and lived experiences made them more capable of capturing the nuances required for adequate coverage.

The purpose of this dissertation is thus threefold: first, it investigates journalists’ perceptions about the relationship between, and impact of, their personal identities and lived experiences and the reporting they produce. Second, it examines best practices journalists recommend to other journalists about covering issues or groups with which they don’t share an identity- or experience-based connection. Finally, it describes best practices journalists recommend to newsroom leaders for supporting journalists in producing more equitable and inclusive coverage. Through a textual analysis of 186 metajournalistic articles and 93 Twitter posts (“tweets”), this study found that journalists pinpoint a myriad of specific advantages they perceive reporting with an identity- or experience-based connection provides. As such, this dissertation advances literature on journalistic identity and role conception by demonstrating how journalists’ personal identities and experiences shape their professional values. It also argues that, by positioning this form of newsmaking as more equitable and legitimate than traditional “objective” reporting, journalists are constructing new conceptions of journalistic identity. This dissertation also contributes to literature on journalistic authority by showing that many journalists claim reporting with identity- or experience-based connections in fact makes them more authoritative interpreters of news. By asserting their roles as professionals who ultimately aim to produce accurate, factual reporting and resisting accusations of being activists

rather than journalists, reporters also engaged in boundary work by increasingly placing reporting which embraces the subjectivity of the journalist within the bounds of professional journalistic practice.

When making recommendations to fellow reporters for producing more equitable and inclusive reporting, the journalists featured in this dissertation called for a reconsideration of normative journalistic practices and recommended that their colleagues place equity at the forefront of every decision they make during the reporting process. The journalists' recommendations to newsroom leaders demonstrate that producing equitable coverage goes beyond individual strategies that journalists can implement; change must also occur at the structural level. Establishing and enforcing new sets of journalistic policies at the newsroom level is a vital component of providing coverage that is fair and accountable to all communities. In describing how journalists are harnessing the tenet that knowledge is socially situated to advocate for new standards of news production, I also suggest feminist standpoint epistemology (FSE) as an operational framework of journalistic practice.

This dissertation is a timely intervention into the ways journalists say their industry needs to change in order to better serve the needs of American audiences in the twenty-first century. The findings in this study have relevant implications for journalistic practice: they provide a clear roadmap for journalism scholars and practitioners for engaging in efforts to make journalism more equitable and inclusive.

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HAVE”:  
JOURNALISTIC PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE OF IDENTITY AND  
EXPERIENCE IN THE PRODUCTION OF MORE EQUITABLE NEWS  
COVERAGE

by

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## Dedication

To all journalists speaking truth to power.

## Acknowledgements

I am remiss to begin this section with a cliché, but sometimes one is appropriate: it truly takes a village to get a candidate through her doctoral program. So, I would like to thank those who helped make this possible for me.

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## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	ii
Acknowledgements .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	vi
List of Tables .....	x
Chapter 1: Introduction .....	1
Statement of the problem .....	3
Study rationale .....	7
Significance of the study and research questions .....	11
Dissertation organization and chapter overviews .....	13
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review .....	16
Journalistic norms and professionalization .....	16
Objectivity .....	19
Journalistic identity and role conception .....	25
Journalistic authority .....	30
Boundary work .....	35
Journalism vs. advocacy vs. activism .....	38
Media diversity .....	42
Newsroom diversity .....	42
Diversity in media coverage .....	50
Feminist standpoint epistemology .....	52
Chapter 3: Methodology and Method .....	56
Metajournalistic discourse .....	56

Twitter as a site of metajournalistic discourse .....	58
Textual analysis .....	60
Feminist textual analysis.....	61
Justification of method.....	62
Researcher positionality .....	64
Data collection .....	66
Articles .....	66
Twitter posts.....	72
Data analysis .....	73
Chapter 4: “Any Good Journalist is an Activist for Truth”: The Relationship Between Journalists’ Identities and Experiences and News Production .....	76
Identities and experiences impossible to separate .....	78
A lack of connection can lead to stereotypical coverage .....	85
Taking certain positions does not equate to bias .....	88
Boundaries between journalism and activism.....	92
Summary .....	103
Chapter 5: “It Makes Me a Better Person to Cover It”: The Impact of Journalists’ Identities and Experiences on News Production .....	107
Lends authenticity .....	111
Deeper knowledge .....	113
Personal stake.....	115
Helps identify stories as newsworthy .....	116
Encourages nuance and complexity .....	124

Summary .....	129
Chapter 6: Best Practice Recommendations to Journalists for Reporting Without Connection	
.....	133
Self-reflection .....	134
Responsibility to develop expertise .....	138
Diversify sources .....	140
Build trust with sources .....	142
Seek input from sources and community members .....	145
Find a trusted sponsor .....	148
Seek input from other journalists .....	150
Present complexity .....	151
Develop an “equity lens” .....	154
Summary .....	156
Chapter 7: Best Practice Recommendations to Newsrooms for More Equitable and Inclusive	
Coverage .....	159
Self-reflection .....	159
Develop clear guidelines and training programs .....	163
Increase diversity of newsroom employees .....	166
Focus on retention.....	169
Increase diversity in newsroom leadership .....	171
Provide institutional support to journalists .....	173
Make a consistent, long-term commitment to diversity.....	175
Summary .....	176

Chapter 8: Conclusion.....	179
Limitations and directions for future research .....	184
Implications and future considerations .....	187
Conclusion .....	189
Bibliography .....	191

## List of Tables

Table 1: Metajournalistic Articles.....	79-80
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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In July 2021, *The Washington Post* reporter Felicia Sonmez sued her employer for having banned her from covering stories related to sexual misconduct on two separate occasions in the previous three years (Robertson, 2021). According to Sonmez, the first ban – implemented in September 2018, after she publicly accused a journalist at the *Los Angeles Times* of sexually assaulting her – prevented her from covering, among other stories, Christine Blasey Ford’s testimony during Brett Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court confirmation hearing, during which Ford made sexual assault allegations against him (Lai, 2018). This ban was lifted on November 7, 2018, the day after the midterm elections (*Sonmez v. WP Company LLC*, 2021). However, one year later, in September 2019, Sonmez said the *Post* again banned her from covering stories having to do with sexual misconduct (*Sonmez v. WP Company LLC*, 2021). This time, the ban was due to Sonmez’s public request for corrections to a *Reason* article on the resignation of the journalist who Sonmez said assaulted her. Sonmez contended that the article was sympathetic to her accuser and mischaracterized her allegations. It was during this second coverage ban that the *Post* suspended Sonmez following basketball superstar Kobe Bryant’s death in January 2020, after Sonmez retweeted a news story that examined the rape allegation levied against Bryant in 2003 by a 19-year-old hotel employee who alleged that Bryant assaulted her at her workplace in Colorado (Wemple, 2020). Her tweet drew much criticism, despite having been shared by Sonmez without accompanying commentary. She brought the resulting death threats to the attention of her editors and publicized some of these threats through her Twitter account.

The *Washington Post* responded by placing her on administrative leave, claiming that the “tweets displayed poor judgment that undermined the work of her colleagues” (quoted in

Wemple, 2020). Sonmez further alleged that a top *Post* editor “told her she had ‘taken a side on the issue’ of sexual assault by talking about her own experience publicly,” while another told her that continuing to report on sexual harassment would constitute a conflict of interest on her part” (quoted in The Associated Press, 2021). Amid swift and forceful backlash online from Twitter users and some journalists, the *Post* rescinded her suspension after less than 48 hours (Stewart, 2020). *Post* management alleged that the policy was put in place to root out potential bias in reporting. However, *Salon* reporter Kylie Cheung (2021) noted that the policy was, at best, unevenly implemented: it did not, for example, “require that reporters who cover health care have never had a medical emergency, or reporters who cover education not be parents of schoolchildren.” Two months later, on March 29, 2021, Sonmez announced that her ban on covering stories involving sexual misconduct had been lifted (Ellefson, 2021).

A second anecdote: On May 31, 2020, Alexis Johnson, a Black woman who is a reporter at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, tweeted photos of a trash-riddled parking lot with the following caption:

Horrifying scenes and aftermath from selfish LOOTERS who don't care about this city!!!! ... oh wait sorry. No, these are pictures from a Kenny Chesney concert tailgate. Whoops (quoted in “National Embarrassment,” 2020).

At the time of Johnson’s tweet, the U.S. was engulfed in a wave of social justice protests following the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, at the hands of a white police officer. While mostly peaceful, the protests were accompanied by instances of looting to businesses near the areas where protests were occurring in several cities. Although some experts argued that any damage caused by looting paled in comparison to the societal ills being protested, the looting became a rallying point for conservatives against any of the reforms the movement was demanding (Khazan, 2020).

The day after Johnson's tweet, the *Post-Gazette's* top editors called her into a meeting and barred her from covering the ongoing social justice protests, alleging that her tweet had shown bias. Johnson said she asked them to point out the bias, but the editors could not give her a specific answer (Deto, 2020). The *Post-Gazette* also removed photojournalist Miguel Santiago, a Black man, from protest coverage without providing an explanation.

In the following days, the Newspaper Guild of Pittsburgh, other journalists, and readers voiced support for Johnson and Santiago, calling for their immediate reinstatement. Santiago quit his position shortly thereafter, while Johnson filed a lawsuit against the *Post-Gazette*, alleging race-based discrimination. She left the paper in October 2020 (Abrams, 2020; Deto, 2020).

According to NPR's David Folkenflik (2020a), Johnson had come into the newsroom on the day of her suspension "full of story ideas about the protests." After all, "she is...African American and a Pittsburgh native" (Folkenflik, 2020a). In a press conference shortly after their suspensions, Johnson and Santiago both expressed their frustration at not being able to cover the protests:

As a black woman, as a Pittsburgh native, as the daughter of a retired state trooper and a retired probation officer, it was a shame I wasn't able to bring my background to cover this story and it's a shame those stories won't be told (Johnson quoted in "National Embarrassment," 2020).

I'm disappointed that I'm not out there covering these protests. When I put my camera down and take my press badges off, I'm a black man in America (Santiago quoted in "National Embarrassment," 2020).

### Statement of the problem

In the cases of both Sonmez and Johnson and Santiago, management at their news organizations invoked a safeguard against bias as the reason behind the removal of the reporters from covering certain stories or beats. In other words, management feared that these reporters

would not be able to perform basic journalistic duties because their proximity to the subject matter, whether through similar lived experiences or certain identity markers, would render them unable to relay a suitable and accurate account of events. The editors' decisions underscore the legacy of hegemonic journalistic values to which journalists are socialized and subsequently internalize about the necessity for supposedly objective and value-free reporting. Rosen (2003) called this type of journalism "a view from nowhere," or the idea that by attempting to privilege all perspectives and become invisible within the news story, reporters actually move farther away from an approximation of the truth. "The attempt by journalists to remove themselves from their reporting," Carlson (2018a, p. 1855) said, "aims to fulfill objectivity claims but does so at the expense of undermining journalistic authority."

Folkenflik (2020a), however, explicitly pointed to Johnson's race and lifelong proximity to the community she covered to underscore why Johnson had several ideas about how to cover the protests. By explicitly invoking their backgrounds, both Johnson and Santiago themselves said that their identities and lived experiences would have been an asset to their coverage of this issue. Rather than their proximity to the story rendering them unable to produce proper accounts of events, Johnson and Santiago argued that, in fact, these aspects of their identities made them *more* capable of capturing the nuances required for adequate coverage of the protests.

These tensions exemplify what several scholars have identified as a journalistic crisis in a post-truth age (e.g., Carlson, 2018a, Steiner, 2018). American news media are currently experiencing heightened levels of criticism from both those who fundamentally distrust journalistic institutions as well as those who believe that news media have retreated too far into their protective veil of impartiality by giving disproportionate space to fringe voices (Carlson, 2018a). Of particular interest to this dissertation are the minority and marginalized communities

who worry aloud that mainstream news media do not sufficiently or appropriately represent them in coverage or report on issues of importance to them (e.g., Voorhees, Vick & Perkins, 2007). News media are thus suffering threats to journalistic legitimacy and authority. How can journalists and journalism organizations reassert authority and rebuild trust? In what ways do long-standing methods of practicing journalism no longer serve the best interests of both those who produce news and those who consume it? Ultimately, how can journalists and news organizations produce news that better attends to the needs of all communities?

This dissertation intervenes in these ongoing debates about appropriate journalistic conduct and the utility of traditional journalism norms in the face of a fast-evolving media landscape. In particular, it focuses on the increasingly prevalent argument from journalism scholars and practitioners that journalists should be allowed to lean into their identities, personal commitments, and lived experiences in the news-gathering process. Rather than their proximity to the story rendering them unable to produce proper accounts of events, journalists' identities and experiences better position them to understand, and report on, the issues at stake – creating, in essence, a more pertinent and applicable form of journalistic authority. This dissertation further examines how journalists articulate the impacts of their embodied identities and experiences on their work, and whether explicitly foregrounding them has now become an inextricable part of producing equitable and inclusive journalism.

However, even those reporters who advocate for a journalistic practice that involves more conscious incorporation of reporters' identities and experiences into the news production process acknowledge that it is unrealistic to expect that news organizations – particularly mainstream “legacy” news organizations – will have reporters who possess an identity- or experience-based connection with every possible subject. Journalism that better serves communities of all kinds

must necessarily also come from reporters who might not have ever identified with or shared common experiences with the issues or subjects they cover. Therefore, this dissertation is also interested in the best practices journalists recommend to their colleagues for reporting on issues or groups with which they do not have an identity or experience in common. This study explores how journalists can still aim to produce news that is accountable especially to underserved communities without sharing an identity- or experience-based connection with them.

Finally, this dissertation examines the recommendations journalists make for more equitable coverage at the newsroom level. While journalists had plenty of best practices to suggest to their colleagues, they also acknowledged that meaningful change cannot and will not occur only at the reporter level; it must also occur at the newsroom level. Therefore, this study explores how journalists articulate, through intra-professional discourse, the types of support they need from news organizations in order to produce journalism that is accountable to all the communities it serves.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues that the objective of advocating for the incorporation of journalist identities and experiences into their newswork and the best practice recommendations for journalists and newsrooms is the production of more inclusive and equitable journalism. Rupar (2017, p. 419) defines inclusive journalism as follows:

Inclusive journalism can be defined as a set of normative discourses, editorial policies and reporting practices that have arisen and have been developed to provide a diversity of voices.... Rooted in the political notion of inclusive democracy and a political system that goes beyond recognizing formal equality of all individuals, the idea of inclusive journalism examines actions and special measures that journalists use to address and respond to inequalities of unjust social structures.

Equitable journalism is closely related to inclusive journalism. Lea Trusty (2020), program manager at The Democracy Fund, defined equitable journalism as follows:

For news to be trusted and responsible, it must incorporate a diverse array of community voices, particularly those that have been ignored or harmed by storytelling and stereotyping in media. Only then will historically marginalized communities be able to count on news and support it as a vital civic asset. This means shifting resources, access, and leadership to, and embracing the power of these groups. For news to be trusted and responsible, it must incorporate a diverse array of community voices, particularly those that have been ignored or harmed by storytelling and stereotyping in media. Only then will historically marginalized communities be able to count on news and support it as a vital civic asset. This means shifting resources, access, and leadership to, and embracing the power of these groups.

In other words, increasing the diversity of journalists working in newsrooms, whether through expanding the range of identities and lived experiences represented (the “D” in the “DEI” acronym) has the potential to produce more equitable and inclusive journalism. However, literature on the perceptions of journalists on the benefits of inclusive journalism in the contemporary moment remains relatively sparse. This dissertation aims to make a crucial contribution to this literature by providing a wide-ranging look at the changes and strategies reporters suggest for making the practice and production of journalism more equitable and inclusive.

### Study rationale

Several bodies of literature within and outside of journalism studies undergird the findings of this study. First, I trace the evolution of longstanding journalism norms and routines to highlight how dominant expectations of appropriate journalistic conduct were established (e.g., Breed, 1955; Tuchman, 1972; Schudson, 1989; Schudson and Anderson, 2009). Of particular interest is the norm of objectivity, or the notion that reporters should write stories from a neutral, value-free perspective (Tuchman, 1972). I describe how objectivity became the measure of the ideal journalist, as well as how other professional journalistic practices have been instrumental in shaping dominant ideas of what constitutes proper journalistic behavior. This

portion of the literature review will situate my argument that journalists embracing embodied identities and experiences during the newsmaking process constitutes a specific challenge to traditional and hegemonic journalistic norms, and that this challenge comes particularly from women, people of color, and other marginalized journalists.

I also consider these tensions through the concept of journalistic authority (e.g., Zelizer, 1990; Carlson, 2017; Vos and Thomas, 2018), another useful theoretical framework within which to situate this study. The concept of authority has been extensively theorized in journalism studies. Zelizer (1990, p. 366) defined journalistic authority as “the means by which [journalistic] legitimacy is built.” In other words, journalists employ various discursive strategies in order to assert themselves as legitimate interpreters of events. Examples of traditional strategies – or, in Tuchman’s (1972) words, “strategic rituals” – for building journalistic authority include the use of expert sources, representing various perspectives, and, of course, minimizing the intrusion of the reporter’s own voice into the story. This section of the literature review situates my argument that journalists are constructing a new kind of journalistic authority, one that relies on the centrality of journalists’ situated knowledge. The basis of this argument is also rooted in feminist conceptualizations of the notion of authority, which recognize the cultural forces that constrain who has historically been conferred an authoritative voice. Journalists who lean into their identities and experiences when covering an issue or community, I argue, serve as “authoritative voices that are used to give voice to the disempowered” (Dow, 2016, p. 61).

This dissertation also uses the lens of journalistic identity to examine the ways by which journalists perceive the relationship between their personal identities and lived experiences and their professional identities as journalists. Emerging scholarship shows that, for journalists,

“professional identity as a journalist is intertwined with personal identity” (Smith, 2018, p. 533). This study thus sets out to investigate what journalists say regarding how their standpoints impact their approaches to, and choices during, the reporting process and, ultimately, whether they perceive this impact to produce journalism that is more equitable and inclusive. I will show how a wide range of identities and experiences – from race and gender to geographic location, to previous exposure to certain events – can influence the ways by which journalists carry out their professional obligations. This dissertation extends the literature on journalistic identity by providing more evidence of the discursive arguments that journalists use to advocate for leaning into personal identities and experiences on newsmaking. It also argues that, by positioning this form of newsmaking as more legitimate than traditional modes of reporting, journalists are constructing new conceptions of journalistic identity.

Like journalistic authority and identity, journalists also collectively make sense of their profession and of themselves as actors within that profession through boundary work. Boundary work refers to the rhetorical strategies journalists use to delineate appropriate and accepted journalistic practices (Carlson & Lewis, 2019a). It is a form of professional self-preservation, as any perceived threats to the identity and authority of journalists is placed outside the boundaries of journalism and delegitimized (Carlson, 2016). Through the lens of boundary work, I show that, on the whole, journalists are arguing that something which had been outside the bounds of (mainstream) journalistic practice – embracing the subjectivity of the journalist and harnessing one’s identities and experiences during the reporting process – should now be firmly placed within the boundaries of journalism.

Finally, this dissertation engages with feminist theory to argue for the centrality of identity and experience in the process of newsmaking. Feminist standpoint epistemology (FSE)

is an especially useful framework for this study because it “foregrounds experience instead of claiming to eliminate this.... [It] affirmatively embraces particularity [and] exploits the distinctive resources of differently situated groups for more critical, reflexive knowledge projects” (Steiner, 2018, p. 1855). I demonstrate how journalists are harnessing the FSE tenet that knowledge is socially situated to advocate for new standards of news production (Harding, 1992; Durham, 1998), although they may not use this terminology. This dissertation also engages with intersectional theory, which argues that identities exist not in isolation, but in co-constitutive ways (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Intersectional research would not examine the identity marker of gender, for example, without also considering the ways by which other aspects of identity such as race, class, and sexuality act upon articulations of gendered experience. This dissertation therefore does not analyze identity markers separately. Instead, I take them together to make more evident the throughlines between what reporters of various genders, races, ethnicities, etc. are expressing in terms of their embodied identities and experiences in their professional lives.

The research in this dissertation was conducted using a qualitative textual analysis of metajournalistic discourse – discussions in which journalists and other interested actors engage to negotiate journalism’s “definitions, boundaries, and claims to legitimacy” (Carlson, 2016, p. 364) – printed in *Poynter*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Nieman* and a variety of other outlets, as well as journalists’ metajournalism on Twitter. In order to narrow down results to a manageable amount of data for qualitative analysis, I collected metajournalistic articles and tweets that responded to three major contemporary social movements – racial and ethnic justice, gender justice and women’s rights, and LGBTQ+ rights. The data set is comprised of articles and tweets published in the last decade – 2012 to 2022. I chose 2012 as the starting point both in

order to keep the data recent and relevant, but also because the death of the unarmed Black teenager Trayvon Martin – and the acquittal of George Zimmerman a year later – sparked the creation of the social media hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, which has since grown into a worldwide movement against the systemic oppression of Black people (“Black Lives Matter Movement,” 2021).

### *Significance of the study and research questions*

Especially in recent years, a growing chorus of journalism scholars, practitioners, and audiences has been arguing that journalism is not living up to its duty to represent and serve the multitude of voices that make up American society. A major contributor to this is the inadequacy of traditional tenets of journalism’s professionalization project, such as objectivity. Producing journalism according to these norms can lead to reporters literally making several missteps in their work in terms of how certain issues are framed and discussed. As Cheung (2020) put it, “lived experience is often crucial to correct harmful, everyday gaffes in coverage of gender and race-based issues.” It is, in essence, a question about who has the power and credibility to tell certain stories, who is in an ideal position to ask better and more critical questions, and how these journalistic choices affect how stories are presented to the public.

This dissertation will provide novel insights into how reporters are challenging traditional journalistic practices and proposing new strategies for ensuring that news coverage is accountable to the people and communities it serves. By arguing that journalists with socially situated knowledge of the issues they cover will produce news that is more nuanced and contains fewer misrepresentations and misinterpretations, this dissertation proposes new definitions of journalistic authority and expertise that better encompass changing notions of journalists’ roles and responsibilities. Revised conceptions of which journalistic norms and practices constitute

equitable journalism will then help increase news media's legitimacy. I provide a roadmap for journalists, editors, managers, and scholars to incorporate tenets of FSE – among them reflexivity, embracement of embodied identities and experiences, and acknowledgement of socially situated knowledge – into their news production processes. This approach, in turn, “could help solve journalists’ credibility crisis” (Steiner, 2018, p. 1854). Ultimately, the aim of this dissertation is to contribute to efforts into making journalism more equitable and inclusive.

This research study will be guided by the following questions:

- 1) How do journalists perceive the relationship between their embodied identities and experiences and professional journalistic practices?
- 2) In what ways do journalists say their embodied identities and experiences impact (or do not impact) their newswork?
- 3) What best practices do journalists recommend to other journalists for covering issues, groups and/or communities with which one does not share a connection or affiliation?
- 4) What best practices do journalists recommend to news organizations for supporting journalists with varied identities and experiences and ensuring more equitable news coverage of their communities?

A quick note on nomenclature: the term ‘newsroom’ is defined as “a place (such as an office) where news is prepared for publication or broadcast” (“Definition of newsroom,” n.d.). The evolution of newsmaking has rapidly progressed to make an actual, physical newsroom often dispensable. The coronavirus pandemic has only accelerated the move by many

organizations – motivated at times by cost incentives, other times by logistical flexibility, or a combination of the two – to transition to partially or entirely remote work. However, even in situations marked by the absence of a physical newsroom, interactions between reporters, managers, executives and external actors – and the norms and practices that mediate them – continue to exert considerable influence on the newsmaking process. Therefore, for simplicity’s sake, I will be using the word ‘newsroom’ throughout the dissertation to describe the sites, both literal and metaphorical, where newsmaking processes are negotiated.

### *Dissertation organization and chapter overviews*

Chapter 2 outlines the study’s theoretical frameworks and provides an overview of previous scholarship that has addressed the major themes and topics of this dissertation. I examine literature on normative journalistic practices, with special emphasis on the origins of, and challenges to, the tenet of objectivity. I also review literature on journalistic authority, journalistic identity, boundary work, and media diversity. Finally, I explain the central tenets of FSE and how they can be applied to newswork.

Chapter 3 outlines the study’s methodology and methods. I first define the term “metajournalistic discourse” and describe how it is employed in print/online journalism and on Twitter. I then describe qualitative textual analysis and feminist textual analysis and justify it as the chosen method for this dissertation. I then briefly discuss my own positionalities as a researcher conducting qualitative feminist research. Next, I outline the criteria for data selection and describe the processes of data collection and analysis. I end the chapter with an overview of the collected data and final data sets.

Chapter 4, the first findings chapter, answers RQ1 by examining how journalists articulate the relationship between their personal identities and lived experiences and the

professional practice of journalism. I show that many journalists emphasize that one's identities and experiences are impossible to leave at the door when practicing journalism, and that not having a direct connection to an issue through an identity or experience can handicap coverage in several ways. I also show that journalists, while simultaneously arguing for the harnessing of personal identity and experience during the process of newswork, rejected accusations of activism and positioned themselves as professional journalists who produce fact-based reporting. Finally, I describe the viewpoints of the journalists in my sample who expressed dissenting sentiments about the role that journalists' identities and experiences should play in journalistic practice.

Chapter 5, the second findings chapter, answers RQ2 by delving deeper into the reasons journalists give for the assertion that sharing an identity- or experience-based connections with the subjects they cover results (or does not result) in more equitable and inclusive journalism. For example, journalists said that sharing an identity or experience with their coverage areas gives them an advantageous lens through which to approach stories and adds authenticity to their stories. They said it also gives them deeper knowledge about the issues they cover, helps them identify stories as newsworthy earlier, and helps them build trust with sources.

Chapter 6, the third findings chapter, answers RQ3 by outlining the recommendations journalists made to their colleagues on how to produce more equitable and inclusive journalism when they are inevitably tasked with reporting on something with which they share no common identity or experience. For example, journalists said that self-reflection is critically important for recognizing one's own blind spots. Journalists also said that reporters should diversify and build deeper trust with their sources, seek input from leaders and members of the communities they cover, and to present as much nuance and complexity as possible in their stories.

Chapter 7, the final findings chapter, answers RQ4 by extending the findings of the previous chapter to examine the recommendations journalists made to newsroom leaders about how to best support journalists of varied identities and lived experiences and make their coverage more equitable and inclusive. For instance, journalists said that newsroom leadership should also engage in self-reflection regarding the blind spots in their coverage. Journalists also said that newsrooms should increase efforts to hire more diverse journalists, develop clear guidelines and training programs for reporting on underserved communities, become more engaged with the larger community in which they are situated, and, above all, to make all of these efforts consistent and long-term.

Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation by reviewing the major findings, describing the main contributions and implications of the study, and discussing the study's limitations and directions for future research. I show that, through arguing for journalistic practices that value journalists' embodied identities and experience during the reporting process, journalists are amending conceptualizations of journalistic norms and values; identity; and authority. In addition, by outlining the many reasons why reporting with connection equips them with several advantages during the newsgathering process, journalists are placing reporting which embraces journalists' subjectivities as being within the boundaries of acceptable journalistic practice. Finally, I echo other media scholars and show that feminist standpoint epistemology provides a useful framework through which to enact the transformations in journalistic practice that journalists are calling for.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This dissertation employs a variety of theoretical frameworks in order to answer the research questions. I anchor my examination of how journalists articulate the relationship between their personal identities and experiences on their reporting process in the concepts of journalistic identity and authority. Because I am also interested in whether journalists, in describing the impact of their identities and experiences on their newswork, bring challenges to traditional modes of journalistic practice, I theorize the values that have constituted normative journalistic practice, with an emphasis on the norm of objectivity. In addition, because, in engaging in this discourse, journalists negotiate what constitutes appropriate journalistic practice, the concept of boundary work is relevant to theorize here. I guide my analysis on the best practices journalists recommend to other journalists in newsrooms about producing more equitable and inclusive coverage in literature on media diversity (including journalist diversity and diversity in news coverage). Finally, I outline the concept of feminist standpoint epistemology (FSE) as a potential framework to be integrated into journalistic practice.

### *Journalistic norms and professionalization*

According to Singer (2007, p. 81), the concept of professionalization refers to “a sociological construct in which certain occupational groups are seen as possessing, among other things, special power and prestige.” The collection of accepted behaviors and practices that delineate the proper exercise of the journalistic profession constitute journalism’s professionalization project. According to Carlson (2007, p. 265), “journalism turns to collective narratives of professionalism to situate itself as authoritative.” The traditional norms and routines

that define proper professional journalistic behavior form the backbone of journalists' longstanding claim to authority as interpreters of real-world events (Tuchman, 1972). As Robinson (2007, p. 312) argues, "News media have garnered [their] authority...in part because of [their] standardized routines and procedures." The norms that comprise journalism's professionalization project therefore achieved an almost mythical status as the practices that conferred upon journalists the cultural credibility to interpret news events. This section theorizes professional journalistic norms, with special emphasis on objectivity, and outlines the challenges brought by journalists to these norms as barometers of journalistic authority.

Many of journalism's most prominent norms emerged in the early twentieth century, when the emergence of professional journalism associations, journalism programs at the college and university level, and codes of ethics underscored the formation of a shared consciousness among those who produced journalism that their practice constituted its own defined occupation. (Some scholars, like Banning (1999), argue that journalism's professionalization project was a more gradual process and began in the mid-nineteenth century.) Journalism norms, or best practices to which journalists are expected to adhere, represented an attempt to regulate the mechanisms by which news was produced (Nerone, 2012). Among some of the most well-known are independence, verification, fairness, and balance. Taken together, these norms, practices and routines constitute newsroom culture. Beam and Di Cicco (2010, p. 397) define newsroom culture as the "shared beliefs, values, and expectations within the [news] organization."

Journalistic norms, once established, serve to regulate journalistic behavior in order to produce standard work products. Breed (1955), in his foundational study on the sociological characteristics of news production, argued that newsroom policies serve as a mechanism of

social control, wherein reporters are expected to operate within specific expectations of acceptable professional behavior as established by the news organization. Conformity to said expectations is enforced through various means: reprimand by executives, attachment to superiors, wanting to advance in the career, little organized resistance to policy, high job morale, etc. When certain norms and procedures become diffuse, social conformity by journalists, even recently hired ones, becomes relatively straightforward because the journalists are socialized into newsroom culture. Schudson (1989) likewise conceives the interaction of reporters, editors, and sources during the process of newswork as governed by professional norms established and negotiated by newsroom policies. Important here is that journalism's professionalization project emerged from efforts to homogenize the newsmaking process and the end products. Journalists' identities, experiences, and commitments are metaphorically left at the newsroom door through the process of newsroom socialization and conformity to normative journalism practices.

Once a norm is accepted and becomes entrenched in journalistic practice, it becomes exceedingly difficult to then dismantle it. As shown above, most normative journalistic values were established when the news industry was comprised overwhelmingly by white men. Thus, when women and minorities are hired into newsrooms, they have essentially two options: adopt the practices of hegemonic newsroom culture in order to assimilate, or resist and risk being marginalized – in other words, a “double bind” (Steiner, 2012, p. 213). Once women and minority journalists enter newsrooms, they are socialized into the hegemonic norms, routines and practices that govern them, which masquerade as neutral and impartial but are in fact constructed around men's interests and perspectives.

## Objectivity

Schudson (2001, p. 149) defined journalistic objectivity as “the chief occupational value of American journalism and the norm that historically and still today distinguishes US journalism from the dominant model of continental European journalism.” Among traditional journalistic norms, objectivity – presenting the collection and relaying of information as value-free and without bias – is one of the most well-known and historically considered the gold standard of principled journalistic practice in the U.S. Objectivity emerged as a journalistic value in the 1800s, and over the next century became the standard benchmark for the measure of good reporting. As Carlson (2012, p. 485) explains, “Efforts at professionalism at the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century tipped the normative underpinnings of journalism toward ideals of objective detachment.” Over the course of the nineteenth century, “the U.S. press broke from a traditional ethic of avid partisanship and adopted the professional code of objectivity” (Kaplan, 2009, p. 25). Funded by political parties and circulating almost exclusively on a subscription basis, early American newspapers did not purport to present the news in a neutral way. In fact, as essentially mouthpieces for their party funders, newspapers took decidedly factional positions. The introduction of objectivity and neutrality into the journalistic lexicon thus represented “a considerable shift from earlier forms of partisan and popular news” (Carlson, 2017, p. 14). The emergence of the penny press revolutionized the news industry by moving away from a funding model built on political party support and a small-but-elite subscription base to one built on ad sales and high circulation. When revenue became tied to reaching as large a readership as possible, it was in newspapers’ interest not to appear partisan (Kaplan, 2009).

By adopting the principle of objectivity, journalists liken themselves to scientists as “rigorously impartial, expert collector[s] of information” and away from other professionals like politicians and marketers (Kaplan, 2009, p. 26). It follows, then, that adhering to objectivity means that journalists “vow to eliminate their own beliefs and values as guides in ascertaining what was said and done” and “must eliminate any organizing philosophies or social commitments from influencing the news” (Kaplan, 2009, p. 26). Tuchman (1972) also argues that the idea of objectivity is a “strategic ritual” practiced by journalists to minimize the risks involved in newswork. Because journalists must make quick decisions and judgements when reporting news (due to other norms such as being ‘first’ to a story and tight deadlines), they believe that following certain procedures when reporting will shield them from criticism.

The critiques against objectivity as a journalism norm are well-known and have been gaining steam in recent years. One of the problematic aspects of objectivity, Tuchman (1972) points out, is the tendency of reporters to devolve into “both sides” journalism in an attempt to uncouple themselves from any perception of implicit bias towards one viewpoint or another. This approach, however, does not necessarily equate to objectivity “because the journalist is inviting ‘selective perception’ from the reader by presenting two or more sides as having equal validity” (Tuchman, 1972, pp. 666-667). Presenting all viewpoints as automatically equally valid can have the opposite intended effect of supposedly “balanced” journalism, elevating and giving institutional credence to fringe or minority viewpoints and producing news that is, in actuality, distorted.

In addition, scholars have noted that the incorporation of objectivity and neutrality into journalism’s professionalization project is mostly an American phenomenon. As Schudson and

Anderson (2009) point out, in many other parts of the world with media systems considered to be free (particularly in Europe), objectivity and professionalism are separate, and the former is not considered a professional journalistic norm. In this way, the norm of objectivity as historically constructed by U.S. media professionals is not necessarily an obligatory component of a professional practice of journalism.

Another major criticism of objectivity – and other traditional news norms – are the insidious ways through which these can come to serve as agents of the interests of the dominant class. Indeed, as Schudson and Anderson (2009, p. 90) note, journalism’s professionalization project constitutes “a system for the orderly reproduction of a class system and the legitimization of class inequality.” Objectivity can never be completely without bias; it is, after all, negotiated through interactions among people, who themselves are not value-free. When a small fraction of people controls a disproportionate amount of capital in society, then their interests become the predominant ones, and the ones around which these norms are formulated. This criticism of objectivity, therefore, is “inclined to see claims to neutrality, detachment, or dispassion as a veil for power” (Schudson and Anderson, 2009, p. 90). The concept of objectivity is imbued with power because it has historically been white and men journalists who have articulated the framework of objectivity. Lowery (2020) also points out that the default reader against whose sensibilities news stories are weighed is white, which leads to a warped sense of objectivity.

Thus, a fundamental problem with traditional journalism norms is that they fail to take into account the lived, embodied experiences of journalists who are not white or men. The experiences of women, people of color, and other minorities, in journalism and myriad other fields, are mediated by their social locations. When journalism norms are defined through men’s

terms, journalists who are not part of the dominant group experience “both structural and attitudinal...inequalities” (Ross and Padovani, 2019, p. 4). A normative understanding of journalistic practice would posit that a journalist’s identity should not be relevant in the process of newswork, as the aim is to remove any personal biases from the reporting. However, it is easier for certain people to profess the need for a disembodied objectivity when the hegemonic viewpoint is white and male. As Steiner (2002) notes, disembodied objectivity is a particular challenge for women, constituting a double bind. The “notion that women are inherently embodied” means that “the subjectivity attributed to women is not convertible into objectivity, and therefore does not bring with it the attribute of rationality” (Steiner, 2002, p. 82). Black journalists have also been leading a reckoning over the inadequacy of traditional journalism norms in newsrooms across the country, particularly within the last few years. Conventional journalistic practices and a dearth of Black voices in newsrooms, they argue, have resulted in “critical stories [that] continue to go unreported and news analysis [that] remain unbalanced” (Abbady, 2017). In *A View From Somewhere*, his book on the centrality of subjectivity in reporting, transgender journalist Lewis Raven Wallace (2020, p. 20) succinctly summarizes the issue: “[O]bjectivity’ has been used to push out and silence the voices of those who are already marginalized and oppressed.”

Indeed, it is (majority white and male) mainstream news organizations that have ascribed to objectivity as a journalistic value. Ethnic and minority presses have historically positioned themselves as advocacy presses, seeing no tension between their roles as purveyors of information and as amplifiers of “underrepresented groups’ perspectives and highlighting information that is in the best interest of these groups” (Williams Fayne, 2021, p. 330). Ida B.

Wells-Barnett, for example, dedicated her journalistic career to being, among other causes, a staunch antilynching crusader (Bay, 2009; Wells, 2020). Robert Abbott, who presided over one of the most influential Black newspapers of the twentieth century, the *Chicago Defender*, also adopted an activist tone for its coverage, which mirrored the yellow journalism of the mainstream papers of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. The *Defender*'s years-long campaign to encourage Southern Blacks to migrate to better opportunities and treatment in the North has been acknowledged by historians as contributing to the "Great Migration" of over 250,000 Black Americans (DeSantis, 1997). The *Pittsburgh Courier* – the other significant Black newspaper of the twentieth century – is well-known for its World War II-era "Double V" campaign, which encouraged Black Americans to fight for democracy abroad as well as for their civil rights at home. As the *Courier* proclaimed on its front page on February 14, 1942: "we wage a two-pronged attack against our enslavers at home and those abroad who would enslave us. WE HAVE A STAKE IN THIS FIGHT.... WE ARE AMERICANS, TOO!" (quoted in Washburn, 1986, p. 75).

The feminist press also has a long history of activist-minded journalism. From 19th-century dress reformers, health advocates, and suffragists to second-wave and contemporary feminists, feminist journalists have long taken advantage of news media to disseminate and advance their causes (Steiner, 2005; Steiner and Velloso, 2023). For example, the suffrage journals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did more than just advocate for the enfranchisement of (white, middle- and upper-class) women: they also "taught participants how to argue for the legitimacy and value of their lives" (Steiner, 2020, p. 46). In the 1970s, hundreds

of feminist periodicals emerged that “facilitated collective action and constructed political identities for women” (Steiner and Velloso, 2023).

The LGBTQ+ press similarly emerged in order to combat both the mis- and under-representation of sexual minorities in mainstream media. Newspapers and periodicals by and for LGBTQ+ communities particularly developed in the second half of the twentieth century. As Baim (2012, p. 15) pointed out, “while much of the pre-1980 American press did just simply miss the story about an important segment of society...the worst stories compared gays to pedophiles, murderers, rapists and more.” Indeed, there is evidence that the LGBTQ+ press not only covered sexual minorities more, but also in fairer and more wholistic ways than mainstream media. Gross and Goldman (2004), for example, found that the *Washington Blade*, D.C.’s gay newspaper, covered anti-gay hate crimes much more frequently than the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Additionally, while both the mainstream papers and the *Blade* centered the perspectives of LGBTQ+ communities, the former also included potentially harmful content like “attributing blame to the victim, the life situation of the assailant, and other criminal motives” (Gross & Goldman, 2004, p. 30).

Despite longstanding and widespread criticisms of objectivity from many in the journalism field, its status as a deeply entrenched journalism norm makes it enormously difficult to dismantle. The question thus becomes: can objectivity ever be discarded as a journalistic paradigm? Thomas Kuhn (1962) introduced the concept of the paradigm shift, initially applied to the natural sciences, to describe the process by which a prevailing approach to a discipline is replaced by a new model which better attends the discipline’s critical questions of the day.

Because old and new paradigms are usually incommensurable, and because professionals tend to

become committed to the paradigms into which they were socialized, paradigm shifts are rare and difficult to execute. Because journalism is a socially constructed field, Vos (2017, p. 310) argues that “it will take a discursive revolution—a new way of talking about journalism—to produce true change.” Vos (2017, p. 309) outlines what he perceives as two necessary conditions for objectivity as a journalistic paradigm to fall: first, there must be a “loss of faith in the viability of [the] paradigm”; second, there must be “a viable alternative.” When it comes to objectivity, much, if not sufficient, movement has already occurred on the first condition. Articulating a viable, widely accepted alternative to objectivity, on the other hand, remains a significant obstacle. Some journalism scholars have offered alternatives, such as Steiner (2018), who suggested feminist standpoint epistemology (discussed in a later section).

### *Journalistic identity and role conception*

The concept of journalistic identity is crucial to theorize in the context of this dissertation. Journalistic identity broadly refers to the ways by which people who professionally act as journalists conceive of themselves and their roles. Bossio and Holton (2018, pp. 248-249) define journalistic identity as “the construction and negotiation of professional identity in journalism.” Jenkins (2018, p. 1070) alludes to the impact of individual sensibilities and experiences on journalism identity when she states that “journalists share common values, strategies, and formal codes in their day-to-day practice, but they apply them differently when determining the meaning of their work and the context in which they do it.” Zelizer (2004, p. 101), meanwhile, directly links journalistic identity to journalistic authority by arguing that the

former encompasses “meanings, symbols, ideologies, rituals, and conventions by which journalists maintain their cultural authority.”

According to Hanitzsch and Örnebring (2020, p. 109), “professional identity is indexed through journalists’ adherence to specific journalistic roles, or combinations thereof.” In other words, the norms, practices and routines which delineate the acceptable procedures for news production in the U.S. form the basis from which journalistic identity is derived. In addition to the norms described in a previous section of this literature review, Hanitzsch and Örnebring (2020, p. 110) name a few others: “to provide surveillance of and information about potentially relevant events and their contexts; to deliver commentary, guidance, and advice on complex issues; to provide the means for political access, expression, and participation; to contribute to shared consciousness; and to act as critic and watchdog to hold the powerful to account.” In addition, the authors (2020, p. 111) found that a majority of journalists are socialized into, and internalize, “the importance of detachment and noninvolvement, of reporting the news quickly, of acting as a watchdog, and of providing access for the people to express their views.”

Journalistic identity is dynamic and undergoes constant negotiation and reconsideration as conditions change within the profession. Many scholars have recently pointed to journalism’s turn towards the digital as a catalyst for debates around what it means to be a professional journalist. Grubenmann and Meckel (2015) found that journalists lean into their sense of professional identity in order to cope with the uncertainties they face in their workplaces. Ferrucci, Tandoc and Schauster (2020) suggest that changes occurring across news industries – such as the closure of physical newsrooms and the increasing precarity of journalism work – may be having a negative impact on the formation of journalistic identity. Bossio and Holton (2018,

p. 258) found that social media have significantly altered “how journalists (choose to) represent themselves, their work, and their interactions.” Important here is the idea that journalistic identity is not static, but always in flux and subject to adaptation based on external forces as well as changing attitudes of journalists towards the profession.

Other scholars have investigated whether or not journalistic identity has lasting power. For example, Örnebring (2018, p. 122) found that journalists have become “primed for precarity” by conceiving it as a typical “rite of passage” into the journalism profession. Reinardy, Zion, and Baines (2021) found that journalistic identity waned when journalists lost or left journalism jobs. However, some sense of journalistic identity remained intact, even when the former journalists moved on to non-journalism careers; aspects of this identity, such as transferrable journalism skills, often benefited them in their new roles. Sherwood and O’Donnell (2016) similarly studied whether journalistic identity remained intact despite job loss. The researchers found that journalists who had been dismissed from stable legacy media jobs not only felt a weakening of their sense of identity as a journalist, but also resented “[the] loss of respect, public status, and the difficulty of gaining a platform for their expertise and experience” (Sherwood and O’Donnell, 2016, p. 1034).

Some recent scholarship has examined the ways by which journalists’ identities and personal experiences impact their professional lives. In her study of journalists working at community-based local newspapers, Smith (2018, p. 533) found that, for these journalists, “professional identity as a journalist is intertwined with personal identity.” The journalists perceived themselves as enmeshed within the small community that they cover, and thus could not separate the myriad other roles they play in that community – “library patron, church

member or baseball coach,” for example – from their professional responsibilities of covering events that occurred within it (Smith, 2018, p. 533). Moreover, the journalists saw this linkage as “imperative” for the effective exercise of their duties because “it is this combination that motivates them to produce accurate news that is relevant to their communities” (Smith, 2018, pp. 530, 528). Smith (2018, p. 533) thus concludes that journalists’ “identities do influence news production.”

Dahmen et. al. (2017) use mass shootings as a case study to investigate journalists’ perceptions and attitudes toward coverage quality. They found that “journalists’ demographic/background characteristics had the most predictive power” regarding levels of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with current coverage of mass shootings. In other words, those who were most likely to cover, or already had covered, mass shootings were most likely to be dissatisfied with the quality of coverage of mass shootings. Meanwhile, those in roles who “probably do not often go to scenes where mass shootings occur, were more satisfied with the current state of mass shooting coverage than both reporters and photographers” (Dahmen et. al., 2017, p. 469). The researchers therefore found a complex interaction between personal experience and professional attitudes and suggested that “individual-level influences...have a stronger effect on how journalists approach mass shooting coverage than routines- or organizational-level influences” (Dahmen et. al., 2017, p. 470).

Similarly, Harlow and Kilgo (2020) compared how journalists who cover social justice protests perceived the quality of the coverage with a content analysis of the coverage. They found that, although journalists generally expressed a desire to remain objective in their reporting, social issues for which journalists expressed support – such as women’s and

immigrants' rights – subsequently received more positive and legitimizing coverage than topics for which less support was expressed, such as racial justice. Harlow and Kilgo (2020) thus allude to the potential impact of personal inclinations on journalistic practices, even when journalists deny this impact. In the context of social justice protests, the authors further note that few studies “have looked at how a journalist’s personal identification with a protest might influence news coverage” (Harlow and Kilgo, 2020, p. 386).

Myers and Gayle (2015) also illustrate the potential impact of personal identities and experiences on journalists’ professional work. Studying African American women journalists, the researchers found that their identities as both Black and women influenced their reporting and editorial decision-making. The journalists expressed dismay at what they perceived as disproportionately negative coverage of Black men and purposefully sought to report and publish stories to counteract some of this negative coverage. However, the journalists expressed less concern along gendered lines, reasoning that Black women do not receive as much negative coverage as Black men, and therefore put in less deliberate effort to seek out positive stories about African American women. Myers and Gayle (2015, p. 307) thus argue that scholars “need to pay close attention to social location and the intersectionality of multiple aspects of social identity in the study of newswriters.”

Cha and Roberts (2019, p. 736) developed a conceptual framework they termed “identity mobilization,” or “the steps through which individuals can deliberately draw on or leverage their minority cultural identity as a source of advantage at work and how this process is sustained or disrupted over time. In their study of 31 Asian American and 16 African American journalists, Cha and Roberts (2019, p. 742)) found that, for example, minority journalists harness identity

resources such as “identity-related insights,” which is the “knowledge and perspectives stemming from one’s experiences as a minority group member.” As the researchers put it:

What an individual has observed and experienced as a member of a minority identity group can create a repository of identity group–related information, skills, understanding, and points of view. Individuals can draw on this repository to inform and enrich their work (p.742).

The research discussed in this section demonstrates how a wide range of identities and experiences – from race and gender, to geographic location, to previous exposure to certain events – can influence the ways by which journalists carry out their professional obligations. However, the impact of those influences remains contested, as Sui et. al. (2018) found that “reporters’ professional journalistic identity often overrides ethnic identity” because they are socialized to follow normative journalistic routines in majority white newsrooms. Nevertheless, as Smith (2018, p. 526) points out, “scholars have not extensively studied the impact of journalists’ personal identities on their news decision-making.”

### *Journalistic authority*

Journalistic authority constitutes another important theoretical basis for this dissertation. The practice of journalism, by nature, involves absorbing information and synthesizing it for a broader audience. This process, however, is not a given: journalists must “‘authorize’ their versions of events” (Zelizer, 1990, p. 366). Zelizer (1992, p. 8), in a separate pioneering work on journalistic authority, defines the concept as “the ability of journalists to promote themselves as authoritative and credible spokespersons of ‘real-life’ events.” Similarly, Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2018, p. 1223) posit that “journalistic authority is the right to be listened to, indicating how a certain kind of knowledge is assigned legitimacy.” Karlsson (2011, p. 281) argues that

earning and maintaining trust from audiences is central to building journalistic authority, which he then defines as “the extent to which the profession’s reputation allows it to be trusted to carry out truth-telling.” Carlson (2017, p. 5) argues that authority is one of journalism’s most crucial building blocks: it is “the central element that makes journalism work.” Examining discursive constructions of journalistic authority is prudent in this literature review because journalists need to be accepted as arbiters of real-world events by audiences if their work is to be at all useful.

Journalistic authority is especially relevant in the current media landscape because of the abundance of information available on the internet and in digital spaces. Over the last several decades, the advent of the Internet and of digital tools have vastly expanded the number of voices competing for attention in the media marketplace. While, as Figenschou and Ihlebæk, (2018, p. 1221) argue, “a wider range of news providers potentially ensures greater diversity of information and opinion [it] also increases the visibility and impact of partisan information, disinformation and ‘fake news.’” Debates over who is and is not a journalist have been especially relevant in the last couple of decades, as freelancers, bloggers, and citizen journalists all claim journalistic space (Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2018; Robinson, 2006). Journalistic authority is thus the means through which journalists attempt to differentiate themselves and their work from the deluge of stories “claiming to represent or explain the world” (Carlson, 2017, p. 2). Important here is the argument that, in a heterogeneous media landscape without clear professional boundaries, journalists construct authority rhetorically and maintain it through constant symbolic negotiation with audiences (Koliska, Chadlha and Burns, 2020).

Nevertheless, journalistic authority is often claimed to be in crisis (Carlson, 2017; Vos and Thomas, 2018). The technological advancements that have loosened legacy news media’s grip

on their status as the producers and disseminators of information, the economic challenges plaguing the news industry through loss of advertising revenue and reduction of jobs, and a growing mistrust in mainstream news due to increased politicization have all contributed to what Vos and Thomas (2018, p. 2001) call “a serious challenge to journalistic authority.” Robinson (2006) demonstrated that, in the early days of online journalism, news organizations reasserted their authority by claiming online newsrooms as merely extensions of legacy newsrooms, operating through the same norms and conventions.

Journalists have historically constructed journalistic authority by establishing boundaries around what should and should not be considered legitimate newswork. Journalism’s professionalization project – the norms, practices and routines established to delineate what constitutes the “proper” practice of journalism – is perhaps the strongest example of journalism’s attempt to assert professional authority over newsgathering and newsmaking processes (these norms will be discussed specifically in a subsequent section). Scholars have identified several strategies employed by journalists within news stories to reinforce their status as authoritative narrators. For example, the use of multiple sources, authoritative in their own right, helps establish authority for the journalist. Zandberg (2010) identified five types of authoritative sources: the biographical source (those who witness the event(s) being written about), the official source (members of government or other institution), the academic source (those with specific expertise about a topic), the cultural source (those with knowledge about a topic due to their involvement in cultural endeavors), and the professional-journalistic source (other journalists). Thus, the use of sources who possess their own cultural authority in turn helps journalists establish “the right to shape society’s stories of the past” (Zandberg, 2010, p. 5). On the other

hand, in his study of journalistic commemorations of Walter Cronkite following his death, Carlson (2012, p. 485) argued that certain features helped Cronkite establish journalistic authority that seemingly conflicted with journalism's "objectivity-based ideology." Namely, Cronkite effectively built credibility and trust through the attribution of "connection," or the ability to create proximity between the journalist and his/her/their audience. While his study focused on broadcast journalism and journalists specifically, Carlson (2012, p. 488) raises important questions about the ways by which journalists build authority outside "normative understandings of news-making."

Existing scholarship thus establishes journalistic authority as "a thoroughly social phenomenon" (Hanrahan and Antony, 2005). In other words, authority is not a static benefit that is acquired, but rather the product of constant interactions among various parties. Carlson (2017) expands upon this notion through his concept of relational authority. He argues that journalistic authority is built and dependent on a series of relationships between actors (such as journalist-source, journalist-audience, journalist-technology, and journalist-critic). In this way, journalistic authority is highly dynamic and constantly being negotiated and re-negotiated. It is the relationships between the actors that construct journalistic authority that reveal "the symbolic and material interactions through which journalism is legitimated – and contested" (Carlson, 2017, p. 185).

Challenges to prevailing notions of journalistic authority, often based on contemporary cultural attitudes and social contexts are instrumental in reshaping definitions of journalistic authority. In the last few decades, several fundamental shifts within the journalism industry have provided challenges for normative features of journalistic authority. For example, Karlsson

(2011) points to the features of interactivity and immediacy as challengers to journalistic authority as journalism moved online at the turn of the 21st century. Immediacy – or the need to publish news online as quickly as possible in order to outpace the competition – often led to “provisory, incomplete and sometimes dubious news drafts [being] published” (Karlsson, 2011, p. 279). This, in turn, damaged audiences’ trust in news media as previously behind-the-scenes newsmaking processes were increasingly laid bare publicly. Similarly, Robinson (2006) argues that journalists themselves challenged established tenets of journalistic authority in order to compete in the new digital media landscapes. News organizations created “j-blogs” in order to compete with independent blogs that were trying to circumvent traditional media gatekeepers, in which professional journalists made use of “traditional no-nos” such as “superlatives, first person, contractions, questions with no answers, answers with no questions” (Robinson, 2006, p. 78). These changes, of course, also brought further controversies and debates about what constitutes appropriate journalistic conduct online as maintaining an active presence on social media platforms (especially Twitter) has become increasingly folded into expectations for news organizations and their journalists alike (e.g., Finneman, Thomas & Jenkins, 2019; Bossio & Holton, 2021; Duffy & Knight, 2021). Thus, changing economic, political, cultural and social circumstances compel journalists and journalism to evolve and adapt what it means to possess and exercise journalistic authority.

There is limited research on how journalists harness their personal identities, particularly in regard to race and gender, to construct journalistic authority. Cha and Roberts (2019, p. 742), in their study of 31 Asian American and 16 African American journalists, found that the journalists engaged in several “identity mobilization tactics,” including “crafting” and

“challenging.” The former involves “creat[ing] or attempt[ing] to influence a deliverable related to minorities, such as by pitching the idea for a news story, writing an article, or providing feedback on a colleague’s draft.” Importantly, the journalists described the process of “crafting” as involving “drawing on their knowledge of and perspectives on their minority group and racial dynamics to generate novel story ideas, craft textured articles, and enhance the accuracy, sensitivity, and breadth of other journalists’ work by correcting errors, acting as an informant, and supporting race related coverage” (p. 742). For the journalists, the process of “challenging” involved “convey[ing] the inaccuracy of assumptions about their minority group” (Cha and Roberts, 2019, p. 742). According to the researchers,

In their descriptions of challenging, the journalists indicated that they drew on the identity resource of identity-related insights and, specifically, their awareness of erroneous generalizations about the group. ... their aim was to construct a positive image—to communicate a more desirable and/or accurate impression—of their minority group. The journalists who engaged in challenging were highly aware of common assumptions about the group and the ways in which those assumptions are inaccurate, and they drew on this knowledge as they attempted to correct other people’s mistaken assumptions (p. 742).

Thus, minority journalists construct authority by harnessing the assets of their minority identities – such as deeper knowledge about certain groups and greater awareness of stereotypes – to engage in producing more equitable and inclusive coverage.

### Boundary work

According to Gieryn (1983), professions of all kinds engage in boundary work. As originally applied to scientific professions, Gieryn (1983, p. 782) defined boundary work as “the attribution of selected characteristics to the institution of science (i.e., to its practitioners, methods, stock of knowledge, values and work organization) for purposes of constructing a

social boundary that distinguishes some intellectual activities as ‘non-science.’” Unlike in professions such as medicine and law, journalism has no clear boundary markers – entry exams, certifications, required schooling – that clearly distinguish between members and non-members of the profession. Thus, Carlson (2016, p. 350) conceptualized journalism as “a cultural practice that is embedded in specific contexts, variable across time and space, and inclusive of internal and external actors.” That is, because journalism as a field possesses no clearly marked boundaries, it is journalism practitioners who define and negotiate the boundaries of journalism through intraprofessional conversation. Important here is the notion that, because they are discursively constructed, journalistic boundaries are not fixed, but rather malleable, to be amended depending on the specific contexts and attitudes of a period. Journalists thus constantly dialogue about what constitutes appropriate journalistic behavior and practices (Perreault & Vos, 2018).

Many studies of journalistic boundary work have examined the ways by which journalists articulate what counts as journalism and what the essential roles of journalists are. For example, Perreault, Stanfield and Luttman (2020) looked at the boundaries journalists drew around their profession in relation to the White House Correspondents’ Dinner (WHCD), which has historically included a comedy performance. Journalists said that the WHCD delegitimized their “lofty conceptions of their democratic contributions: speaking up for voiceless communities, serving as watchdogs and engaging citizens on the issues that shape their lives” (Perreault, Stanfield & Luttman, 2020, p. 1151). The entertainment and spectacle aspect of the comedy portion, along with a “false sense of affinity between journalists and politicians” that the format of the dinner invites, placed the WHCD squarely outside the boundaries of appropriate journalistic conduct for these journalists. Carlson and Berkowitz (2014) showed that U.S.

journalists defined the boundaries of proper journalistic norms by criticizing the work of tabloids in the wake of the 2011 phone hacking scandal that led to the closure of British tabloid *News of the World*. By calling out, for instance, the practices of paying for information, using a sensational tone, and purposefully printing rumors without fact-checking, U.S. journalists “firmly set boundaries of appropriate and inappropriate practice by subtly restating the profession’s core values” (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014, p. 400).

Journalists have also engaged in boundary work regarding who can and should be considered a journalist. Over the decades, journalists have used critical events to distance themselves from, among others, paparazzi following Princess Diana’s death in 1997 (Bishop, 1999); whistleblowing website Wikileaks and its enigmatic leader, Julian Assange (Coddington, 2012); tabloid journalism in the wake of the (UK) *News of the World* phone hacking scandal in 2011 (Carlson and Berkowitz, 2014); and social media as de-facto news organizations (Johnson and Kelling, 2017). In addition, citizen and participatory journalism have recently become the subject of much debate among professional journalists about where these actors fit into the news ecosystem. While initially “there was a less-than enthusiastic embrace by many traditional news outlets,” journalists have responded to the ever-increasing presence of social media content in the mobile and social media age by “creating certain kinds of limited spaces for citizen journalism” (Wall, 2015, p. 798). Nevertheless, the balance of research shows that “most journalists do not want to abandon their routines or share their authority with outsiders” (p. 799).

A related concept to boundary work is that of paradigm maintenance or repair, which occurs “when members of the journalistic community deploy discursive strategies to defend the paradigmatic status quo from a perceived internal threat” (Vos & Moore, 2020, p. 19). Steiner et. al. (2013, pp. 705-706) define paradigm repair as “the notion that when journalists perceive an

event or situation as undermining journalists' or news organizations' credibility and authority they will go to great efforts to restore their own image and reputation." Journalists have engaged in paradigm repair to differentiate themselves, for example, from the behaviors of fictional journalists (Steiner et. al. 2013); and journalists, such as Jayson Blair, who plagiarized from other newspapers and fabricated information (Hindman, 2005). Other journalists have used paradigm maintenance to defend against critiques and align themselves with the values and practices of mainstream journalism. For example, gaming journalists have sought to position their relatively new, niche, and often controversial (the field is riddled with sexism) subject area as legitimate journalism akin to sports or technology journalism (Perreault & Vos, 2018). Indeed, journalists have argued that emerging news mediums or practices can often help journalists "reclaim authority and credibility": the digitally native, venture capital-funded sports website The Athletic, for example, enabled journalists to engage in journalistic practices they said they could not at legacy sports departments, such as producing sufficient time to produce long-form pieces (Ferrucci, 2022, p. 2077). Boundary work and paradigm repair are thus both mechanisms by which journalists defend themselves against threats, both internal and external, to their professional credibility and reassert control over the news process (Lewis, 2011).

### *Journalism vs. advocacy vs. activism*

One of the most prominent boundaries that journalists have drawn around their profession is their authority as legitimate transmitters of news. Historically, this boundary has been enforced through objectivity as the operational framework of appropriate news production. By producing news that is supposedly value-free, which presents a variety of perspectives and doesn't take a particular side, journalists would thus distinguish themselves from other communicators and

mass media, and instead embody the logic and rigor of the scientific disciplines (Schudson, 2001; Nerone, 2012).

First, it is prudent to define advocacy and activism and draw similarities and differences between them. These terms are often used synonymously and interchangeably by scholars in varied disciplines. For instance, in his meta-analysis on “Public Interest Media Activism and Advocacy as a Social Movement,” Napoli (2007) does not separately define activism and advocacy. Some scholars have attempted to provide distinguishing characterizations. Parsons (2016, p. 2) defines an advocate as “a person who speaks, writes or argues in support or defense of a person or cause,” while an activist “is someone who tries to draw public attention and concern to an issue *they* consider to be important.” In other words, advocacy is a broader term that can, but does not have to, also include activism. Activists, therefore, are more militant in their objectives by “drawing attention to an issue rather than speaking on behalf of an issue” (Parsons, 2016, p. 2).

The Black, feminist, and LGBTQ+ presses discussed earlier are thus considered to be activist presses, since one of their main objectives was to draw attention to their respective causes. However, as also discussed earlier, the aspiration to produce journalism from a detached, objective and neutral position has historically come from majority white and male mainstream news organizations. Although activist and advocacy journalism has long been deemed to work in opposition to normative journalistic practices (Williams Fayne, 2023), many journalists who took on activist roles with their work did not see a conflict between their ability to produce fact-based journalism and their advocacy for certain causes. In other words, they did not perceive certain forms of activism – such as campaigning for human rights – as journalistically

disqualifying. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, for example, asserted that by publicizing the frequent and widespread practice of white-on-Black lynching, she was telling “the truth freely” (quoted in Bay, 2009, p. 5). Mary Church Terrell, a Black woman journalist and activist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, recalled that while she wrote extensively for Black newspapers, her articles were routinely rejected by mainstream majority white papers “not because of [their] mediocrity or inferiority, but because of the indisputable facts presented by” them (quoted in Broussard, 2002, p. 19). Thus, despite Terrell’s journalism being fact-based, it was rejected because of perceptions about the quality of the work of an activist journalist.

Conversations about the boundaries between journalism, advocacy and activism have gained traction among journalism scholars and practitioners over the last decades, including about the meaning of the “advocate” or “activist” labels themselves. The mid- to late-twentieth century was marked by controversies over the extent to which journalists should participate in civic life. Journalists debated whether marching in protests, serving on school or local boards, or even voting constituted appropriate journalistic conduct (e.g., Allen, 2008; Jones, 2021). These positions seem to be lessening, as various news outlets have revised their code of ethics to allow civic participation more explicitly from their journalists. For example, NPR overhauled its policy in 2021 to remove bans on participating in “marches, rallies and public events” and to allow journalists to advocate, both online and in their personal lives, for “the freedom and dignity of human beings” (quoted in McBride, 2021).

More recently, some journalism scholars have stressed that advocacy journalism is not automatically biased or unreliable: Laws and Chojnicka (2020, p. 1266) argue that “a good definition of advocacy journalism emphasizes that it is still ‘fact-based’, solid reporting that aims to additionally mitigate the problems that it reports on.” In a study of environmental journalists,

Tong (2015, p. 782) found that although her participants consider themselves advocacy journalists,

Their practice is characteristic of the centrality of perspectives and experience rather than objectivity, despite the fact that their viewpoints may be expressed in a covert way. ... This does not mean, however, that environmental investigative reports do not require facts. By contrast, the participants believe strongly that their reports should be based on facts and evidence. The participants constantly highlight the importance of facts and of the verification of facts. They regard verification and cross-checking of facts and information as a legitimate and indispensable journalistic tool to produce balanced reporting; it also enables them to control the narratives of their stories and, in addition, help to insure them against post-publication retribution from the political authorities. This tool prevents them not only from publishing erroneous information but also from being manipulated by news sources. This tool also enables them to offer “true” knowledge to their readers.

Nevertheless, as more minority and marginalized journalists began working for mainstream outlets, those journalists have largely resisted activist labels and take pains to protect themselves from such accusations. For example, Nishikawa et. al. (2009) showed that Black and Latino journalists accept and conform to certain journalistic values, such as accuracy and balance. This generally led the journalists whom they studied to reject advocacy as a component of their professional roles. On the other hand, while they did not conceptualize themselves as outright advocates, the minority journalists in the sample “ameliorate the pressure they face in mainstream newsrooms by acting surreptitiously in favor of their communities. That is, minority journalists need not openly act as advocates, yet they can have a positive effect on content ‘behind the scenes’ in the newsroom” (Nishikawa et. al., 2009, p. 251).

## Media diversity

### Newsroom diversity

In 1968, an 11-member commission comprised of U.S. governors, congressmen, bureaucrats, and executives released the “Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders” (“Report”), an examination into the structural causes of racial unrest and violence in the United States. The Kerner Report (colloquially named after the commission’s chairman, Illinois governor Otto Kerner) indicted news media as participants in perpetrating racial conflict through their inadequate coverage of riots that had broken out in cities across the U.S. the previous year. The commissioners took specific issue with a perceived incongruence between the events as they occurred and media characterizations of them; in other words, the report found “a significant imbalance between what actually happened in our cities and what the newspaper, radio and television coverage of the riots told us happened” (“Report,” 1968, p. 363). In addition, the report criticized the coverage’s sensationalistic headlines, reproduction of quotes from prejudiced sources without vetting or contextualizing them, and framing the conflicts as a “Black vs. white” issue when most violence occurred in majority Black neighborhoods (Byerly and Wilson II, 2009). The perceived inadequacy of coverage about Black issues and communities contributed to a pervasive distrust in mainstream news from those communities. As the report stated, “distrust and dislike of the media among ghetto Negroes encompass all the media” (“Report,” 1968, p. 374).

The Kerner Report made several recommendations to newsrooms for improving coverage of racial issues and minority communities. These recommendations underscored mass media’s central role in shaping societal attitudes towards underserved groups. They included:

initiatives by editors and news directors to engage in voluntary self-studies of their own news content, to develop sources within Black communities...for newsrooms to adequately train all reporters to understand and report responsibly on events they find in those neighborhoods, to hire more Black reporters, to promote Black journalists into decision-making jobs, to engage the editors of Black newspapers in identifying stories and story perspectives, and to expand journalism education at high school and college levels for young African Americans who could enter and transform the journalism industry (Byerly and Wilson II, 2009, p. 212).

At the time the Kerner Report was issued, very little diversity existed among the nation's journalists. While women, minority and marginalized journalists have participated in journalism in the U.S. since the colonial period, they were scarce until the mid- to late-nineteenth century. In the 1830s, new technologies such as the steam press allowed for newspapers to be printed and reproduced faster and at a far lesser cost. In addition, several social factors, such as urbanization and increased literacy rates, expanded potential audiences for newspapers. The penny press revolutionized U.S. journalism's funding model by relying on one-off street sales and advertising revenue to cover operating costs and generate profit, a stark contrast to the subscription-based and political party-backed funding model of the colonial, revolutionary and early republic newspapers (Fahs, 2011). Thus, with the explosion in both the supply of and demand for newspapers, and publishers' (and advertisers') desire to attract women readers, women began to be hired as reporters in greater numbers. They were, however, mostly relegated to the "women's pages" to write about topics of perceived interest to women, such as fashion and society gossip (Chambers, Steiner & Fleming, 2010; Lutes, 2018). Nevertheless, the "women's pages" in the penny and yellow newspapers represented sites where women and minority journalists found opportunities – even if their abilities and contributions continued to be marginalized (Chambers, Steiner and Fleming, 2004). While the landscape for non-white and non-men journalists has

undoubtedly improved over the last century-and-a-half, U.S. journalism has not achieved proportional representation of journalists relative to the overall population. Women comprise about 40 percent of newsroom employees (Grieco, 2019) while journalists of color represent around 22 percent of all salaried newsroom employees in the U.S. (Clark, 2019). There seems, however, to be a generational shift occurring in terms of gender: women ages 18 to 29 comprise 51 percent of newsroom employees, which is proportional to their share of the overall population of U.S. workers (Grieco, 2018).

The issue of newsroom diversity has been hotly contested by journalism practitioners and scholars over the last five decades. While there is little disagreement that newsrooms should more proportionately reflect the communities in which they are situated – that is, more diverse and minority reporters should be hired – it remains undetermined whether increasing the number of diverse journalists in news organizations actually results in better and fairer coverage of distinct communities. Those who are skeptical about the power of increasing the diversity of coverage by increasing the diversity of reporters argue that structural forces like longstanding journalistic norms constrain the ability of diverse journalists to make an impact on coverage at the individual level. The evident failure of theories of “critical mass” underscores this skepticism (Steiner, 2012). Originally a concept in nuclear physics, critical mass refers to a point that serves as a catalyst for an irreversible chain reaction. Adapted to social-scientific studies of gender, racial minorities, and other marginalized identities and groups, this theory posits that once marginalized people make up a certain proportion of organizations, they will have reached a point in which they are able to make a meaningful positive impact on their organizations. In other words, there would come a point in which newsrooms would become sufficiently diverse

such that there would be a “change in organizational culture” (Shor, van de Rijt and Miltsov, 2019, p. 48).

However, previous research largely shows that this has not come to materialize. In the case of gender parity, as the numbers of women began reaching critical mass in the proportions suggested by scholars, the tone and content of news did not noticeably change. As such, “the consensus among news scholars is that the gender...of journalists [is] not sufficient to affect news content or newsroom culture” (Meyers and Gayle, 2015, p. 295). For example, Beam and Di Cicco (2010) conducted a study in which ten daily newspapers that underwent a change from a man to a woman managing editor were compared with ten similar newspapers that did not undergo a management change (that is, they had a man managing editor for the entirety of the study period). Content from all papers was captured at two points in time – before and after the first group’s managerial changes – and analyzed to determine whether the shift in gender at the top altered the newspapers’ content as compared to the second group’s content. The researchers found very subtle differences in the output of the women-led newsrooms, such as types of topics covered (“coverage of business and politics/government/national security dipped slightly at the women-led treatment newspapers while increasing slightly at the men-led papers”) as well as in types of stories featured (“more emphasis on features or news features and less emphasis on straight-news stories”) (Beam and Di Cicco, 2010, pp. 400, 402). However, many of these findings, while anecdotal, were not statistically significant, indicating a miniscule effect in having majority-women leadership.

Craft and Wanta (2004) compared news coverage at thirty different newspapers, some featuring “high” proportions of women editors and some featuring “low” proportions of women

editors (again, no exact measurement defined what constituted a high or low proportion, but the former had an average of 66 percent women editors, and the latter had an average of 23 percent). The researchers found that while men and women reporters covered the same types of beats in majority-women newsrooms, men reporters covered politics more than women at minority-women newsrooms, while more women covered beats such as education. In addition, in terms of tone of the content, “newspapers with a high percentage of women in managerial positions tended to report more positive news and newspapers with a low percentage of women in managerial positions tended to report more negative news” (Craft and Wanta, 2004, p. 134). However, again, there was generally no difference in issue agendas between the majority-women and minority-women newspapers. This leads Craft and Wanta (2004) to draw a similar conclusion that while women have some impact on newsrooms, the evidence does “not support drawing a straight line from reporter or editor gender to news content that somehow flows out of one’s gender” (Craft and Wanta, 2004, p. 136).

Shor, van de Rijt and Miltsov’s (2019) findings reiterate much of the research so far discussed. In their examination of 212 newspapers in various U.S. locations from 2004 to 2009, they found a modest increase in positive coverage correlated with an increase of women editors. Once again, though, these changes were modest at best, and as a whole, there was no statistically significant evidence that “the gender composition of newsrooms...considerably affect[s] either the quantity of women’s representation in the news or the tone with which they are covered” (Ibid., p. 54).

Everbach (2006) considered the content of a newspaper with an all-women management team in a pair of studies. A content analysis published in 2005 revealed that the content of the

*Sarasota Herald-Tribune*, a newspaper in western Florida with a circulation of about 100,000 at the time of the study, “did not differ from other mainstream U.S. newspapers,” suggesting that “the female management team clearly did not change news values regarding content selection” (Everbach, 2006, p. 479). In a follow-up ethnographic study, Everbach (2006) examined how the women managers of the *Herald-Tribune* perceived their impact on newsroom culture. She found that the women managers claimed they made positive impacts on newsroom culture and that their newspaper fostered an open and inclusive environment distinct from that of men-led newsrooms. They pointed to elements such as “its acceptance of family concerns, its gender fairness, the openness of management, and the feeling that the newspaper staff worked as a team rather than a hierarchy” (Everbach, 2006, p. 488). However, despite the perceptions expressed by management and staff, the earlier content analysis demonstrated that they had no tangible effects on the content the paper ultimately put out.

Many of the insights thus far discussed about the ambiguous evidence of the impact of gender on content diversity also applies to the racial and ethnic diversity of journalists. Bodinger-de Uriarte and Valgeirsson (2014) conducted a comprehensive study of the state of diversity in U.S. newsrooms through interview surveys with over 600 journalists and analysis of professional association documents and reports. The authors found that news organizations continue to fall short on reaching established diversity benchmarks because “meaningful diversification of staff and news coverage is impeded by established newsroom culture and by the lack of structural mechanisms to facilitate such change” (Bodinger-de Uriarte and Valgeirsson, 2014, p. 399). A substantial increase in newsroom diversity numbers would require “a cohesive mission, consistent philosophical and material reinforcement of new values and

practices, and changes in practitioner role definitions” (Bodinger-de Uriarte and Valgeirsson, 2014, p. 399). Similarly, through their interviews with minority journalists at four mainstream outlets, Johnston and Flamiano (2007, p. 111) found that journalists claimed, in order for true change in diversity in media coverage to occur, diversity “(a) cannot be achieved until racist traditions and patterns in their newspapers’ coverage are addressed, (b) must be seen as being a critical and important news value.” Thus, the evidence that diversifying along, for example, the axes of race and gender is mixed at best. While it is undoubtedly a good idea to increase the diversity of reporters in newsrooms, the extent of their impact on news coverage is ambiguous.

However, it is possible that newsroom-level changes – that is, changes enacted and enforced by newsroom leadership – can make a more significant difference than efforts at the reporter level. Rivas-Rodriguez et al. (2004) tested the perception of journalists about the impact of a minority in a newsroom leadership position through a survey of members of the four major minority journalist associations – the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ), the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA), and the Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA). The authors (2004, p. 52) found that, overall, minority journalists said that a minority newsroom leader makes a positive difference in four main areas – “the news operation’s sensitivity to racism, its coverage of minority groups, providing greater job opportunities for all minorities, and influencing how the news media think about minority groups.” However, results were more mixed when further defining the category of respondent. For example, journalists who reported higher job satisfaction – and, thus, might have suffered less workplace microaggressions or discrimination – were more likely to perceive minority newsroom leaders as making a difference. Further, men were more likely than women to indicate the positive effect of a minority

newsroom leader. Interpreting this finding through an intersectional lens, perhaps journalists with multiple marginalized identities are less likely to believe that minority newsroom leadership will make a meaningful impact on its own (Rivas-Rodriguez et al., 2004).

However, there is evidence that minority and marginalized journalists feel that they can make positive impacts on the quantity and quality of coverage at mainstream news organizations. Nishikawa et. al. (2009), in a survey of 18 Black and Latino journalists at mainstream news organizations, found that the journalists claimed they could make contributions to better portrayals of different groups by “clarifying misconceptions about their communities and breaking down stereotypes” (Nishikawa et. al., 2009, p. 251). Journalists also said that having a diverse group of editors and newsroom leaders who could play significant roles in story assignments, greenlighting stories, and story editing, was crucial. According to Johnston and Flamiano (2007, p. 125), “having a diverse newsroom was very important, but even more critical to these reporters was having persons of color in positions of editorial power at the newspaper.”

Thus, while normative journalistic processes imbued in mainstream news organizations necessarily restrict the individual impacts of minority journalists, Nishikawa et. al. (2009, pp. 254-255) found that “minority journalists push beyond normative constraints and feel they make a difference in how the mainstream media report the news, implying that a diversified newsroom can improve media coverage of minority communities and issues. The diversity of perspectives minority journalists add to the newsroom may make for fuller, more nuanced, and richer portraits of their news subjects.” Journalists’ perceptions that they can produce more equitable and inclusive journalism, coupled with newsroom level changes, may provide a promising direction for implementing such changes.

## Diversity in media coverage

Journalism scholars and practitioners have argued that in addition to diversifying the people who produce the news, it is also crucial to diversify the scope and content of media coverage. A preponderance of scholarship has argued that anyone who is not a white man continues to be both under- and mis-represented in news coverage (e.g., Poindexter, Smith and Heider, 2003; Armstrong, 2004; Sui and Paul, 2017). Diversifying news content would involve not only increasing coverage of issues of interest to minority and marginalized communities, but also improve the representation of those groups in news coverage (Ross, 2019).

Previous research has largely shown that non-whites are underrepresented as topics in news coverage. In a study of 857 stories that aired on 84 newscasts, Owens (2008) found that nearly 80 percent of the stories centered a white person. Further, more than 90 percent of sound bites in stories about “politics, religion, and science/technology” – and more than 80 percent of sound bites in stories about “health/medicine, human interest, economics, crime and education” – were of white people (Owens, 2008, p. 361). More recently, Sui and Paul (2017) examined 2426 stories in local newspapers and found that only five percent of them covered Latinos.

Additionally, early research demonstrably showed that women were both under- and mis-represented in news coverage. For example, Armstrong and Boyle (2011, p. 160) considered the “news treatment of women in the context of social protest.” The researchers investigated both the proportion of women in news coverage of abortion protests over a 46-year period, asking whether this number improved after the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, as well as how favorably women were portrayed in news stories. They found that, in general, women continued to be underrepresented in news coverage after *Roe*: “the sex disparity between mentions of men and

women generally continued in the context of news coverage of abortion protests, as men appeared more frequently than women as sources – both before and after the *Roe. v. Wade* decision” (Armstrong and Boyle, 2011., p. 171). Similarly, Armstrong (2004), in a content analysis of nearly 900 news stories, found that men were both featured more frequently and more prominently in news stories. Further, Armstrong (p. 149) found that “female writers were more likely to write about women and showcase women in news coverage, whereas male writers were more likely to include males in their stories.”

In addition, when women do appear in news content, they are “disproportionally portrayed in family roles, such as housewife, spouse, or parent, or in so-called “soft” professions such as education and health. In contrast, men are portrayed in “hard” professions, such as business and law (D’Heer et. al., 2019). Len-Ríos et. al. (2005) considered the visual representation of women in news coverage. The researchers examined written and visual content from two newspapers – a medium- circulation paper and a large-circulation paper – during a one-year period. They found that “newspapers also sustain gender stereotypes by showing women in more ‘feminine’ news sections and men in more ‘masculine’ sections” in both written and visual content (Len-Ríos et. al., 2005, p.165). Additionally, Len-Ríos et. al. (2005) found that news staff generally believed that men and women were equally represented in both visual and written coverage, while readers’ perceptions more closely matched the actual proportions of representation found in coverage.

More recent research on representations of women in news is slightly more promising, if still mixed. In a study of the online news website Vice.com, D’Heer et. al. (2019, p. 267) found that “women are slightly better represented in Vice.com when compared to previous research on traditional news media.” In addition, the researchers found “no differences with respect to the

representation of men and women in news images” (p. 267). Slakoff (2020), however, found that media coverage of minority women continues to misrepresent them. For example, Latina women are often subjected to stereotypes that depict them as lawbreakers, especially as it related to immigration; Black women continue to be portrayed as “angry, lesbian or both”; and, when Native American women appear in news coverage, it is overwhelmingly as missing or murdered victims (Slakoff, 2020, p. 3).

An abundance of previous research has also demonstrated that racial and ethnic minorities are mis-represented in news coverage. Mainstream coverage of Black communities, for example, tends to emphasize negative and stereotypical aspects and fails to place issues within proper historical and sociocultural contexts (Lowery, 2020). Several early studies point to these failings. Dixon and Linz (2000) found that Blacks and Latinos were much more likely than whites to be depicted as “lawbreakers.” Poindexter, Smith and Heider (2003, p. 531) found that “Black-focused stories (69%) were almost two and a half times more likely than White-focused stories (28%) to be about crime.” Recent research has yielded more mixed findings. Dixon (2017) found that Black Americans were proportionally represented “across all roles including as perpetrators, victims, and officers.” Sui and Paul (2017, p. 286), however, found that, in addition to being under-represented, “when Latinos do get covered, they are mostly included in news stories on immigration and crime, and are depicted using predominantly negative racial stereotypes.”

### Feminist standpoint epistemology

Feminist standpoint epistemology (FSE) challenges traditional modes of knowledge production by interrogating the basis upon which this knowledge is formed. Because white men

have historically controlled the means of knowledge production, norms such as objectivity and impartiality have largely been institutionalized as default requisites for the production of knowledge. Feminist standpoint epistemology, however, challenges these supposed value-free norms by arguing that “knowledge comes from someplace: a standpoint, which is partly grounded in, *inter alia*, embodied experience” (Steiner, 2018, p. 1856). It is not possible to produce knowledge that is completely impartial because investigators bring their own experiences, viewpoints, and attitudes to the table. These “standpoints” are the result of how each person experiences the world due to intersecting identity markers such as race, gender, sexuality, national origin, socioeconomic status, etc. Feminist standpoint epistemology thus asserts “the socially situated nature” of knowledge claims (Durham, 1998, p. 127).

Not only does feminist standpoint epistemology argue that truly impartial knowledge is not possible, but that acknowledging the positionalities inherent within knowledge building results in more epistemologically sound claims. In other words, by “foreground[ing] experience instead of claiming to eliminate” it, and by demanding “transparency, accountability, comprehensiveness, consistency, and reflexivity from the subject,” feminist standpoint epistemology in fact produces more reliable results than other supposedly objective frameworks (Steiner, 2018, pp. 1855-1856). Haraway (1988, p. 578) likewise notes that norms such as objectivity threaten “our budding sense of collective historical subjectivity and agency and our ‘embodied’ accounts of the truth.” Harding (1992) proposes the term “strong objectivity” to describe this norm of knowledge production grounded in partiality and experience. If we accept that knowledge can never truly be value-free, as it will always be mediated by socially situated

people, then we can begin to make genuine assertions about producing “stronger standards of objectivity” in knowledge claims (Harding, 1992, p. 438).

Several scholars have advocated for the implementation of FSE tenets into the practice of journalism. Steiner (2018) argues that the objectivity paradigm is failing journalism on multiple levels, exacerbating a mistrust in journalistic institutions that has led to increased polarization, susceptibility to disinformation, and embracing of “alternative facts.” Durham (1998) similarly advocates for alternative frameworks for news production, even if the objectivity paradigm can never be truly eradicated. As for what news stories would look like if reported through the lens of feminist standpoint epistemology, Durham (1998, pp. 136-137) suggests that they “would need to incorporate the ways in which the various positions on an issue have been structured along gender, class, racial, or other lines... [T]he identification and examination of competing social interests, beginning with the most marginalized, would be at the nucleus of every story.” For example, in the Meyers and Gayle (2015, p. 306) study on Black women journalists, “many of the journalists emphasized that they brought a “sensibility” to their work that was lacking in their white coworkers. This sensibility—their standpoint—is the product of their social location as both African Americans and women.” These practices, Steiner (2018, p. 1854) argues, “could help solve journalists’ credibility crisis.”

Several scholars have also advocated for a practice of journalism that more intentionally incorporates reflexivity into the process (e.g., Carlson and Lewis, 2019b; Verkest, 2021). Ahva (2013, p. 719) defines journalistic reflexivity as “journalists’ capacity for self-awareness; their ability to recognize influences and changes in their environment, alter the course of their actions, and renegotiate their professional self-images as a result.” In other words, journalists’ ability to

critically reflect on what works in their practice of journalism – as well as what their blind spots are – better enables them to adapt in new or unfamiliar situations and consciously work toward producing more ethical and equitable journalism. As such, scholars like Cabas-Mijares (2022, p. 14) argue for the possibility of a “reflexive and social justice-oriented form of journalism, which understands engagement and advocacy as key parts of professional practice, not threats to it.”

## Chapter 3: Methodology and Method

This dissertation uses a qualitative textual analysis of metajournalistic articles and Twitter posts to answer the research questions. This chapter provides an overview of and justification for my choice in method and describes the process of data collection and analysis. I begin by defining metajournalistic discourse and explain why it is an ideal object of study for this dissertation. Next, I define qualitative and feminist textual analysis and justify its use as the method of choice for this dissertation. Finally, I describe the procedure for data collection of the metajournalistic articles and Twitter posts and how I conducted the analysis of the articles and tweets.

### *Metajournalistic discourse*

Metajournalistic articles serve as the texts that form the main data set for this dissertation. When journalists reflect on their profession and write about it, we call this “metajournalistic discourse” – in other words, journalism about journalism (Carlson, 2016). Vos and Thomas (2018, p. 2002) state that “journalism is, at bottom, a belief system and this belief system finds expression through metajournalistic discourse.” Carlson (2016, p. 350) argues for journalism to be viewed as a cultural practice that is deeply dynamic: it is “embedded in specific contexts, variable across time and space, and inclusive of internal and external actors.”

Because definitions of journalism are culturally constructed and always in flux, metajournalistic discourse is often employed by journalists as a tool for performing journalistic boundary work (Perreault & Perreault, 2021). In the absence of formal accrediting standards, such as entrance exams or licensing boards, for the journalism field, journalists use metajournalistic discourse as a space in which journalists can assert what they perceive to be

acceptable journalistic practices and legitimate forms of news production (Carlson, 2018b). As journalists struggle to delineate the boundaries of the journalistic field, metajournalistic discourse is significant because “prevailing attitudes affect the distribution of resources and epistemic authority” (Perreault & Vos, 2020, p. 161). By articulating “why journalists are covering something a certain way and what the motivations are for covering it that way,” journalists argue for journalism’s legitimacy as authoritative chroniclers of current events (Perreault and Perreault, 2021, p. 979). The primary audience of metajournalistic discourse is often other journalists or members of the journalism profession, but its publication in news outlets signals an intended wider, general audience (Vos and Perreault, 2020).

In addition to reifying acceptable journalistic practices, metajournalistic discourse can also be used to challenge established journalistic norms and advocate for the reconfiguration of certain norms and practices. Vos and Perreault (2020, p. 474) argue that the discursive ability of journalism practitioners to negotiate journalism’s institutional boundaries allows them to “try to situate emergent practices within existing norms, or... try to reconfigure the norms.” That is, when new types of journalism, or ways of practicing journalism, are suggested, metajournalistic discourse is one avenue through which journalists can discuss and negotiate the place of these emergent features. They can be accepted and placed within established journalistic norms, dismissed as outside the boundaries of journalistic practice, or used as catalysts for discussions about redefining journalistic boundaries in order to include them within those boundaries. For example, journalists had to negotiate the place of gaming journalism within normative journalistic boundaries (Perreault and Vos, 2020). Practices can be negotiated, too: for example, the use of web analytics has gradually been accepted and incorporated into the newsmaking

process, to the point where they are now considered a valuable decision-making tool for newsrooms (Belair-Gagnon and Holton, 2018).

This dissertation investigates how journalists perceive the impacts of their personal identities and experiences on news production. Of particular interest is whether journalists place these impacts within or outside contemporary journalistic boundaries, and whether they advocate for reconsidering those boundaries in order for journalism to be more accountable to the communities it serves. In addition, this dissertation examines discourse by journalists geared toward other journalists in terms of recommendations for covering issues and communities with which one might not have an identity- or experience-based connection. Therefore, metajournalistic discourse is ideal for investigating these lines of inquiry.

#### *Twitter as a site of metajournalistic discourse*

As newsrooms have become increasingly networked over the last couple of decades, engaging with, and participating in, social media have become an integrated and routinized part of journalists' job responsibilities (Lewis and Molyneux, 2018; Papanagnou, 2021). The microblogging platform Twitter, which was founded in 2006, has developed into a particularly important site of journalistic activity (Vanian, 2022). Hermida (2013, p. 295) has characterized Twitter as "a platform for networked flows of information, facilitating the collaborative creation and curation of news content." Journalists are expected to post breaking news updates, share recently published articles, write commentary, and engage with other journalists and audience members (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre, 2013). As of this writing in 2023, journalists still use Twitter as a key medium for information sharing, despite significant changes to the platform since its acquisition by Elon Musk on October 27, 2022 (Conger and Hirsch, 2022).

The incorporation of Twitter (and social media in general) into the journalism profession has also had profound effects on journalistic norms and practices. The platform has given journalists an outlet to express themselves beyond a story byline and a direct line of communication to audiences. As Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2012, abstract) found, “journalists more freely express opinions [on Twitter], a common microblogging practice but one which contests the journalistic norm of objectivity (impartiality and nonpartisanship).” In addition, Barnard (2018) found that journalists have used Twitter to express solidarity with activists and convey personal information. For example, during the racial justice protests in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, “journalists posted messages of shared experience, including instances of police threatening to arrest or otherwise punishing them for doing their job” (Barnard, 2018, p. 2260). Put another way, the affordances for journalists of new media platforms such as Twitter – including the ability to directly speak to and interact with other journalists and audiences – are expanding notions of acceptable journalistic behavior. Through Twitter, journalists continue to express more personalized sentiments and discuss – amongst each other as well as with an eye towards general readers – what is and what is not working in the journalistic profession (Lasorsa, 2012).

Twitter has been an especially important tool for marginalized journalists to express concerns about the journalism industry and journalistic practices. Lowery (2020) observes that Twitter has provided a platform for marginalized journalists to “speak directly to the public” without having to clear several gatekeeping hurdles, as they would need to do in order to have their discourse published in traditional media outlets. In addition, the ability to generate public attention and support on Twitter can be an effective means by which marginalized journalists can provoke changes in workplace conditions: as Lowery (2020), put it, “if recent years have taught

black journalists anything, it's that public embarrassment appears to make our bosses better hear us." Women journalists, for their part, have been found to be more "transparent" on Twitter than men journalists (Lasorsa, 2012). However, one consequence to women journalists' use of Twitter is that they are "more likely to [be] unfairly singled out for using social media in ways their managers claim undercuts their organization's professed neutrality" (Nelson, 2021).

Given the above, it is also important for this dissertation to consider metajournalistic discourse occurring on Twitter. Not only is being active on Twitter now embedded into journalists' standard routines, but Twitter has also specifically provided women and marginalized journalists a public platform to express grievances with their employers and discuss the relevance and utility of normative journalistic practices (Hedman and Djerf-Pierre, 2013).

### Textual analysis

Textual analysis is one of the most popular and frequently used methods in mass communication and journalism studies. Fursich (2009, p. 240) defines it as the "qualitative analysis of media content in the cultural-critical tradition." Media texts are ripe objects of study because of the quality and quantity of information that they provide. They "are richly infused with the history, idiomatic speech, and cultural logics of the people who made them" (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, p. 235). Qualitative textual analysis looks "beyond the manifest content of media [and] focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text" (Fursich, 2009, p. 240). That is, a qualitative textual analysis allows researchers to draw nuanced and complex inferences about texts, taking into account several contextual factors. Analysis of discourse contained in media texts "seeks to understand language in the institutional and social

contexts in which it is located” (Perreault and Vos, 2020, p. 165). It is therefore an ideal method for investigating how journalists construct and articulate meaning in their texts.

In a qualitative textual analysis, scholars “probe a research question inductively by finding patterns in the empirical material” (Fursich, 2014, p. 2). Researchers conduct multiple, in-depth readings of texts, beginning with a “long preliminary soak,” as Hall (1975) famously put it. This prolonged engagement with the dataset allows researchers to become deeply familiar with the material. Using their “intuitive sense” of the material acquired through this preliminary soak, researchers then define and construct categories for analysis of the text (Hall, 1975). In other words, “textual scholars use open coding, not predefined codebooks, to organize, condense, and interpret their material: they decide on specific codes based on observation of patterns in the text” (Fursich, 2014, pp. 2-3).

#### Feminist textual analysis

This dissertation uses a feminist approach in its analysis of data. This method has proven especially useful for feminist researchers in interrogating the content of media texts. It is important to keep in mind that ‘feminist’ does not directly equate to ‘women’; in other words, a study can be feminist without being only or primarily centered around gender issues. Textual analysis has successfully been employed by feminist researchers across disciplines. This section will explain what feminist textual analysis is.

Two main characteristics distinguish a textual analysis as feminist. The first is aim: feminist media researchers believe that by interrogating the documents that a society produces, it is possible to “resist patriarchal understandings of social reality that push women and other minorities to the peripheries of their culture and social interpretive processes” (Leavy, 2007, p. 224). The second is intent: feminist textual analysis assumes that “dominant narratives, images,

ideas, and stereotyped representations can be exposed and challenged” (Leavy, 2007, p. 224).

That is, feminist researchers undertake textual analyses to bring to light issues regarding the hegemonic representations of women and marginalized groups.

Therefore, the major difference between a traditional textual analysis and a feminist one is not necessarily differences in the research design and implementation, but rather in the starting point. As Leavy (2007, p. 236) explains, “feminist textual analysis is important because when looking through a feminist lens, researchers are likely to ask different research questions, approach the data differently, and use their resulting knowledge to effect intellectual, social, and political change.” As such, “because feminists are centrally concerned with women and other minorities, they have asked questions of popular culture in ways that would not be possible from a perspective other than feminism” (Ibid., 245).

This dissertation is concerned with how journalists, and in particular journalists who claim a minority or marginalized identity or experience, articulate the impacts of those identities or experiences on their newswork. I thus employ a feminist lens as a researcher in my approach to data analysis. I ask in what ways normative journalistic practices affect these journalists and how they propose to redraw journalism’s professional boundaries to be more sensitive to these embodied identities and experiences and make journalism more accountable to the communities it serves.

### *Justification of method*

An advantage of textual analysis is that it is unobtrusive. It takes as its data set media texts that already exist and have already been produced. This means that, unlike ethnographic or survey methods, creating a data set does not depend on the responses of other people. As Weber (1985, p. 30) explains, “the messages are separate and apart from communicators and receivers.

Armed with a strong theoretical framework, the researcher can draw conclusions from content evidence without having to gain access to communicators who may be unwilling or unable to be examined directly.” Because a researcher is using pre-existing data, textual analysis is also not prone to the same types of errors as ethnographic methods, which involve human subjects who are aware that they are being analyzed. Therefore, textual analysis can be an attractive research method for the relative straightforwardness of generating a data set for a study and little risk of the introduction of errors by the research subject.

In addition, textual analysis (like other qualitative methods) emphasizes and centers the role of the researcher in data collection and analysis. Textual analysis can be characterized by “the reflexive and highly interactive nature of the investigator, concepts, data collection, and analysis” (Altheide, 1996, p. 16). Rather than have an a priori study design, textual analyses allow for new categories to be formulated from the data based on the interaction between the researcher and the data. Textual analysis is thus “systematic but not rigid. Categories and variables initially guide the study, but others are allowed and expected to emerge throughout the study, including an orientation toward *constant discovery* and *constant comparison* of relevant situations” (Altheide, 1996, p. 1, emphasis in original). In textual analysis, the emphasis is not on “coding and counting,” but rather on comparing categories, writing summaries, sorting the data into general themes (refinement of concepts and categories might be necessary here), and reporting findings that are descriptive, comparative and analytical in nature. As such, rather than attempting to prove or disprove already formulated hypotheses, textual analysis focuses instead on identifying emergent patterns in texts.

Finally, textual analysis is extremely useful for the types of insights it can produce – namely, it allows us to understand the why. Because “grounding our assessments of the social

world in qualitatively oriented research helps preserve the processual character of social life even as we are able to capture it in analysis,” textual analysis may be able to better produce inferences about meaning than quantitative content analysis (Altheide, 1996, p. 44). That is, textual analysis may be better at drawing appropriate inferences on the intentions of a speaker or text (Holsti, 1969, p. 10).

However, textual analysis (like other qualitative methods) is typically not meant to be generalizable or replicable. Because of the central role of the researcher in textual analysis – and the nuances in interpretation that stem from the researcher’s positionality – no two researchers will analyze qualitative data in exactly the same way. Thus, textual analysis is “is designed to allow, with discipline, for some of the vagueness and flexibility which aid the creative generation of theory” (Glaser, 1965, p. 438). The findings presented in this dissertation therefore do not purport to be generalizable to all journalists or newsrooms; rather, they illuminate the perceptions and experiences of a wide array of journalists working within the contemporary media landscape.

### *Researcher positionality*

Because this dissertation is methodologically qualitative, and argues for the strength of knowledge produced through the framework of feminist standpoint epistemology, it is prudent to acknowledge my positionalities as a researcher in relation to this dissertation. In qualitative studies, the researcher plays a crucial role in generating findings and insights from data. Rather than being considered a weakness or drawback, the researcher’s centrality in qualitative analyses is a “core [aspect] of inquiry” (Reich, 2021, p. 576). I thus recognize that the totality of my identities – for example, as a woman and an immigrant, usually considered marginalized; and as

a white, a cisgender and straight, and college-educated person, usually considered dominant – has undoubtedly shaped my interpretations of the data:

Feminist standpoint epistemology goes further than simply claiming that knowledge is socially situated by arguing that the epistemically strongest knowledge would be produced from the perspective of the marginalized. Those in dominant social positions are in fact limited in what they can “understand about themselves and the world around them” because they have historically benefited from the shelter that this social location provides (Harding, 1992, p. 442). Alcoff (1991, p. 7) reminds us that, actually, “certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous” because they are not able to take into account the experiences and needs of those more marginalized. Meanwhile, starting an intellectual project with the interests of marginalized groups in mind will “generate illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant group lives” (Harding, 1992, p. 445). Knowledge that originates from marginalized standpoints will then better serve those marginalized groups. Feminist standpoint epistemology thus “sets out a rigorous ‘logic of discovery’ intended to maximize the objectivity of the results of research, and thereby to produce knowledge that can be *for* marginalized people” (Harding, 1992, p. 444).

Alcoff (1991) speaks to the commitments of feminist standpoint epistemology in what she terms “the problem of speaking for others.” As she explains, “who is speaking to whom turns out to be as important for meaning and truth as what is said” (Alcoff., p. 12). In society there are inevitably situations in which some will be called on to speak “for” others, such as when citizens elect representatives to government bodies. Social institutions are largely governed by hegemonic logics, which have been normalized to stand in as society’s default values. In sectors like journalism, law, academia, etc., marginalized ‘others’ are often spoken for in problematic

ways. As such, “rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations of domination, exploitation, and subordination” (Alcoff, 1991, p. 15).

On the other hand, in some cases it is too reductionist to say that you cannot ever speak for anyone. In order to maintain societal function, it can be argued that speaking for others is often necessary. So, as Alcoff (1991, p. 19) suggests, “instead of retreating from speaking for others, [one might] devise methods to decrease the dangers.” She suggests the approach of ‘speaking to’ rather than ‘speaking for’ others. This involves those in dominant positions reflecting not only on the context through which they are privileged to speak, and the effect that their positions have on what and how they speak, but also on the potential effects that their words could, intentionally or unintentionally, inflict upon others. Essentially, “speaking should always carry with it an accountability and responsibility for what one says” (Ibid., p. 25).

I thus heeded Harding’s (1992) and Alcoff’s (1991) calls when collecting, analyzing and interpreting data for this dissertation. I always strove to speak to, rather than for, others, and to start from the perspective of the marginalized.

### *Data collection*

#### Articles

The metajournalistic article is one of two main units of analysis in this dissertation. In order to be included in the final sample, the metajournalism needed to fulfill three main criteria: first, it needed to be written by a journalist, former journalist, student journalist, journalism educator, media executive or journalism-related organization. While I required that authors have (or have had) some sort of direct involvement in the journalism industry, I was open to all kinds of journalists (those working for legacy outlets, digitally native outlets, or freelancers, for

example) as well as those who were not working journalists but who had other forms of expertise about the industry. In this way, I was able to capture a wide variety of perspectives within the metajournalistic discourse.

Second, the metajournalistic discourse needed to address some aspect of identity or experience relating to one or more of the three central issues considered in this study: racial justice; gender justice and women's rights; and LGBTQ+ rights. I chose to focus on a select group of contemporary issues in order to narrow down the data set into a manageable amount for a project of this scope. The three I selected represent some of the most salient contemporary social justice issues (Paul, 2019). The #MeToo movement marked a watershed moment in recent discourse about, and campaigns against, sexual harassment and assault (Brown, 2022). In addition, the June 2022 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn the *Roe v. Wade* decision, which legalized abortion at the federal level, also reignited discourse about reproductive rights with a new urgency (Henriquez & Gupta, 2023). The longstanding struggle for better treatment of, and more opportunities for, racial and ethnic minorities erupted with new vigor with the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, then subsequently the racial justice protests in 2020 following George Floyd's death (Chavez, 2019; Burch et. al., 2021). Finally, several advances in securing rights for the LGBTQ+ community – such as the 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision which federally legalized same sex marriage – to retreats – such as the numerous anti-trans “bathroom” bills that prohibit the use of bathrooms that did not match one's birth sex – have made the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and several other sexualities and gender identities an issue of contemporary relevance (Fredrickson & Wurman, 2015; Lopez, 2017). While I searched for articles based on these three central issues,

metajournalistic discourse about other identity markers included in those articles was also considered.

Finally, the metajournalistic discourse needed to be published online between 2012 and 2022. I chose 2012 as a starting point for two reasons: first, to concentrate the analysis on metajournalism written in the last decade, to ensure the recency and relevance of the discourse; and second, because 2012 marked the unofficial start of the Black Lives Matter movement with the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin (Chavez, 2019).

To collect articles, I searched the online archives of journalism-focused publications: *Poynter*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, and *Nieman* (specifically, *Nieman's* publications *NiemanReports* and *NiemanLab*). As trade publications that discuss industry trends and issues by and for journalists, they contain a high volume of metajournalistic discourse. I chose journalism trade publications as my primary source for metajournalistic discourse because, as Ferrucci, Nelson and Davis (2020, p. 1592) put it, “examining content published in trade publications allows for a deeper understanding of how journalism, as an interpretive community, talks to itself.” In addition, if a story pulled from any one of these publications fulfilled the criteria to be included in the final sample, I searched for any external links to other metajournalism within the story. Any story linked out from a story in the original sample that fulfilled the criteria was also included in the final sample. Therefore, the sample includes stories from a wide variety of online and digital outlets in addition to *Poynter*, *CJR* and *Nieman*. In total, the sample consisted of 186 articles. Of these, 32 came from *Poynter*, 52 from *CJR*, 31 from *NiemanReports*, and 14 from *NiemanLab*. Metajournalistic discourse was also found in student newspapers, blogs (on Medium and personal websites), and union websites. The other 55 stories

represent a wide variety of outlets, including Medium (5), *The New York Times* (3) and NPR (3) (see Table 1 below).

Because there is no precise way to capture metajournalistic discourse on the complex subjects of identity and experience, I used search terms in several combinations in order to capture as many of the articles that fit the criteria as possible. For metajournalistic articles about the impact of racial identity on reporting, I used the search keyphrase “journalism + identity + race.” For articles about the impact of experiences with racism on reporting, I used the search keyphrase “journalism + experience + race.” For articles about the impact of gender identity on reporting, I used the keyphrase “journalism + identity + gender.” For articles on the impact of gendered experiences on reporting, I used the keyphrase “journalism + experience + gender.” For articles on the impact of sexual orientation and identity in journalism, I used the keyphrases “journalism + identity + sexual orientation” and “journalism + identity + sexuality.” For articles on the impact of being a member of the LGBTQ+ journalist on reporting, I used the keyphrases “journalism + experience + sexual orientation” or “journalism + experience + sexuality.” I typed each of these keyphrases in the search bar of the three journalism-focused outlets. After excluding articles published before 2012, I clicked into every article that appeared as a search result. Then, I vetted each article thoroughly before adding it to the data set to ensure that its content relevantly discusses some aspect of the impact of journalists’ situated knowledges on their work (Johnson, 2016). I did this by reading through each article and determining whether or not it fit the criteria. Once I determined that an article should be added to the sample, I then clicked on every external link embedded into the text, as well as any stories deemed “related.” I then read through each of those to determine whether they fit the criteria and should be added to the sample. I repeated this process until the entire pool of potential articles had been exhausted. I

copied the author name, outlet, title and URL for each article onto a Google spreadsheet. Once all articles that would comprise the sample had been added to the spreadsheet, I also saved each article as a PDF on my computer and on a thumb drive.

Table 1: Metajournalistic Articles

Outlet	Number of Articles
Columbia Journalism Review	52
Poynter	32
NiemanReports	31
NiemanLab	14
Medium	5
The New York Times	3
NPR	3
Toronto Star	3
The Washington Post	2
Politico	2
CNN	1
Houston Chronicle	1
Bloomberg	1
Associated Press	1
Axios	1
Tampa Bay Times	1
Burlington Free Press	1
Statesman Journal	1
The Daily Beast	1
The Guardian	1
Vanity Fair	1
Pittsburgh City Paper	1
LAist	1
Grantland	1

The Establishment	1
The Stranger	1
The Walrus	1
The Root	1
Jezebel	1
Colorado Media Project	1
Latino Reporter	1
USC Annenberg Media	1
Blavity	1
LA Times Guild	1
The Emory Wheel	1
Stanford Daily	1
NowToronto	1
Advocate	1
Transom	1
Literary Hub	1

#### Twitter posts

The Twitter post (or “tweet”) is the second unit of analysis in this dissertation. Collecting metajournalistic Twitter posts for inclusion in the final sample presented many of the same challenges as the collection process of metajournalistic articles; namely, that there are no straightforward search terms capable of capturing the complexity of the issues of interest to this study. In addition, data collection on social media can be complex and inexact (Guha, 2017). Information flow on these platforms is fluid. On Twitter specifically, content output fluctuates based on several factors, including high and low periods of interest for a specific topic, the

capability of certain elite accounts to aid or constrain information flow, and the potential lifespans of different types of content (Wu et. al., 2011; Jurgens, Jungherr and Schoen, 2011). Therefore, I used the same combination of search terms that I used to collect the articles in order to capture as wide a range of Twitter metajournalism as possible. This also ensured consistency of search procedures and results between the articles and the Twitter posts.

I used Twitter's advanced search function to search for posts using each keyphrase. After entering each search term and narrowing results to 2012 or later, I read each of the "top" search results to determine whether it fit the criteria for inclusion in the sample. I repeated this process for each keyphrase. In addition, if, over the course of my regular Twitter use, I came across a post that fit the criteria of this study, I "liked" it to save it to my profile's "likes" tab. During data collection, I returned to the "liked" Tweets and re-read them to ensure they were appropriate for inclusion in the sample. In total, 93 distinct Twitter posts from advanced keyphrase searches and anecdotal encounters comprise the sample. For Twitter threads (i.e., a string of connected related tweets) in which more than one tweet in the thread fit the criteria for inclusion in the sample, I counted each tweet in the thread as a separate entry.

For each tweet, I copied the text, date, author's username, author's handle, and URL onto a Google spreadsheet. Data collection occurred in August and September of 2022, before the sale of Twitter to Elon Musk in October 2022 (Conger and Hirsch, 2022). Because of uncertainty regarding the future of the platform, I screenshotted each Tweet as an additional safeguard should online access to the Tweets disappear.

### Data analysis

I used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to aid me in analyzing the metajournalistic articles and tweets. For scholars studying metajournalistic discourse, NVivo has

been found “to enrich the investigation of journalism’s meaning-making activity” (Grunwald and Rupa, 2010). Software like NVivo is helpful in the creation and organization of a large number of codes from hundreds of pieces of text, and it provides a simple and straightforward way to easily find and manage categories and illustrative quotes.

Articles and tweets were coded using the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965). This approach to data analysis involves coding pieces of data into as many relevant categories as possible and, “while coding an incident for a category, compar[ing] it with the previous incidents coded in the same category” (Glaser, 1965, p. 439). Repeatedly thinking through the examples defining each category causes the category’s theoretical properties to emerge. From there, categories can be integrated or redefined to create larger themes. Perreault and Ferrucci (2020, pp. 1304-1305) note that “while the constant comparative method is often associated with grounded theory, [it] is well-suited to both etic coding, driven by theory and literature, and emic coding, driven by themes that emerge from data analysis.”

As previously mentioned, I first read through each article when determining whether or not to include it in the sample. Then, I imported the articles into NVivo in groups of eight to ten and read through each group of articles several more times. As I was reading, I made note of how journalists described the impacts of their identities and/or experiences when doing their job, any difficulties they encountered on account of a particular identity or experience, recommendations for other journalists when covering issues or communities with which they have no affiliation, etc. I did this by highlighting passages of text in NVivo and then assigning them to “codes.” I would either create a new code (if it had not yet been created) or assign them to already existing codes. As per the constant comparative method, I assigned each relevant passage into as many codes as I determined it fit. After coding the entire corpus of articles, I went through all of the

codes I created and further refined them by combining similar codes, renaming others, and redistributing barely used codes. I then coded the entire sample again using the revised set of codes. From there, several themes emerge, which I discuss in detail in the findings.

To describe the gender, racial, and sexual identity markers of journalists who either authored or were featured in the metajournalistic discourse I analyzed for this dissertation, I used a combination of publicly available information. For example, I looked at whether they listed pronouns on their Twitter or professional bios, self-identified within the metajournalistic discourse, or whether their gender, race and/or sexuality was identified by others in other articles or websites. In terms of their professional status, I either described them by their current position or their position at the time the metajournalism was authored.

## Chapter 4: “Any Good Journalist is an Activist for Truth”: The Relationship Between Journalists’ Identities and Experiences and News Production

On March 1, 2023, journalist Karen K. Ho (2023), a Canadian woman of Asian descent, sent a series of tweets questioning the ethical line between journalists supporting social causes in their personal capacity and activism that is incongruent with their professional roles:

I have seen white journalists fundraise for causes like victims of the Haiti earthquake, their PTA, affinity groups, and link to GoFundMes for colleagues with cancer. Genuinely, is that not considered activism? What are the defining lines?

Is belonging to a journalism union's organizing committee activism? Being an executive of a chapter of NABJ? Running a marathon to fundraise for a cancer charity? Writing about the US immigration process from a first-person perspective? Volunteering for a local conservation org?

Is advocating for First Amendment rights, democracy, meeting notes, open data, lower EDGAR fees, FOIA requests, better severance packages after layoffs, and equal pay also considered activism?

The same day, Anita Varma (2023), a journalism professor at the University of Texas at Austin who is of Southeast Asian descent, quote-tweeted Ho’s tweets and offered her sarcasm-tinged interpretation of these debates:

Activism for the status quo = “journalistic objectivity”

Activism for social justice = “crossing the line into advocacy”

Activism for social regression to undo civil rights = “endorsing traditional values”

Ho and Varma received several replies to the original tweets and the quote-tweet, respectively. Some underscored the notion that certain acts count as activism while others seemingly don’t. In response to Ho’s hypothetical examples, Jeremy Littau (2023), a journalism professor at Lehigh University and a white man, said:

On a much more basic level, journalists advocate for a free press all the dang time. But the list here is much less industry-specific and thus much more important.

Journalists advocate for things. It's part of the job, but they're also human beings.

Others pointed out the ambiguity regarding what positions count as activism, which seem to disproportionately disfavor causes associated with gender and racial minorities, may be harming the ability of news organizations to recruit and retain diverse journalists. Letrell Crittenden (2023), Director of Inclusion and Audience Growth at the American Press Institute and a Black man, argued “if your newsroom is struggling to recruit or retain diverse talent, a lack of clarity around this issue - what is activism - could be a significant factor.” Still others brought up that speaking up for their own humanity often brings charges of activism. Replying to Varma’s quote-tweet, Daylina Miller (2023), a non-binary reporter for WUSF, Tampa’s NPR station, said “it's frustrating when colleagues tell me I’m an activist when I’m simply saying people like me should be allowed to exist and get healthcare.”

This debate exemplifies increasingly prevalent tensions within journalistic communities about the relationship between established journalistic practices and values and journalists’ personal sensibilities. In an era of increased social justice agitation, and as media organizations continue to push to diversify their ranks as well as their content, these questions have become all the more relevant. This chapter will describe and explain how journalists perceive the extent of the roles that identity and/or experience should play in the production of news. It will then outline some of the ways in which reporters say journalism suffers because of a lack of what I’m calling “connection-based” reporting – that is, reporting produced by journalist(s) who share some identity or embodied experience with the issue or group they covered. Finally, this chapter will discuss how journalists reconcile these interactions with their conceptualization of journalists’ roles and responsibilities. It thus seeks to answer the first research question (RQ1):

How do journalists perceive the relationship between their embodied identities and experiences professional journalistic practices?

*Identities and experiences impossible to separate*

Most journalists whose metajournalism I analyzed expressed that their identities and/or lived experiences were impossible to separate from their work. That is, their identities or experiences, however each journalist individually defined them, impacted every aspect of their reporting process, whether consciously or subconsciously. As Jeremy Klaszus (2018), editor-in-chief of *The Sprawl*, a Calgary, Canada-based investigative outlet and a white man, succinctly put it: “we bring our class, race, worldview, experience etc. to our work. We can say we don’t—but we do.” Journalists said it is a fruitless exercise to pretend that journalists can separate their positionalities from the journalism they produce, as normative objectivity demands. Rather, according to the journalists, recognizing that all reporters bring their own perspectives into their work is a necessary first step in any discussions about how to make journalism more accessible and equitable.

Journalists further said that the ways by which their identities publicly present also impact how they move through the world and, consequently, how they do their jobs. Several journalists who identify as Black indicated that they consider it their primary identity, with their professional identity as journalists coming second. Even if they theoretically did not want their identities to impact their newswork, the visible nature of their race, which they cannot control, determined how it would impact their practice of journalism. As Tyrone Beason, a reporter at the *Seattle Times* and a Black man, said: “I may think of myself as a journalist, but the world thinks of me as a black dude, whether I like it or not. You can’t make that disappear, but how do you make it more apparent, but in a constructive way? How do I use what I bring to the table in my

work?” (quoted in *CJR* Editors, 2018). Mary C. Curtis (2020), a columnist at *Roll Call* and a Black woman, said she “quickly realized when I entered the business that every journalist wears his or her or their background into every newsroom or Page 1 meeting or press conference. It’s just that only some of us get called on it and judged because of it.” Aiyana Ishmael, a student journalist at Florida A&M University, echoed these sentiments, underscoring the centrality of her identity as a Black woman and the impact it has on how she practices journalism: “I’m a journalist, but I’m a black woman first. ... I can’t ever be a journalist first because the intersections of my identity are just larger than my career” (quoted in Edison, 2021).

Nevertheless, while journalists said that reporting on an issue or community with which they share an identity or experience does not automatically make them biased, there are certain levels of distance that journalists should keep in mind. As Steve Friess (2015), a freelance journalist who identifies as gay, put it: “there may be no problem with allowing a Latina to cover immigration reform, but would it be proper for her to cover the arrest of her own undocumented cousin? Jews can and have covered the Israeli-Palestinian issue with insight and balance for ages, but is it possible to reconcile having a *New York Times* reporter covering that region after his own son enlisted in the Israeli military?” Journalists thus drew a distinction between simply sharing an identity or experience with an issue or group, which can actually enhance reporting, and being personally involved with the subject of the story, which remains problematic.

#### *A lack of connection can lead to ignorant coverage*

Journalists also extensively discussed the ways in which not possessing a common identity or experience with those one covers can be detrimental. While an identity- or experience-based connection with an issue or group does not automatically guarantee that journalists will produce more equitable and inclusive coverage, journalists generally said that a

lack of connection can lead to incomplete, misinformed, or – at worst – ignorant coverage. Of course, this is not to say that every journalist with a connection to the subjects they cover will automatically produce more equitable coverage, nor that journalists without that connection will necessarily produce inadequate coverage. However, on balance, journalists said that reporting with an identity- or experience-based connection presents numerous advantages – and that not sharing a common identity or experience can present certain, specific disadvantages.

Journalists argued that reporters and editors who do not share a connection with those they cover can often produce misguided coverage because they lack basic knowledge of the things about which they’re writing. Freelance journalist Nicole Taylor, a Black woman, said “it can be very difficult when you’re working with an editor who doesn’t understand cultural nuances. ... I realize that I sometimes have to fight for certain phrases or things. A lot of times, the editor just doesn’t know that” (quoted in Sen, 2018). For example, freelance journalist Tara Murtha (2017) recounted difficulties she had with editors while covering abortions: “given the myths that permeate the abortion debate, it’s unsurprising that editors —disproportionately white men — would lack basic knowledge about abortion as a medical procedure.” She also quoted a fellow journalist who experienced similar frustrations, saying: “It was very clear the editor thought ... abortion required something akin to major surgery. There are a lot of assumptions that they bring to editing that are not born [sic] out in what we know about abortion” (quoted in Murtha, 2017). Jenni Monet (2019a), an indigenous freelance journalist, had to ask her editors at *High Country News* to change a headline that read “Thanksgiving at Standing Rock, Activists Dig In” after reminding them about the fraught relationship between Native Americans and that holiday. Of an article about Native American politicians in *The Economist*, Monet (2019a) said “throughout the piece is the use of out-of-touch language, points of view, and cringeworthy art”

and that it exemplifies “the lazy, discriminatory and damaging writing that comes from the deep roots of colonization in our newsrooms.” Sometimes journalists are aware of their ignorance: about covering abortion, Issac Bailey (2019), a journalist and professor at Davidson College, confessed: “I’m a male veteran journalist who is only now realizing the depths of my ignorance when it comes to ‘women’s issues’. ... I didn’t do the necessary thinking—and listening—to better understand this issue from a women’s point-of-view.”

Sometimes, journalists simply do not notice that they have blind spots regarding certain issues or communities because their privilege shielded them from those considerations. For instance, Mike Fitzgerald, a technology reporter and a white man, said he never had to stop and reflect on the lack of diversity in his newsrooms and in the organizations he covered: “We weren’t actually thinking about what opportunities were or weren’t available to non-white males in technology. Most of us, white males like me, weren’t thinking that we were creating obstacles by not acknowledging that there was a gap” (quoted in Dorsey, 2019). Fitzgerald said he became more aware of this gap when he covered Brian Brackeen, a Black businessman and entrepreneur. Similarly, in terms of issues of class, Sarah Jones (2018), a staff writer for *The New Republic* who grew up in rural Washington County, Virginia, argued that, because newsrooms are still overwhelmingly composed of people from advantaged backgrounds, their lack of lived experience with economic adversity negatively impacts their coverage. She said

Journalists who aren’t from low-income backgrounds aren’t necessarily hostile to the poor, but class prejudice can manifest as a form of blindness. Based on my own experiences and the experiences others related to me for this piece, simple ignorance is much more common. It’s more that certain experiences, like poverty, are opaque to people who have not lived them (Jones, 2018).

Other times, journalists said that misguided coverage is the result of a lack of consideration for diverse voices. As Eric Deggans (2012), NPR’s television critic and a Black

man, put it, “from turn-of-the-century lynchings in the American South to the women’s suffrage movement and the civil rights protests in the 1950s and ‘60s, U.S. history is filled with stories journalists got wrong because they excluded the perspectives of anyone who wasn’t a white male.” This negligence can often lead to stories that are not only inadequate, but also harmful to the issues or communities prejudiced by them. Stephanie Foo (2015), a Malaysia-born freelance journalist, argued that “the consequence of telling an unsurprising story is not just that you may be boring people — you may actually be perpetuating dangerous cultural stereotypes.” For example, to accompany a 2018 cover story about children who wanted to transition, *The Atlantic* chose to run a photo of 22-year-old Mina Brewer, who went by they/them pronouns at the time. The headline read “Your Child Says She’s Trans. She Wants Hormones and Surgery. She’s 13,” and “though it may have been unintentional, the headline was tied to Brewer’s photo in print, misgendering him and creating a false narrative about his life” (Bauer, 2020). Brewer was not yet ready to be fully open with his friends and family about his gender identity, and being featured on the cover forced him to come out and have those conversations earlier than he expected or wanted. Transgender journalist Sydney Bauer (2020) said that the harm caused to Brewer made it “clear that the final product would have been set up vastly differently had a trans person been involved in its creation.” Trans journalist Christina Karhl further explained how some coverage of trans issues can be actively harmful. In a story about an inventor who pushed a fraudulent product, journalist Caleb Hannan outed the inventor, Essay Anne Vanderbilt, as a trans woman. Shortly after the story was published in *Grantland*, Vanderbilt committed suicide. Karhl (2014) said that “by any professional or ethical standard, [Vanderbilt’s gender identity] wasn’t merely irrelevant to the story, it wasn’t [Hannan’s] information to share.” This damaging blunder, Karhl said, was only the most severe of the many missteps made by a journalist who did

not possess the knowledge or lived experience to properly report on the story. The issue isn't that Vanderbilt was trans (and that a cisgender journalist could not have appropriately covered this story); it is that her gender identity was irrelevant to the main story, and Hannan was not able to recognize this; or did, and chose to include Vanderbilt's gender identity anyway (and thereby outing her). A trans journalist, said Karhl (2014), likely would have been acutely aware of the harm that comes from outing someone against their will: "the story's problems include screw-ups you might expect for a writer or editors who aren't familiar with this kind of subject matter — misgendering and ambiguous pronoun usage upon making his needless discovery of Vanderbilt's past identity."

Many journalists expressed a frustration that their editors often did not assign or greenlight stories the journalists perceived as important to minority or marginalized communities. For instance, anonymous journalist "Tara," who identifies as a racial minority, was surprised when her editors did not assign her to cover the racial justice protests that arose in reaction to the killing of George Floyd: "The reporter on it ended up being a white man, and I was not sure where that decision had been made. There was never a newsroom discussion about who might be most appropriate to cover this, or who might be able to bring a certain amount of context to the story" (quoted in Tameez, 2022). According to Hanna' Tameez (2022), who reported Tara's story, it is unclear whether anyone asked Tara's editors to explain their decision, but that Tara's editors "didn't give her much feedback or guidance." An anonymous journalist at the WHYY radio station in Philadelphia, unable to convince her editors about the significance of a story, decided to report it on her own time. As journalism scholar Andrea Wenzel (2019), who conducted an ethnographic study of the WHYY newsroom, explained, the journalist "believed [it] was a big story for Philadelphia's Black community, the city's largest demographic [but] her

editors didn't seem to understand why it was important." The story ended up being well received "by both the audience and staff, but she said she was only able to do the story in the first place because of a lack of oversight" (Wenzel, 2019).

Story editing presents another potentially contentious process between journalists and editors they perceive as not being adequately qualified to have a say in stories about certain issues or communities. Anonymous reporter "Jen" said that "the editing process is where you find so much pushback against certain things that are culturally relevant or culturally important to the topic that you're covering," she said. "[Editors] try to whitewash or water it down so things seem less aggressive toward one side or the other and I'm like, 'That's a fact. The thing that you're trying to delete is a fact'" (quoted in Tameez, 2022). Some minority or marginalized journalists who have had story ideas rejected by editors turn to ethnic or minority publications, where editors are more likely to share the journalists' identities and/or lived experiences. "It feels so good to be edited by black folks," the writer Michael Arceneaux, a Black man, said to Jamilah Lemieux (2018), a Black woman and a senior editor at *Ebony*, a magazine geared towards Black audiences. Lemieux (2018) said that this type of comment "was a common refrain from black freelance writers who also contributed to outlets largely staffed by white editors who would assign them stories about race but lacked the cultural competency to adequately edit their work."

The ignorance of journalists and editors can sometimes lead to the unfair treatment of a fellow journalist. Felicia Sonmez (2021) took to Twitter to express her frustration at her treatment from the leadership at the *Washington Post* after being banned from covering stories about sexual misconduct:

The reason I've repeatedly been given by senior editors is that they are worried about "the appearance of a conflict of interest" if they allow me to write on sexual assault.

They've told me they don't believe there's an actual conflict, or even that my writing would be biased in any way. I've sent them a long list of stories I've written that proves that's not the case. This reason, I believe, makes no sense. If I am attacked online by an army of misogynist trolls, that does not harm The Washington Post any more than my awesome colleague [Seung Min Kim] harms the Post by facing a relentless swell of racism online. Neither of us is less capable of doing our job due to our identity. It would be great if senior editors at the Post prioritized \*actually supporting\* their female and POC staff instead of presenting the appearance of doing so as they compete for the paper's top job. This harms all of us.

In addition, journalists argued that rules imposed by newsroom leadership that ignore the impacts of reporters' identities and lived experiences disproportionately affect women and minority journalists. They said that only a narrow set of identities and experiences are singled out as introducing bias into a journalist's reporting. In reaction to the dismissal of Sonmez's discrimination lawsuit against the *Post*, in which Sonmez claimed that her employer illegally discriminated against her by pulling her off of sexual misconduct stories, Jayme Fraser (2022), a data reporter for *USA TODAY*, tweeted: "Welp, by this logic, I couldn't cover child abuse, domestic violence, sexual assault, on-the-job-harassment, on-the-job groping, or ... pretty much any awful thing experienced by many women, including me. Remind me, what aren't men allowed to report about if it happened to them?"

#### *A lack of connection can lead to stereotypical coverage*

Journalists said that there might be a higher risk of stories containing stereotypes if those stories are written by journalists who have no identity- or experience-based connection to the subjects. This kind of coverage, journalists argued, is the result of reporters not having enough intersecting commonalities with the subjects of their stories to be able to recognize the nuances and complexities of the issues at stake. Consequently, coverage which contains stereotypes is not only irresponsible and deficient, but may also be harmful, as it might lead audiences to form

misguided perceptions about those communities as well as cause a decrease of trust in news coverage from those communities..

Many journalists, for example, expressed long-held frustration with coverage of issues that affect Black communities. Journalists said that stereotypical coverage about their communities came in many forms. Perhaps the most common complaint from journalists was coverage that depicts Black communities and Black life as strife with violence, poverty and hopelessness. “[T]oo often we have this idea that covering ‘Black stories’ means covering pain, trauma, and racism, which in and of itself, is not only taxing, but a limited way to look at the totality of what it means to be a Black person in America,” said Karen Attiah, a columnist for the *Washington Post* and a Black woman (quoted in Ingram, 2020). When describing ABC 57, a majority-white television station in South Bend, Indiana, the *Columbia Journalism Review* editors (2018) said “when it covers black communities, stories come as a numbing parade of school fights, dead bodies, arrests, bizarre assaults, and lots of shootings. Positive coverage often centers on do-gooderism, like volunteering in a homeless shelter.” But the U.S. largest and most prestigious news organizations have also long engaged in stereotypical coverage of Black communities: according to Jaweed Kaleem (2018), a national correspondent for the *L.A. Times* who is of Southeast Asian descent, the *New York Times* has often fallen “into racial tropes on major stories—like a profile of Michael Brown, who was shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, that described him as ‘no angel.’” Plenty of coverage also fell into the category of “poverty porn” or “people of color porn,” which is, according to journalist Erika Dilday (2020), a Black woman, “the shock value of situations and the ‘otherness’ of marginalized communities, allowing armchair middle-class audiences to reinforce the stereotypes they already have of ‘those people’ and ‘those places’”. These stories may engender

sympathy, but they don't foster understanding." Sources have also expressed frustration at journalists asking him to contribute to poverty porn stories: "I've turned down interviews because what journalists often want to hear is stories of scarcity, that black communities don't have enough housing stability, economic stability, or food access, without talking about why," said nonprofit founder Jessica Roach, a Black woman (quoted in Greenlee, 2018).

Journalists of color named several instances in which their story pitches were rejected by editors because they did not fit the "poverty porn" mold. When she was a college student at the majority white University of New Hampshire, Rebecca Carroll (2018) recalled

My pitches for stories about the need for a black student union, the history of black presence on campus, and racial profiling were routinely rejected for not appealing to enough of the student body. But could I do a story on the black students who had defied all odds to attend UNH on basketball scholarships? Or perhaps I'd like to write about my own beleaguered experience in a personal essay?

Potential sources also recalled similar treatment from journalists. Brackeen, the businessman and entrepreneur, said he was approached by *Inc. Magazine* for a profile, but the story was killed without warning after he was shadowed for two months by Mike Fitzgerald, the *Inc.* reporter. Although he was not given an official reason for the cancellation, he had his suspicions:

My experience wasn't interesting because I couldn't recount a 'started from the bottom now we here' narrative — or express angst behind all of the discrimination they assumed I encounter in my business life. I was disappointed. Offended. And saddened. Yet I was not confused. This notion that the Black experience is only worthy of recognition or discussion when there is, in some capacity, negativity expressed — is the old normal. Publications are looking for a modern entrepreneurial version of being chased by dogs and pummeled by fire hoses" (quoted in Dorsey, 2019).

Journalists of other identities or lived experiences also criticized ubiquitous stereotypical coverage of various issues or communities. Some journalists pointed to "coming out stories" of LGBTQ+ public figures as a common example of stories that might be well-meaning, but reduce their subjects to stereotype. Leigh Ann Carey (2019), a freelance journalist who writes about sex,

gender, LGBTQ issues, argued: “Each coming out story is personal and complex, and rarely fits into a neat narrative. ‘Pete Buttigieg’s Life in the Closet’, a profile published this month in the *New York Times*, is an example of what is likely an unintentionally negative headline. The article opens with: ‘The closet that Pete Buttigieg built for himself in the late 1990s and 2000s was a lot like the ones that gay men of his age and ambition hid inside.’” Tristan Ahtone (2017), an indigenous journalist, said that “coverage of indigenous affairs often remains limited to dying languages, cultural pageantry, disheartening living conditions, or troubling drug, alcohol or suicide statistics.” Jenni Monet (2019a) agreed that much of the coverage on Native Americans “describe[s] tribal community, at once, as a ‘picture of wretchedness’ while also stirring lingering stereotypes linked to the environment, casinos and what’s known as the Cherokee Grandma Syndrome (a phenomenon of people who claim Cherokee ancestry).”

#### *Taking certain positions does not equate to bias*

In general, journalists made clear distinctions between objectivity and accuracy. That is, they rejected objectivity as the measure of fair and accurate reporting, and the notion that their identities and/or lived experiences precluded them from producing fair and accurate coverage. Journalists argued that taking certain positions on issues does not inherently or automatically betray a bias. This was especially true when it came to advocating for equal rights for minority or marginalized groups to which they belong. If their ability to live authentic lives with full civil rights clashed with normative notions of objectivity, then journalists argued that those versions of objectivity were impossible and unacceptable. Journalists said that standing for human rights should not be considered controversial, or even a position as such that it would have a valid counter-position. BuzzFeed’s ethics guidelines, which were developed in 2015, explicitly assume this human rights perspective: “We firmly believe that for a number of issues, including civil

rights, women's rights, anti-racism, and LGBT equality, there are not two sides" (quoted in Blanding, 2019). Editor Ben Smith further underscores his organization's stance: "It's hard to find a news organization where they say there are two sides to racial segregation. I don't think the question of whether LGBT citizens have equal rights is a debatable point" (quoted in Blanding, 2019). Other journalists echoed these sentiments. As Joshua Benton (2019), director of the Nieman Journalism Lab, put it, "if black journalists can't say racism is bad, if gay journalists can't say discrimination against gay people is bad, if women journalists aren't allowed to say sexism is bad, you're asking people to put their own humanity up for debate." Similarly, Alexandria Neason, a staff writer at the *Columbia Journalism Review* and a Black woman, said: "for reporters from underrepresented communities — reporters of color, queer and transgender reporters, disabled reporters, poor reporters — taking a neutral stance on their own humanity isn't an option" (quoted in Cross, 2021). That is, reporters who share an identity- or experience-based connection with the issue they denounce run a greater risk of being labeled activists than a white journalist calling out racism or a man calling out sexism, for example.

Several journalists argued that calling out racism, for example, was not at odds with being a fair and accurate reporter. If a public figure or source says something racist, then journalists writing a story about it should not be expected to treat those racist remarks as a valid point of view and on equal footing with anti-racist remarks. When then-President Donald Trump told four congresswomen of color to "go back" to the "totally broken and crime infested places from which they came," journalists of color especially argued that they should be able to explicitly call Trump's remarks racist without fear of being labeled inadequate reporters (quoted in Benton, 2019). As Errin Haines, editor-at-large for gender-focused outlet *The 19th*\* and a Black woman, argued:

We are seeing Black journalists in particular treating racism as a matter of fact. This is not just about our feelings. This is about telling the most transparent truth that we can about America. One of the tenets of journalism is to afflict the comfortable. Well, white people are too comfortable in America. And if we are not pointing that out and showing people the disparities and being honest about and clear out about those disparities, then things are not going to be different (quoted in Kahn, 2020).

Journalist Abby Phillip, who identifies as Black, said the following about her shift in perspective when reporting on social justice issues:

What we are talking about is a question of human rights. And I think it's important not to present that as a both sides issue. It is self-evident that policing in America, for example, has disproportionately targeted Black people. When I go on the air, it's not about convincing people that that is a real thing. It's not my responsibility to hold the hand of people who are willfully ignoring reality and pull them toward something that is obvious. That's not what I as a reporter have to do. It is about telling people, "This is a real thing, and if you choose not to acknowledge it, you're going to have a hard time understanding what's happening in this country right now" (quoted in Kahn, 2020).

Other minority and marginalized journalists echoed many of these arguments when speaking about the perceived incompatibility of bias-free reporting and calling out bigotry and prejudice. Latino journalist Julio Ricardo Varela of *Futuro Media* told fellow Latina journalist Valeria Olivares (2019) in an interview that he "resents being accused of bias when he is reporting on the Latino community. He is just telling it like it is." For example, when Varela covered the 2019 mass shooting at an El Paso, TX Walmart, the perpetrator of which was linked white nationalist and anti-immigrant positions, he asserted that "it should be described as an act of domestic terrorism fueled by racism." He told Olivares (2019) that "there are no two sides to that story." Shaya Tayefe Mohajer (2017), who identifies as a woman of color, echoed these sentiments:

Our identities are not a bias. Women who want equality aren't biased. They are fair. ... I have been told to set aside my identity—no easy task, and patently dishonest—and my desire for equality so that I can report like a robot facsimile of a supposedly pure standard. But any journalist's excellence depends on much more than that. We are told to speak truth to power, to reveal inequality, to empower the disadvantaged and the poor. But diverse employees are also told to stay silent where they feel their own rights and

those of other marginalized communities are threatened. Perhaps that's part of why, despite decades of efforts, newsroom diversity is actually declining in some sectors.

In questioning the relationship between objectivity and truth telling, journalists argued that rejecting traditional notions of reporting from a distance can in fact lead to an increase in trust in news media. For instance, Alex Sujong Laughlin (2022), editor of *Poynter's* gender and media newsletter "The Cohort" and an Asian American woman, pointed out the origins of the objectivity ideal as "a cynical public relations tactic, one that came to prominence at a time when the industry — and who works in it — looked very different than it does today." Because news organizations are increasingly striving to diversify their workforce as well as their audiences, operating from a standard which was established when the journalism industry was overwhelmingly run by white men no longer serves the best interests of both reporters and readers.

In fact, sticking to "both sides" reporting sanctions fringe and prejudiced viewpoints as valid and can actually move news stories away from the approximation of truth. This, in turn, can have severe negative effects on public trust in news media, especially from the growing minority U.S. population which might feel that their interests are not being adequately served by mainstream outlets. Thus, Laughlin (2022) argued that objectivity is outdated and is not something to which reporters should aspire in contemporary society, for "if we want to preserve public trust in media institutions, the best thing we can do is to tell the truth." Journalist Lewis Raven Wallace, a transgender white man, similarly said that journalists "cannot look to the same old tools to defend truth in reporting. ... we must work harder and do more to truly represent the communities we report on and on behalf of in order to build trust and remain relevant" (quoted in Owen, 2017).

Not every journalist agreed with this argument. To some, making explicit one's position on an issue and being able to produce fair reporting on that issue are mutually exclusive. Any expression of a personal opinion, these journalists argued, compromised one's ability to report on a story by injecting insurmountable bias into the reporting process. After the controversy surrounding the removal of Alexis Johnson and Miguel Santiago from coverage of racial justice protests in 2020, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* executive editor Keith C. Burris, a white man, published an op-ed in the newspaper defending the decision. He stated that leadership

will not apologize for upholding professional standards in journalism or attempting to eliminate bias. Why is this important? Because fairness, removal of bias, removal of even the hint of conflict of interest is our gold standard — all we really have as journalists (Burris, 2020).

In Burris's view, then, Johnson's sarcastic tweet about the Kenny Chesney concert expressed a clear position on the actions of protestors, thereby rendering her incapable of producing a fair and unbiased account of the protests.

### *Boundaries between journalism and activism*

While journalists said, in general, their identities and/or lived experiences were impossible to separate from their professional lives, and that taking a position on questions of human and civil rights does not constitute bias, they nevertheless made sure to draw explicit boundaries between their journalism and activism. That is, journalists said that rejecting normative notions of objectivity does not mean that their reporting was not also fair, accurate, and transparent. Wesley Lowery, a Pulitzer Prize winner and one of the country's foremost journalists on racial issues, said that, rather than being a traditional activist, "any good journalist is an activist for truth, in favor of transparency, on the behalf of accountability" (quoted in Blanding, 2019).

Journalists also pointed out that marginalized journalists are especially vulnerable to being labeled activists. If they cover issues or communities with which they share an identity or experience, and particularly if that coverage involves injustice, journalists face a high likelihood of being accused of having ulterior motives and their coverage deemed unreliable. Journalist Pacinthe Mattar (2020), who identifies as Black, stated that for marginalized journalists, “professionalism is questioned when we report on the communities we’re from, and the spectre of advocacy follows us in a way that it does not follow many of our white colleagues.” This, in turn, can threaten journalists’ livelihoods because they become vulnerable to losing their jobs if they are deemed to be incapable of performing their professional duties. As the indigenous journalist Jenni Monet said, “As a marginalized writer of color, I can’t afford to be called an activist” (quoted in Blanding, 2019).

Journalists make distinctions between covering issues or communities with which one shares an identity or experience with traditional community organizing-type activism. For example, they said they always adhered to other central journalistic tenets, such as fact-checking and considering multiple perspectives. About reporting for *Scalawag*, a magazine focused on covering cultural and political issues in the South, trans journalist Lewis Raven Wallace said: “[T]here is such a thing as conflict of interest, and I am fairly vigilant about that ... but we certainly don’t say, ‘You have a connection to this issue, so you can’t cover it’” (quoted in Blanding, 2019). Reflecting about covering court challenges to state same-sex marriage bans in the run-up to nationwide legalization in 2015, the gay journalist Steve Friess (2015) acknowledged his personal stake in the issue and outcome, but also noted several safeguards he implemented to make sure his reporting was fact-based. For example, he “abstained during reporting from arguing with sources, some of whom made odious and hurtful claims about gay

people, unless it involved a provably wrong remark or if certain questions might tell us something valuable about the speaker.” In her defense of Alexis Johnson, the Black reporter who was taken off coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* because of a sarcastic tweet, journalism professor Gina Baleria said that, in fact, Johnson had followed several accepted journalistic practices before sending the tweet. Furthermore, Johnson’s tweet did not contain any factual inaccuracies or misrepresentations. Baleria (2020) said that in “vetting the photo, assessing the story and providing information to help increase understanding,” Johnson “was practicing solid journalism. ... [S]he was right; she was accurate; and she was transparent.”

In addition, journalists said another distinguishing characteristic between them and activists is that they consider including a variety of points of view in their stories. While a personal connection to the subjects being covered might mean that journalists approach their reporting from a certain perspective, that does not mean that their reporting will not be diligent and nuanced. Defending the work of his fellow Black journalists covering racial justice issues, Wesley Lowery (2020) said that “we will diligently seek out the perspectives of those with whom we personally may be inclined to disagree and that we will be just as sure to ask hard questions of those with whom we’re inclined to agree.” Similarly, Lewis Raven Wallace said that journalists “fact-check and make sure that the story considers as many points of view as possible” (quoted in Blanding, 2019). According to investigative journalist Michael Blanding (2019), this responsibility to consider and include several points of view, even when they might be contrary to the journalist’s personal inclinations – such as “hearing the story of the police when writing about a protest, or hearing the story of an accused rapist when reporting on sexual

assault, something most activists would never trouble themselves with” – further demarcates the difference between journalists and activists.

Rather than perceiving it as activism, many journalists said that covering marginalized communities – and serving as agents for bringing their concerns to mainstream attention – is actually one of their duties as reporters. “I think that for me, the purpose of journalism is to raise the voices of people who maybe don’t have a voice,” said Rebecca Schneid, a student journalist at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, the site of a school shooting in which 17 were killed in 2018 (quoted in Blanding, 2019). She went on to distinguish this function as a spokesperson for these communities from activism while underscoring journalism’s role in bringing underreported issues to light: “There is a distinction for me, as a journalist, and also someone who wants to demand change, but I think the partnership of the two is the only reason that we are able to make change” (quoted in Blanding, 2019). Press On (*About us*, n.d.), a social justice journalism collective, said the same regarding the coverage of underrepresented issues and communities: “This does not mean turning journalists into soapboxes for activists, but fostering collaboration between journalists and grassroots movements, and supporting journalism created by oppressed and marginalized people.”

Several journalists invoked the concept of truth when disavowing accusations of activism. Journalists said that truth, as a journalistic value, is separate and distinct from objectivity. In other words, telling the truth – producing accurate reporting – does not necessarily require that journalists maintain a distant and dispassionate relationship with their coverage areas. Journalists who reject normative notions of objectivity therefore embrace truth-telling as one of their missions as journalists. As an anonymous journalist told Pacinthe Mattar (2020), “there seems to be the assumption that we cannot coexist with the journalistic standards of being

fair and balanced and impartial. Really, what we are fighting for, what we've always been fighting for, is just the truth." Journalists and journalism scholars Kate Farrish, Megan Craig and Greg Munno (2021), in their survey of nearly 200 journalists, found that truth-telling as a journalistic value is strongly supported both by traditionalists – those who subscribe to normative notions of objectivity and neutrality – and those who embrace standpoint-driven journalism.

Harking back to the earliest days of journalism in the American colonies, journalists invoked truth as an absolute defense against accusations of bias. For example, some journalists said they believe it is important for news organizations to stop using phrases such as “racially charged” when describing racist words or acts. While these decisions likely stem from attempting to appear neutral and avoiding alienation of audiences, not explicitly labeling something as racist can end up being more harmful. As Rachel Hatzipanagos, a Hispanic multiplatform editor at the *Washington Post*, said, “If we’re reporting the truth, then that’s not biased. It’s simply a statement of facts. ... the more that some organizations get into writing things as euphemisms, the more trouble we get ourselves into, because we’re kind of muddling the truth” (quoted in Olivares, 2019). News organizations are making changes, too. As freelance journalist Christine Grimaldi (2016) pointed out, “journalists may not be social activists, but we have updated our vocabulary at the behest of advocacy work throughout the history of media.” Grimaldi gave the example of the AP Stylebook abandoning the term “illegal immigrant” in 2013.

Journalists also drew a distinction between activism and active citizenship. As many news organizations began to reconsider their ethics policies in light of recent social justice movements, many journalists questioned traditional guidelines that barred them from engaging in

civic activities such as protesting, especially if they were not there on duty or as representatives of their organization. For example, *New York Times* journalist Linda Greenhouse called herself an “accidental activist” when reflecting on the criticism she received for joining a pro-abortion march in 1989: “The abortion march was an action in which half a million people took part.... Would I have marched under a banner that said, ‘New York Times Reporters for Choice’? No, I would not. I simply went as a person” (quoted in Blanding, 2019). As more journalists openly embrace aspects of their identities or lived experiences – like the Black journalists whose racial identities are placed at the forefront, by both themselves and the public – they said that engaging in efforts to secure civil rights for different groups should not be considered activism. Shaya Tayefe Mohajer (2017), a freelance journalist and an Iranian-American, argued that “it is time [to] consider a new slate of rules by which journalists can responsibly engage in civic and civil dialogue in a manner that exemplifies their dedication to service.” A generational shift may be happening in terms of reporters’ perceptions of the distinction between activism and active citizenship: “I think that journalists have the right to vote and partake in protests that they think are just, as long as they are not letting their emotions and actions interfere with their work,” an anonymous student journalist said (quoted in Farrish, Craig and Munno, 2021).

Nevertheless, it can be difficult for news organizations to determine precise boundaries for what is appropriate civic engagement and what devolves into activism. Robert Samuels, national political reporter at the *Washington Post* and a Black man, said, “I think there is an evolving conversation about where the lines are for journalists to express their identities, particularly because identity politics has become political” (quoted in Allen, 2021). There is often tension between where journalists perceive that line and where their superiors do. For example, in 2017, the *Toronto Star* parted ways with one of their columnists, Desmond Cole, a

Black man, for disrupting a meeting of the Toronto Police Services Board to protest police carding, a practice in which Canadian police officers “stop, question, and document individuals without any evidence that they have been involved in, or have any knowledge of, an offence” (*Carding and anti-Black racism in Canada*, 2019). Despite Cole being a freelancer and an opinion columnist, who isn’t bound to the same ethical guidelines as news reporters, the *Star* leadership said that by “becoming the news [Cole] went beyond that latitude” (English, 2017). Cole, meanwhile, criticized the *Star* for its “limited appetite for my very political and unapologetically Black voice” and said that “it seems the *Star* is reluctant to invest in columnists who relentlessly name these racial power imbalances, who call out the political and institutional forces responsible for white supremacy and Black suffering” (Cole, 2017). This particular incident raises further questions about whether evolving guidelines regarding civic engagement should be applied differently to columnists versus reporters, freelancers versus full-time employees. Indeed, Cole was rebuked by multiple journalists at the *Star* who argued that although reporters aligning themselves with social justice causes did not inherently disqualify them from fairly covering news related to those causes, there was a point at which the degree of advocacy crossed into inappropriateness. For *Toronto Star* columnist Rosie DiManno (2017), actively participating in something, rather than just identifying with it, constitutes a crossing of that line:

From my four-decades plus as a journalist, two-decades plus as a columnist, the one thing I know as intrinsic truth is that you can’t suck and blow at the same time. Can’t observe, deduce and explain whilst participating in the story unfolding. Many years back, I attended a rally for Dr. Henry Morgentaler, not in a professional capacity but as a ‘civilian’. When an editor learned of it, he tore a strip off me. I could no longer, he declared, report on Morgentaler, who was at the time embroiled in judicial battles over his freestanding abortion clinics. I took the rebuke deeply to heart, to the extent that I will not even vote in any election, at any level of government, because that would be tacitly aligning myself with a political party.

Kathy English (2017), public editor at the *Star*, stated that Cole's actions at the public meeting had compromised the newspaper's ability to "fairly and persistently" cover police carding issues. According to English, journalists' public stances regarding their identity- or experience-based connections to issues can actively impede, rather than facilitate, the production of news coverage that is fair and accurate. English (2017) also notes that "there is some precedent at the *Star* for columnists ... to take an advocacy stance in the community," but "not news reporters."

Thus, the question of what counts as righteous stances in favor of human rights and what counts as activism (or simply bad journalism) remains muddy. Ben Smith, editor at BuzzFeed, articulated the crux of the issue succinctly: "this isn't an exact science" (quoted in Blanding, 2019).

#### *Producing fact-based journalism through connection-based reporting*

A vast majority of journalists underscored that their connections to a topic through a shared identity or lived experience do not preclude them from producing accurate and fair reporting. They argued that accusations of bias usually originate from those who want to preemptively attempt to discredit their reporting. As Traci Lee (2019), an Asian American digital producer, expressed:

As a journalist of color, I've been asked, 'What's your ethnicity?' before, as if my ethnic background somehow disqualifies me to ask a question tied to something having to do with politics, identity, race, etc. – you name it. [That's] tiring.

Using aspects of your identities or experiences to inform your journalistic process does not make for sensational or untruthful reporting, but rather creates a different style of fact-based journalism. As Terrell Jermaine Starr (2022), a Black American journalist who lives in Ukraine, said about covering the Russian invasion of that country:

You'll never get so-called "objectivity" from me. What you will get is fair, compassionate reporting that reveals how much I deeply love this place. You will feel every emotion I'm experiencing as I report here. I live here. I didn't helicopter in like everyone else. ... I'm my best when I'm passionate. I won't apologize for developing my own style that people are drawn to.

Journalists thus rejected the notion that there is only one model for a competent journalist, for it reinforces the white, male, privileged point-of-view that established normative journalistic tenets in the first place. As Wesley Lowery (2022) wrote, "the vast majority of our discussion of objectivity in media is not about the fairness, rigor or truth of journalists' work - rather it's about what bosses assume a theoretical reader (who are assumed white and moderate to conservative) will perceive as objective." Clinging to a narrow definition of "objective" reporting, journalists said, will alienate nonwhite and non-men readers and further foster mistrust between marginalized communities and news media. Stel Kline (2022), a transgender and nonbinary journalist, argued that "declaring someone not objective is a selective practice used effectively to exclude [people of color] / queer journos." *L.A. Times* film reporter Sonaiya Kelley, who identifies as Black, said:

We can't constantly pander to our primarily white audience with stories like this that affirm their biases. One of the responsibilities of the job is to state the facts and tell it true. ... and it's alienating the viewers we're trying to attract. As well as the [people of color] journalists like me who contribute so much to this paper and then have to read stories like this that oversimplify our struggles and realities" (quoted in Folkenflik, 2020b).

Similarly, Stacy-Marie Ishmael, an editorial director of the *Texas Tribune* from Trinidad and Tobago, said:

There is a notion that certain kinds of experiences disqualify you from being able to objectively assess a situation. And I have found that the kinds of experiences that ostensibly disqualify you are rooted in things that make you different from the status quo in most newsrooms. ... [T]he notion that there is one kind of person who can be objective because that person is the "default" is, first, untrue and, second, an idea that has been used and weaponized in bad faith against journalists from other backgrounds for a long time (quoted in Kahn, 2020).

In addition, journalists made a distinction between legitimate conflicts of interest and simply issues with which one could relate. The former is a situation in which any journalist, regardless of gender, race, sexuality, or other identities, could find themselves and should in fact preclude them from covering certain issues. At the *Washington Post*, local editor Mike Semel said that “if you’re on the board of a college, you’re not going to cover higher education issues,” for example (quoted in Cimarusti, 2015). *The Varsity*, the University of Toronto’s student newspaper, makes a similar distinction: “conflict of interest is about affiliation, not experience — so while reporters aren’t allowed to cover stories on an organization they’re involved in or use a friend as a source, they can cover stories that they relate to” (quoted in Blatchford, 2021). As such, journalists said a personal investment in an issue or community due to a shared identity or lived experience does not constitute an actual conflict of interest. As Taylor Blatchford (2021), a *Seattle Times* engagement reporter and a white woman, pointed out, “editors in the industry are slowly realizing that reporters who empathize with a story can still cover it accurately and responsibly.” According to journalism scholar Gina Baleria (2020), journalists with connections to the issues they cover will still ensure that their reporting process produces stories that are “well documented, well-sourced and carefully told.” Journalists emphasized their roles as skilled professionals, saying that producing news requires a specific set of abilities, much like other professions. These learned skills help ensure that the news product is accurate and responsible, despite any possible personal connection to the subjects. “I believe that journalism is both a science and a trade. Challenging assumptions, balancing our sources, and engaging with our readers is a learned skill set. We temper our opinions in service of the truth, and I was drawn to the field because I am dedicated to the truth,” said Isaac Fornarola (2019), an editor at the *Burlington Free Press* and a transgender man. “My job as an editor is to ensure accuracy, and

my agenda is to provide you with reliable information. As long as there's no legitimate conflict of interest in which a journalist's loyalty to a person or group supersedes their loyalty to you — the reader — a journalist's connection to an issue can enrich coverage," Fornarola (2019) said.

Above all, journalists argued for their capacity to cover issues or communities with which they share a connection. As Alex Sujong Laughlin (2022) said, "We can do the important work of witnessing the world, verifying truth, and contextualizing it for our readers while acknowledging our humanity and telling the truth about how these decisions will affect us personally." In fact, several of the journalists said that having a personal connection to the issues they cover not only doesn't disqualify them from this reporting, but also helps them produce coverage that is *more* accurate. *Axios* reporter Ursula Perano (2019) stated that "what makes journalists different, be it sexuality, gender identity, race or ethnicity, can often be seen as a bias. In fact, these differences strengthen coverage and make news stories more accurate." An increase in diversity in voices both represented in and producing news coverage works in favor, and not to the detriment, of accuracy. As Pacinthe Mattar (2020) pointed out:

In an industry that loves to talk to its racialized employees about accuracy when we pitch and cover experiences that mirror ours, what's become clear is that media organizations themselves have failed these tests of accuracy. Their very existence and makeup has long been an inaccurate reflection of the world we live in. The accuracy problem was never ours to fix.

Similarly, Ursula Perano (2019) said, "[W]hat makes journalists different, be it sexuality, gender identity, race or ethnicity, can often be seen as a bias. In fact, these differences strengthen coverage and make news stories more accurate." Doris Truong (2020b), director of training and diversity at the Poynter Institute and an Asian American, asked both newsroom managers and readers to trust reporters who have personal connections to the issues and communities they cover: "give us the space to tell our stories in our way. We can be fair and accurate – but we

should not abandon part of ourselves along the way. Reexamine what you mean when you ask us to be objective.”

### Summary

In arguing that personal identities and experiences are impossible to separate from the professional processes of newswork, and outlining the ways by which distance from a subject can be detrimental to the quality of coverage, the journalists featured in this dissertation argued for updated definitions of journalistic identity. Previous research (Smith, 2018; Dahmen et. al., 2017; Harlow and Brown, 2018) has identified a growing link between journalists’ personal and professional identities. That is, journalists are increasingly leaning into, and incorporating, their personal identities and experiences into how they define themselves as professional journalists. This dissertation attends to Smith’s (2018, p. 526) assertion that “scholars have not extensively studied the impact of journalists’ personal identities on their news decision-making.” I argue that, by calling for a reimagining of what it means to be a professional journalist, journalists are creating even stronger associations between personal and professional identity. Journalists said that, in the contemporary moment, it is no longer feasible or desirable to define journalistic identity as separate and distant from journalists’ personal identities.

In renegotiating the relationship between personal identities and experiences and the professional practice of newswork, journalists also argued for a reworking of the objectivity tenet in journalism. Objectivity has already been a contested concept within journalism for decades (Tuchman, 1972; Schudson and Anderson, 2009; Ross and Padovani, 2019) but the findings in this chapter illuminate novel arguments that journalists are making in favor of rejecting objectivity as an operational framework in light of contemporary social justice agitation. Journalists contended that because objectivity emerged in the journalistic field at a time in which

it was dominated by white men – whose privileged gendered and racial identities facilitated their backing of supposedly value free reporting – it no longer adequately serves the needs of increasingly diverse media producers and consumers. Objectivity, the journalists said, asked them to report the news with a distant impartiality, which was impossible since the collection of their identities and experiences inherently affected the perspectives and approaches they brought to reporting. Furthermore, they contended that supposedly objective reporting had never been that, but rather reflected the views and interests of white men. Thus, journalists argued that it is possible – and, in fact, preferable – to produce journalism outside the guise of objectivity but which is still informed, accurate, and fair. Journalists rejected objectivity as an operating practice in journalism and called for the consideration of personal identities and experiences in professional decision-making.

At the same time, journalists contested characterizations of their work as activist journalism. Producing journalism that is informed by their identities and experiences, they argued, not only does not brand their reporting as activist, but actually better approximates the “truth” of the topics they report. This is because sharing an identity or experience with their coverage areas affords journalists a unique perspective that better equips them to produce nuanced and fair journalism (the specifics of which are discussed in the next chapter). Further, journalists argued that taking a position on certain issues does not, in and of itself, constitute bias. For instance, journalists believe that standing up for human rights (which might include racial, gender, and LGBTQ+ justice) should not be considered a stance that garners accusations of bias because there is no legitimate counterpoint. These arguments from journalists align with a contemporary shifting of societal attitudes that increasingly view supporting social justice movements as non-controversial (Schmidt, 2023). Journalists perceive taking a position in favor

of the rights of marginalized and underserved groups and producing fact-based, accurate and fair journalism as not mutually exclusive. Journalists protect their identities as professional journalists by engaging in boundary work around acceptable journalistic practices in light of these new challenges. Therefore, journalists reject the label of activism *as it is levelled against them*: in other words, that activist reporting necessarily equates to biased or nonfactual reporting. As Lewis Raven Wallace (2020, p. 7) put it, journalists still “argue in favor of facticity and nonpartisanship,” if not complete detachment and impartiality.

As such, journalists’ assertions that their identities and experiences actually helped them better approximate the “truth” in their stories aligns with the FSE tenet that acknowledging one’s positionality results in more epistemologically sound claims than supposedly value-free knowledge production. The metajournalistic discourse analyzed here heeds Durham’s (1998) and Steiner’s (2018) calls for the use of “strong objectivity” that emphasizes reflexivity in the production of journalism. While journalistic objectivity has been a contested ideology practically since its inception, mainstream news media have largely continued to insist on the notion that it is possible and desirable to facts from personal values during the reporting process, and characterized the practices of minority and ethnic practices as advocacy journalism. This chapter demonstrates that journalists are calling for a framework for producing journalism that lies somewhere in the middle. While still drawing boundaries around their identities as professional reporters and rejecting accusations that they practice advocacy journalism, the journalists featured in this dissertation argue for an approach that rejects objectivity as an operational framework. They claim objectivity doesn’t, and never did, serve the interests of women and minority journalists (Ross and Padovani, 2019; Lowery, 2020); and emphasize the reflexive incorporation of embodied identities and experiences into newsmaking processes.



## Chapter 5: “It Makes Me a Better Person to Cover It”: The Impact of Journalists’ Identities and Experiences on News Production

In the ABC drama *Alaska Daily*, a disgraced investigative reporter from New York City, Eileen Fitzgerald, takes a job at the *Daily Alaskan* in Anchorage, Alaska. Eileen is paired with an Alaska Native reporter, Roz Friendly, to cover the murder of an indigenous woman, Gloria Nanmac. The reporters have an uneasy relationship at first, with Eileen – who has years of high-profile investigative experience – believing that she could handle the story on her own, while Roz resents Eileen for parachuting into her community and attempting to take over an investigation into which she had already put in a lot of work. At one point, Eileen attempts to speak to Gloria’s mother, Sylvie, alone, but is rebuffed. Later, she returns with Roz to try again.

The following exchange ensues:

Roz: I know you’re upset with the paper. I get it. But [Eileen] didn’t bring me here. I came because our editor wants to find out what happened to Gloria.

Sylvie: And how do I know you’re not going to do what you always do? One sad story and that’s it.

Eileen: Because I don’t work that way. You have my word. It’ll be different this time.

Sylvie: Your word doesn’t mean anything to me.

Roz: Sylvie, please. I know how you feel.

Sylvie: I’m so sick of hearing that. Did you lose a daughter?

Roz: No. My cousin, Laura. I grew up in Yakutat [a sparsely populated, almost entirely indigenous Alaskan county]. Laura and I did everything together. She was my best friend. She went missing when she was 17. That’s why I became a reporter. That’s why I do this job.

Sylvie: [After a pause]. What do you want to know? (McCarthy, 2022)

This exchange underscores the importance of reporting with connection – that is, sharing an identity or experience with those you cover. In Roz’s case, she shares both with Sylvie – an Alaska Native identity as well as an experience with a loved one being murdered. Through these connections, Roz was able to convince Sylvie to open up about her daughter’s murder, which Eileen alone was not able to do. Any shared identity or experience can create a common ground between journalists and those they cover. This chapter thus addresses the specific ways by which journalists say that embodied identities and experiences impact their newswork. Journalists highlighted a myriad of advantages that they feel reporting with an identity- or experience-based connection affords them. In general, journalists said that sharing identities and/or lived experiences with the subjects they cover gives them unique insights and perspectives for approaching and reporting these stories. This chapter delves into the specific reasons journalists indicate for this belief. Therefore, this chapter answers the second research question (RQ2): In what ways do journalists say their embodied identities and experiences impact (or do not impact) their newswork?

### *An advantageous lens*

According to journalists, one of the ways that their identities and lived experiences impact their newswork is that these give them an advantageous lens through which to see and understand issues. Journalists said that, because it is largely impossible to separate their identities and experiences from the exercise of their profession, their backgrounds will invariably influence the prior knowledge and perspectives they bring to stories, which in turn impacts their approaches to reporting. The journalists said that these perspectives ultimately enrich their reporting process and help produce deeper, more nuanced stories. Andrew Goldstein (2020), a

reporter at the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, recounted the impact of his Jewish identity on coverage of the 2018 shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue:

As a Squirrel Hill resident and a Jew, I understood the enormity of the moment in a way others could not. It was an upsetting time, and what happened on Oct. 27 continues to pain me to this day. Even though it was challenging, I knew how important it was for me to write about the massacre as thoroughly and accurately as possible. I believe I did. At the same time, our executive editor, David Shribman, a Jewish man who made his home in Squirrel Hill, also knew the significance of the moment better than many. Shribman's grasp of the situation because he was Jewish made our newspaper better equipped to cover the massacre. He was the one who came up with the idea for the Hebrew headline that appeared in the PG the week after the shooting. That headline was, in my estimation, a major reason why the staff of the PG won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the massacre. To sum it up, diversity brings strength to newsrooms. I've seen it in action.

Journalists pointed out that “all humans have these lenses of cultural perspective,” but that women and marginalized journalists are particularly singled out because of normative journalistic tenets that privilege the white male point-of-view as the default (quoted in Childers, 2020). Bina Venkataraman (2020), a *Washington Post* columnist of Indian ancestry said she teaches journalism students that “our identity (race, class, gender) doesn't make you subjective or objective. Being human makes you subjective; we all have biases, some are just considered neutral historically.” However, they said, their reporting lenses are extremely valuable and should be harnessed to produce insightful and equitable journalism. In a tweet, freelance journalist Sierra Lyons (2022), a Black woman said, “As long as the journalism field continues to view journalists from marginalized groups covering the issues they have proximity to as biased instead of informed, the field will remain white and straight and issues will continue to not get the coverage and perspective it needs.”

Journalists with a wide array of identities and experiences said that their backgrounds provided them with a unique lens through which they approach potential news stories. Tina Vasquez (2020a), editor-at-large of *Prism*, a non-profit outlet staffed by journalists of color,

underscored the advantages of this lens in a profile of fellow Latina reporter Esmeralda Bermudez, a journalist for the *Los Angeles Times* who covers the city's Latinx population: "even though her identities are not at the center of her work, they inform Bermudez's reporting lens, which is why her reporting on Latinx communities resonates so deeply with Angelenos." Vasquez (2020a) went on to say that "the more layered a reporter's identity is, the more nuanced their work. In fact, one of journalism's greatest scams was making marginalized reporters feel like our identities are a detriment."

Journalist Farai Chideya, a Black woman of Zimbabwean ancestry, argued that reporters from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, for example, might approach stories about social issues from a perspective that is cognizant of the ways by which those issues intersect with socioeconomic aspects:

The relative level of privilege in the press corps leads us to miss some key aspects to stories about social mobility—links to mental health, addiction, or collapsing social systems are often under-explored. Does it make sense to have a welfare policy that discourages people from working? Does it make sense to allow a minimum wage that is not a living wage? The framework is vital.

Katherine Goldstein, a white woman who covers caregiving and gender equity, was surprised by the framing used in coverage of the September 2020 U.S. jobs report, which showed a large number of women had left the labor market. "A lot of the coverage I found to be surprise, awe and wonderment. To me, that was a huge red flag about how out of touch news organizations were. And how out of touch economics reporters are, by and large, with the realities of American family life," she said (quoted in DeSmith, 2022). According to Goldstein, if more women had been assigned to cover this story – especially those who had at one point left the workforce – then they would have been able to approach those stories with lenses informed by their experiences. Perhaps the tone of the coverage would have then been more appropriate.

### Lends authenticity

Several journalists used the terms “authentic” or “authenticity” to describe stories produced by reporters who share a connection to the subjects they cover. According to journalism scholar Meredith D. Clark (2016), a Black woman, “a framework of authenticity [considers] how life experiences, place and connections impact one’s ability to get the story and tell it accurately.” Journalists argued that reporting with which audiences connect and perceive as authentic also bolsters the reporting’s credibility. But, as Katherine Reynolds Lewis (2022), a biracial Asian American journalist, said, “The people who can authentically tell stories that build empathy for other perspectives and lived experiences — diverse journalists — are underrepresented in newsrooms and among journalism decision makers.” Therefore, according to these journalists, having a diverse workforce of journalists who can effectively capture the lifeblood of a wide array of issues and groups is vital for more equitable and inclusive journalism.

Journalists argued that those who have an identity or experience-based connection with their coverage areas are uniquely qualified to authentically represent the heterogeneity of those issues and communities. For instance, at the outset of the Trump administration, Swati Sharma (2017), editor-in-chief of *Vox* and a woman of Indian descent, wondered whether news organizations would rise to the challenge of covering emergent identity movements: “how will those sentiments be accurately covered with empathy, nuance, and authenticity? We need people in those communities to capture the messages, the angst, the people who make up the groups. If we don’t have reporters who vary in race, religion, economic status, and education, we will fail a core journalistic mission of capturing the pulse of our nation.” Journalist Issac J. Bailey (2018a), professor at Davidson College and a Black man, similarly stated that authenticity is a crucial

component to accurate and accountable coverage, which diverse journalists help provide “the ability to tell stories with nuance and from every relevant angle and in an authentic, unapologetic voice matters. People who live the stories have a finer appreciation for them than those who don’t.”

Journalists said that authentic reporting by better serving communities they purport to serve, news organizations can also broaden their audience base by attracting readers who are drawn by reporting they perceive as authentic and fair to their communities. Mainstream news organizations can take inspiration from ethnic and minority media, whose appeal “lies in their authentic voices,” according to Carlett Spike (2016), a freelance journalist and Black woman. For example, for those who work in the Asian Voices section at HuffPost, “the idea of Asians writing about Asians is not only about authenticity and accuracy, but about elevating [the] section’s brand” (Kaleem, 2018). Jessica Rois, the executive editor of Asian Voices and who has Korean heritage, said that “the way you build an audience is content that specifically speaks to a specific identity group. Readers come to you for these types of stories that they can’t find anywhere else. And that type of content is typically done by someone from that community” (quoted in Kaleem, 2018).

Similarly, digital outlet *Mic* worked to diversify the reporters in its “Identities” section. Journalism scholar Meredith D. Clark (2016), a Black woman, said:

[C]onnections to diverse communities are demonstrated by [Identities’] ability to elevate conversations through the lens of identity and personal experience. It’s community connection that lends authenticity to *Mic*’s coverage of historically disenfranchised groups in its presentation of news geared toward millennial audiences. Reporters at *Mic* need the capacity to write stories with an understanding of the political frameworks that underpins them all.

### Deeper knowledge

Journalists argued that their background gives them valuable knowledge and context for reporting a story. In turn, journalists said this knowledge that comes from sharing an identity or lived experience with those they cover puts them in an authoritative position to make certain judgements or observations. For example, journalists who came to the defense of Alexis Johnson, the Black *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reporter who was suspended for a sarcastic tweet comparing the trash left behind by mostly white tailgaters at a Kenny Chesney concert with claims of looting by racial justice protesters, said that her perspective, rather than being biased and opinion-laden, was in fact valuable. “What [Johnson] was actually doing was pointing out an important truth and giving context to an important story. [She] took a position, one that her background, ethnicity and experience made her uniquely qualified to explore and contextualize,” said Gina Baleria (2020), a journalist and journalism professor. Shereen Marisol Meraji and Gene Demby, who identify as journalists of color and who co-host “Code Switch,” NPR’s podcast about race, said they lean into their identities to inform the stories they feature and weave their experiences into their storytelling in order to lend authenticity and credibility to their journalism. “The journalists on the team are all living the [people of color] experience and, to add to that, just like any other beat reporter, we’re developing expertise in the subject-area, so we also share our well-informed insights,” Meraji said (quoted in Kaleem, 2018).

Journalists argued that the framework built from the collection of your identities and experiences helps you interpret issues in a particular way and makes you better equipped to capture the intricacies of issues. As Nicole A. Childers (2020), an editor at NBC News and a Black woman, argued, “The more a journalist knows about the inner workings of a community, the better equipped they are to know who to ask, what questions to ask, and how to frame those

questions in a way that gets to the heart of the story. If a journalist is from a community they are reporting on, they're more likely to know the history of that community and be able to put it into proper context for their audience." Intimate knowledge of a community, journalists argued, also helps them see differences within it and avoid stereotypical reporting. For the indigenous journalist Jenni Monet, "her position as a Native writer gives her insight into debates within the community that an outside writer might miss ... allowing her to understand distinctions within the community rather than viewing it as monolithic in its views" (quoted in Blanding, 2019). Antonia Gonzales and Pauly Denetclaw, reporters for *National Native News* who identify as indigenous, leaned into their intimate knowledge of Navajo agricultural and cultural practices to inform their coverage of the Gold King Mine spill of 2015. They knew, for instance, that "the Animas River in Colorado fed ... a waterway Navajo farmers rely on to grow crops and feed livestock" and that "water is more than a resource for Navajo businesses and livelihoods; it's intertwined with Navajo culture and spiritual beliefs, meaning heavy metal and chemical contamination would have serious impacts on cultural practices" (Ahtone, 2017). Based on this knowledge, Gonzales and Denetclaw produced compelling stories that involved them, for instance, speaking "with Navajo farmers and ranchers near the river who were forced to rely on water deliveries to feed livestock and crops" and "how contamination impacted corn, a crop with multiple religious uses that would be tainted by toxic chemicals for generations." As such, according to fellow indigenous journalist Tristan Ahtone (2017), "cultural and geographic knowledge helped Gonzales and Denetclaw produce award-winning coverage."

Even so, some journalists said that deep knowledge could be cultivated without an identity- or experience-based connection to the subject. Matt Taibbi of *Rolling Stone*, for instance, has written extensively about racial justice and authored a book, *I Can't Breathe: A*

*Killing on Bay Street, about the 2014 killing of Eric Garner by New York City Police* (Bailey, 2018a). Despite not being Black (he identifies as white), Taibbi said that he was able to develop enough of an expertise in police brutality against Black Americans in order to authoritatively write about the issue and capture its nuances and complexities:

If I'd backed off this story because I was white, then I'd never have learned so much history about this kind of police violence and bureaucratic prejudice, which is largely a story about white America's legacy. I think as journalists we should just be interested in a wide range of things. The same issues of access and empathy are going to exist in stories where race is a factor and where it isn't.

### Personal stake

For many reporters, experiencing something firsthand, or feeling like they had a personal stake in the issues made them more invested in getting the stories and getting them right. For example, according to Gina Baleria (2020), "experiencing sexual harassment can lead a reporter to pursue stories that bring suspected harassers and assaulters to justice. Being looked over or made to feel stupid in elementary school can lead a journalist to uncover systemic racism in a school district." Journalists said they felt deeper responsibility to their communities to produce accurate and accountable reporting. Black reporters especially expressed this sentiment in my sample. Trymaine Lee said that "we kind of had a basic premise, that the scales are imbalanced, oftentimes for us, as black people, as minorities. ... viewing the story through that filter made us more sensitive. There was something unjust about it. And that line of injustice was the guiding thing" (quoted in Froomkin, 2013). For *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reporter Alexis Johnson, covering the racial justice protests of 2020 was a personally meaningful assignment. "These are very much my friends and family and community members that were out there in the streets, protesting against police brutality in the black community," she said (quoted in Folkenflik, 2020a). Abby Phillip, CNN anchor and correspondent and a Black woman, also invoked personal

relationships to describe her investment in coverage of racial justice protests, saying that, to her “this is personal”:

As Black reporters, we understand this on another level. I have two brothers who are Black men. This moment—since Ferguson—has shaped them. And they’ve had their own experiences with law enforcement. I grew up with a dad who was always afraid he’d be pulled over. We have lived these experiences, and I recognize that a lot of white reporters might not have lived these experiences” (quoted in Kahn, 2020).

A majority of Black journalists said their direct prior experiences with systemic racism informs and deepens the stories they produce about racial justice. For example, Susan Smith Richardson (2015), chief executive officer of the Center for Public Integrity, argued: “[D]irect experience with housing discrimination or police harassment can help deepen reporting, revealing new angles. ... [F]or example, the drop in public sector jobs over the past several years has disproportionately affected African Americans, who historically have relied on government jobs to enter the middle class.” Marissa Evans, a housing and social issues reporter for the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, said:

When I’m reporting, I have an extra level of context that some reporters don’t have. I’ve known that feeling of fear when I’ve been stopped while driving. I have a father and two older brothers. I come from a place of seeing these videos or reading stories and thinking, what if that was one of my siblings?” (quoted in Kahn, 2020).

#### *Helps identify stories as newsworthy*

The sum of your identities and experiences, journalists said, can also help you see stories where others might not see them. As CNN senior media editor An Phung, a woman with Vietnamese ancestry, said, “When you have just straight white males covering a subject matter, newsrooms are leaving a lot of stories on the table that aren’t told in a robust or nuanced way” (quoted in Schneider, 2020). In general, journalists agreed that having a diverse pool of reporters leads to more diverse news coverage and readership base. “There are stories that you miss out on, stories that you could really get good readership for and circulation for that you don’t get if

those voices are not at the table,” said Jelani Cobb, a *New Yorker* writer and a Black man (quoted in The Editors, 2016).

Having gone through a particular experience firsthand, for instance, might help one recognize an issue or event as newsworthy earlier. Steve Friess (2015) said that his “insight and experience—both as a gay man and as a veteran journalist” helped him recognize the significance of a particular state case in the run-up to the Supreme Court’s decision legalizing gay marriage nationwide:

I was among the first in the national press to sense that the Michigan lawsuit could become one of the most important of the many that proliferated at the time because it was the only gay-marriage case since California’s Proposition 8 to feature an actual trial with expert testimony and cross-examinations. My coverage was both more consequential and improved by insight earned from my proximity to the topic (Friess, 2015).

Embodied identities and experiences can also help reporters spot troubling events or actions and recognize them earlier as newsworthy. Several Black journalists said that they began sounding alarms over the possibility of Donald Trump winning the 2016 presidential election while their white counterparts largely dismissed that concern. Steven Thrasher said he “made a video in May of 2016 for *The Guardian* where I was predicting that Trump would win, and it was taken very seriously by other journalists of color and other queer journalists because those of us who were out in the field—both for our jobs and in our lives— were seeing this is really ugly ramping lots around the support of Trump” (quoted in Vernon, 2018). Had his white colleagues taken more seriously the potential impacts of the hateful and prejudiced rhetoric that surrounded Trump’s campaign – rhetoric which has been directed at marginalized journalists at some point in their lives –, he said, then perhaps coverage of the 2016 wouldn’t have missed the mark as badly. According to Thrasher,

A lot of the mainstream press missed the rise of Trump, and missed asking questions and doing important reporting about it because they just didn't see it. Their experience told them that this isn't that serious of a threat. When we don't have diversity in the newsroom, we miss important stories—stories that are important to people we might call marginalized (quoted in Vernon, 2018).

Indeed, many Black journalists said that they were intimately aware of the problem of police brutality against Black Americans long before some incidents made mainstream headlines. As news organizations began grappling with the systemic causes that lead to the deaths of Black Americans at the hands of law enforcement, Jaden Edison (2021), a reporting intern at *Poynter*, said that “none of it was new or surprising to the Black journalists in those spaces, who didn't have to watch the murder of George Floyd to realize there were issues with policing or that civil rights litigation had done little to address the subordinate status of Black Americans.” Indeed, for *Huffington Post* reporter Trymaine Lee, his personal history helped him “see how the Trayvon Martin story was not a run-of-the-mill he-said/she-said crime story, but a powerful real-life parable about race and justice” (Froomkin, 2013).

Journalists also argued that those who share identities or experiences with the subjects being covered can help identify missteps with coverage more effectively. For example, trans journalists called out *The Atlantic* magazine for publishing a 2018 cover story about transgender children written by Jesse Singal, who has expressed anti-trans sentiments. In the ensuing backlash, trans journalists pointed out many problematic aspects to the story. The fact that the story was commissioned, published, and made the cover of this prestigious magazine, journalists argued, exemplifies the consequences of not having enough diversity on staff. As Herron Walker (2018), a trans queer journalist, put it:

Without any trans people in the room (writers, editors, copy editors, factcheckers...) to say ‘Hey, you guys, this story about trans people sucks,’ someone like Jesse Singal is able to become one of the most prominent and successful journalists covering trans issues today, despite the fact that every trans person I know takes issue with the way he does it.

Jose Antonio Vargas, a Latino reporter, expressed frustration at what he perceived to be inadequate coverage by mainstream news outlets of Julian Castro's announcement of his presidential campaign in 2020. Castro, a former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Obama administration, is of Mexican descent. Vargas (2019) said that most reports "overlooked the deep meaning" of Castro's announcement speech:

Castro connected dots that are often neglected by both parties: ie [sic], mass incarceration and mass detention. He made a strong case. ... Let me be clear: I'm not backing any particular candidate. But I hope political editors are asking themselves harder questions about how candidates are framed, contextualized. I hope media reporters (most of whom are white) go beyond their own bubbles. ...

Vargas's point is that coverage without proper contextualization is at best incomplete, at worst lacking essential insights that can affect readers' understandings of the content. These stories should thus be reported by journalists who are able to "connect the dots" and explain the larger meanings and implications about particular events.

Journalists also described feeling a moral responsibility to pursue the stories they identify as valuable. They said they wished that they'd had the opportunity to read more of those kinds of stories while they were growing up. Therefore, they wanted to make sure that the next generation of readers had access to them. For example, Viet Tran said

Being a queer Asian man, I reflect on what is it that I would have liked to see. That came up in our editors meeting — it's really important to reflect on what kind of content we would have liked to read growing up and how that would have validated our experiences or helped us grow. That reflection gave us an opportunity to create content that is accessible and available for the public who can receive what us, as queer Asian editors, longed for. That's not something a non-queer and non-Asian person can really do, because they don't have these experiences (quoted in Yao, 2022).

Thus, advocating to report on issues or events that would be of interest to underserved communities due to journalists' own sense of obligation to their communities is a potential

avenue for both increasing and improving coverage of issues that matter to underserved communities.

### *Helps foster trust with sources*

Journalists said another advantage to covering issues and communities with which they share an identity or experience is that this connection helps them foster trust with sources.

Journalists said that their identities and/or lived experiences allowed them to choose sources more effectively as well as anticipate the needs of sources. This is potentially a crucial advantage because of the increasing mistrust of underserved communities toward mainstream media.

Minority and marginalized reporters have pointed out that this mistrust stems from a perception that mainstream news organizations and reporters don't particularly understand or care about the issues that affect them. Journalist Julia Métraux (2022), who has a chronic illness, described the reason she suspected was behind the hesitation of immunocompromised individuals to speak to reporters during the coronavirus pandemic:

Some journalists: Why won't disabled/chronically ill people talk to me for my stories?

The same journalists: Retweet tweets about COVID being over, posting photos of themselves at superspreader events.

If a group of people feel betrayed by society, they may not talk to you if they feel you're contributing to their problems. (Métraux, 2022)

Thus, having reporters who possess the sensibilities to interact with vulnerable sources in a manner that dignifies and empowers them would not only increase the diversity of content in news coverage, but also the diversity of voices represented in that coverage.

A majority of journalists said that simply sharing an identity or experience with potential sources helped them gain initial access to them. This was especially true when those sources

were part of an underserved or marginalized community with a historic distrust of mainstream media. Journalist Duncan McCue, who identifies as indigenous, said media distrust among the indigenous is common when non-indigenous journalists cover Native American communities. He said that “some reporters are surprised when they show up and say, ‘I work for *The New York Times*’ and expect that that will give them some sort of legitimacy. ... The outlets we work for and the value that we place on operating in legacy media may not necessarily bring any currency in Indian Country if you don’t have the knowledge and background of Indian Country to back up your credentials” (quoted in Ahtone, 2017). Similarly, reporter Kate Sosin’s “trans identity often made it easier to connect with sources and to tell stories that were deeply reported and empathetic” (Wallace, 2019b). Trish Bendix, one of Sosin’s editors and a cisgender queer woman, said that Sosin “found all these different access points for people reading this story” about a bathroom bill in Alaska. “There’s a way to make these stories, like any story, find some central human interest point, and I think that Kate can balance that with making sure that it’s still very centered on trans people and trans issues” (quoted in Wallace, 2019b).

Some journalists also said that, conversely, white reporters might gain access to certain groups who would refuse to speak to minority journalists. As Issac J. Bailey (2018a) explained:

There may be times when the race of a journalist makes the difference between a great story, and maybe none at all. While journalists of color— including columnists who have essentially embedded with the KKK—have done good work on stories about white supremacists, the well-received Vice documentary about Charlottesville was clearly helped because the reporter was a white, blond woman. That made the alt right activists she interviewed feel comfortable in ways simply not available to a black male journalist like me.

Journalists found that sources tended to open up to them more easily if they found the journalists relatable, with which a shared identity or experience was extremely helpful. Rachelle Hampton, a reporter for *Slate* and a Black woman, found that sharing racial and gender identities

with her sources was an asset when writing a story about the online abuse that Black women receive on Twitter. For Hampton, “approaching her sources presented a challenge: many of them had been frequent targets of online harassment, so their guard was up and their accounts were locked down. When she introduced herself, however, they found her relatable. Her resulting piece described Black Twitter’s relationship to disinformation in a way never seen before; she also highlighted the disappointing response of Twitter executives” (quoted in Haines, 2019). Tyler Griffin, editor-in-chief at *The Eyeopener*, Toronto Metropolitan University’s student newspaper and who identifies as mixed-race, also said that leaning into his identities helped him establish rapport with sources. “My first ever big feature for The Eyeopener was on the experience of mixed-race students at the university,” he said. “When I tried to start opening up to sources and telling them a bit about my experience and how it’s shaped my worldview, that really helped them open up and feel like they could trust me” (quoted in Blatchford, 2021).

Additionally, journalists said that sources were often more inclined to talk to reporters when they sensed that the reporters were truly listening to them and invested in what they had to say beyond a superficial interest in getting the story. Being of the same race or opening up about a similar experience helps reporters establish that foundation of trust with potential sources. During his time as a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, Wesley Lowery (2020) approached a man in a predominantly Black section of Boston hoping to speak with him about a stabbing that had recently occurred. The man brushed him off and, skeptical about Lowery’s stated credentials, said that the *Globe* didn’t have any Black reporters and never covered that part of town. Lowery (2020) recounted what happened next:

The man I’d approached told me that years earlier a family member had been wrongfully arrested. He said the paper printed his relative’s full criminal history, as well as a mug shot from an unrelated incident. There had been no follow-up when his loved one was later cleared of the crime.

I told him that I understood why he was still upset and that it did sound pretty messed up, before tucking my notebook into my back pocket and turning to leave. “Hey, kid! What was it you wanted to know about?” he asked. “The stabbing?” For years, he’d waited for the chance to tell off a Globe reporter. And now that he had, and had been heard, he wanted to help me tell the story, and get it right.

By acknowledging the man’s prior experience, expressing understanding about his reluctance to speak to reporters, and not returning to his original reason for being there, Lowery fostered enough goodwill with the man that he became willing to speak about the stabbing, trusting that Lowery would get the story right. Similarly, when Black journalist Collier Meyerson (2017) was tasked with reporting on a protest by Black students at the University of Missouri over what the students viewed as “an administration that consistently ignored complaints of on-campus racism,” she knew she would have her work cut out for her, since the students were not allowing any reporters into their encampment. She noticed that all other reporters trying to gain access to the protesters were white men. Then, she had an idea:

I knew I had a better chance than the other reporters of getting the students—most of whom were of color—to talk to me. I am black, and looked younger than 30, which is the age I was at the time. I made a calculation: I would see if the group wanted to talk, and let them know I’d wait as long as I had to. I would tell them, as proof of my diligence, that I had nowhere to go and would take up residence alongside them.

I identified myself as a reporter, and said I didn’t want to disrespect their media-free zone but wanted to hear their perspective and their stories. The students’ faces lit up, and one said, “You’re the first reporter to say that.” It took about 30 more seconds for them to escort me onto the grass and introduce me to the group’s leaders (Meyerson, 2017).

By centering the views and experiences of the students, rather than the end product of the story, in her pitch – and certainly aided by her race – Meyerson was able to gain access to a group that her white male counterparts had not.

Journalists said that establishing trust with sources allowed them to build unique relationships with them. For example, Alex Stucky, a *Salt Lake Tribune* reporter and survivor of

sexual violence, said she believed her experience gave her advantages for speaking with sources who also survived sexual violence. “I think it makes me a better person to cover it. I understand the best way to talk to those people,” she said. “I know what they need. I understand what they might be going through. It makes me a more compassionate reporter” (quoted in Calfo, 2021). For example, Meredith Talusan, BuzzFeed’s first openly transgender reporter, “views her sources as collaborators, rather than assuming it will be difficult to get information out of them. ... she’ll ask what topics are off limits before she dives into the story and documents boundaries in a way that can be referenced, such as in a recording, in case that ground shifts over time” (Grimaldi, 2016). Talusan said that her own identity influenced her approach to building and maintaining relationships with sources: “For me, both as a trans person and as a journalist, I obviously try my best to honor my subjects and to respect them” (quoted in Grimaldi, 2016).

Some journalists, however, said that sharing an identity or experience with a group they were covering did not necessarily translate into easier access or more automatic trust from sources. Despite stating that their identities as indigenous made them better equipped to understand the complexities of the issues that affect Native American communities, journalists Antonia Gonzales and Pauly Denetclaw also said that they faced similar obstacles during their reporting process as when they cover non-Native issues. Gonzales said: “just because we’re Native press doesn’t mean that we have any kind of special access by any means. We get told ‘no’ by people just the same as non-Native reporters do” (quoted in Ahtone, 2017).

#### *Encourages nuance and complexity*

Journalists said that their identities and experiences enabled them to produce more nuanced stories. Their ability to recognize, understand and capture the complexities of certain issues, in turn, strengthens and deepens news coverage of those issues. As freelance journalist

Tamryn Spruill (2021), a Black woman, argued, “You can’t tell me that deeply nuanced issues of race, sexuality, gender identity etc. aren’t best handled by journalists with both professional expertise in the subject but also lived experience.” Erica Ifill (2018), *The Hill Times* columnist and a Black woman, agreed with this statement, saying that “most white journalists do not have the language, the nuance, the historical knowledge, the experience to talk about race and in this day and age that's very much needed. Most are not able to look at the layers of racism and misogyny.” Thus, according to the journalists, it is imperative that newsrooms have a diverse contingent of reporters who are able to capture the nuances of complex, heterogeneous, and underreported issues.

Journalists said that their unique perspectives resulting from their backgrounds enable them to recognize complexities where others might not. Several journalists particularly mentioned feeling frustrated with editors who did not understand the nuances of certain stories. For instance, when Jennifer Hampton of *Slate* was reporting on community-building by Black women on Twitter, she said that her (mostly white and older) editors could not grasp the crux of her findings. “The nuances of what’s happening on the internet where people of color are congregating—they don’t understand the conversation,” Hampton said (quoted in Haines, 2019).

Some journalists had success in helping editors understand the complexities behind seemingly innocuous journalistic choices. For example, Sarah Glover, president of the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), said that she was bothered when she read an Associated Press (AP) headline which described a Black teenager as a “boy.” As Kristen Hare (2020) put it, “Glover saw, again and again, stories where editors and reporters weren’t considering cultural nuances, context or history.” In an email to the AP, Glover explained that “historically, Boy has derogatory meaning when referring to black males. The term has been

used to demean and talk down to black males” (quoted in Hare, 2020). The AP was responsive, and added this qualifier to its stylebook regarding the usage of “boy” and “girl”: “be aware of nuances and unintentional implications. Referring to Black males of any age and in any context as boys, for instance, can be perceived as demeaning and call to mind historical language used by some to address Black men” (quoted in Hare, 2020). The nuances that editors might not see, which can lead to news coverage that misses the mark, underscores the necessity of having a diverse editorial workforce. In terms of racial coverage, for example, one journalist argued that “an editor of color will be able to see certain choices and catch certain nuances that white reporters can struggle with” (quoted in Wenzel, 2019).

Because stories that lack appropriate nuance can cause meaningful damage, like reinforcing harmful stereotypes, journalists said it is crucial that people who understand and recognize the complexities of certain stories report them. For example, a 2017 NPR investigation into forged graduation rates at Ballou High School in Washington, D.C. “focused heavily on the school’s high truancy rate, but restricted mention of poverty to an anonymous student’s brief quotes and a few passing references to “traumatic events” in students’ lives” (Jones, 2018). The missing context is that Ballou serves a predominantly Black student population and that “the school’s problems can be traced directly to segregation, gentrification, broken-windows policing, and education reform; each problem or policy binds a knot where race ties into class” (Jones, 2018). Without examining the structurally racist causes of the school’s fraud, the story is incomplete and damaging. Similarly, Susan Smith Richardson (2015) said that she is “painfully aware that black life is too often cast in one dimension.” In arguing for dedicated beats that cover Black Americans, Richardson (2015) said that “whether by omission or commission, news coverage frequently reinforces stereotypes. A [beat] could help capture the breadth of black life

while also shining a steady light on the persistent challenges facing black people at a time when race in America is more complex than ever before.”

Journalists emphasized that significant or controversial news items in particular demanded nuanced coverage, which certain journalists are able to provide. For example, many of the initial stories that came out in the immediate aftermath of the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin, who was Black, by George Zimmerman, who is not, were matter-of-fact and lacking in detail. This is because, as Eric Deggans (2012) argued, while “journalists had an angle which could elevate the unfortunate shooting of a young boy into a story with implications about racial profiling, small town justice and the struggle for a working class, black family to get fair treatment from a mostly white police force and criminal justice system. In response,” it is often simpler and less precarious for news organizations to cover race without wading into conversations about systemic and structural racism. In response, Black journalists “added insights and urgency to the case by sharing their own experiences” (Deggans, 2012). Because these journalists “felt a personal stake in the Martin case that those unaffected by race prejudice or racial profiling may not have felt,” their insights into the nuances of the case “led to some compelling pieces” (Deggans, 2012). At the dawn of the Trump administration, Sharma (2017) argued that “a new administration is afoot, and with it nascent movements are growing across the country. How will those sentiments be accurately covered with empathy, nuance, and authenticity? We need people in those communities to capture the messages, the angst, the people who make up the groups.” After the mass shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Meredith D. Clark (2016) said that “Mic dispatched a young Latino, gay journalist who had been covering LGBTQ communities, and had the experience to present a nuanced picture of a breaking news event that targeted a marginalized community.” Readers agreed: about the

*Houston Chronicle*'s lack of a single Latinx columnist or editorial board member, Anna Nuñez, a first-generation American of Mexican descent, said: "we've got the border crisis, we have so much going on. And now, more than ever, it's important that we have reporters who know our community way beyond the language. You've got to know the nuances. You've got to know the culture" (quoted in The Editors, 2018). Journalist and documentary filmmaker June Cross, a Black woman, similarly sees deficiencies in mainstream news coverage of race and ethnicity. She said that when journalists look back:

We will have missed the nuances of race and ethnicity. When I get together with my Latino friends, they talk about how different their individual cultures are: Mexican, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Colombian, and Guatemalan [cultures] not only have different holidays and use the same word to connote different things; they also speak Spanish in different accents. The cities that receive immigrants are creating a melting pot of Latin America that I haven't seen reported at all in mainstream press. Ditto for the immigrant flow from Africa and the West Indies. Further, in the press's binary paradigm, undocumented immigrants are rarely Russian, Eastern European, Canadian, Irish—even though their ranks also fill immigration detention centers (quoted in Chideya, 2013).

While, of course, it would be nearly impossible for newsrooms to have reporters of every ethnicity and nationality, geographic context is important: some cities or communities will have larger populations of certain ethnic groups, and it is crucial that newsrooms have staff that reflect the larger community in which they are situated. It is thus imperative, journalists argue, that reporters who understand the myriad complexities of certain issues or communities to be reporting on them. Without a diverse corps of journalists who can effectively capture these nuances, journalism will continue to fail to be accountable to all communities it serves and mistrust of news organizations will endure.

However, some journalists expressed dissenting opinions regarding the impact of identity- or experience-based reporting on news trust. These journalists said that reporters embracing their subjectivities during the reporting process would further damage, rather than

repair, the public's trust in news media. Elizabeth Jensen, the public editor and ombudsman at NPR, said that audiences are less likely to trust that a reporter's story is factual and fair if they become aware of explicit positions that journalist has taken regarding the issue: "If you feel so strongly about an issue (one that you regularly cover) that you [for example] choose to raise money for it then your opinion has crossed a line" (quoted in Cimarusti, 2015). Kathy English (2017), public editor at the *Toronto Star*, said that the paper's policies are in place in order to strengthen the paper's "overall journalistic values and reader trust." Duncan McCue, an indigenous journalist, said that having only journalists with identity- or experience-based connections to certain subjects cover them potentially risks narrowing, not broadening, the audience for their stories: "if we simply play in our own sandbox, then we're not speaking to the broader audience and we need to be" (quoted in Ahtone, 2017). Therefore, some journalists rejected the notion that embracing the positionalities of reporters during the newsmaking process will increase news trust; rather, they said it would undermine it, for audiences would be skeptical of the ability of the journalists to present fact-based narratives about issues with which they share a connection.

### Summary

By outlining the myriad advantages they believe reporting with a connection to their coverage areas provides, journalists are advocating for reconceptualizations of journalistic authority. Like journalistic identity, journalistic authority is not a static concept, but rather dynamic and constantly being refined based on contemporary societal circumstances and attitudes. Through metajournalistic discourse, journalists rhetorically argued for the need for new definitions of journalistic authority in a symbolic negotiation process with audiences. Namely, journalists said they were better equipped for covering certain issues or groups because of their

identity- or experience-based connection to them. For instance, journalists asserted that sharing an identity or experience with their subjects provided them with a unique lens through which to perceive and understand issues. Further, they were often able to bring more prior knowledge and context to their reporting than journalists who did not share an affiliation with their subjects. Because of these affordances, journalists said that their reporting was more authentic and accurate than comparable stories from other journalists. These advantages, journalists argued, made them more authoritative transmitters of information about the issues or groups with which they share an identity or experience. I argue that when journalists produce metajournalistic discourse advocating for the incorporation of embodied identities and experiences into the process of newswork, they are trying to build a new kind of journalistic authority – one in which reporting with an identity- or experience-based connection is accepted and perceived as legitimate journalism.

In addition, journalists argued that reporting with identity- or experience-based connection could be part of the solution to increasing trust in mainstream news media from underserved communities. Previous research (Carlson, 2018; Vos and Thomas, 2017) has shown that mistrust in mainstream media is closely linked to the rejection of journalists as legitimate arbiters of current events. This rejection has several causes – among them the increasing polarization of the American population and the growing presence of “fake news” in information streams. For underserved communities, this mistrust largely stems from the perception that mainstream news both insufficiently and inadequately covers the issues most relevant to them (Wenzel, 2020; Crittenden and Haywood, 2020). The journalists featured in this dissertation argued that one way to potentially increase and improve coverage of underserved communities is for reporters with an identity- or experience-based connection to those communities to report

those stories. The advantages, they said, are numerous: they often recognize certain events as newsworthy and advocate for reporting on them before reporters who do not share a personal connection to those affected by these events; they are better able to understand the nuances of issues that matter to those communities and are thus better able to contextualize them for readers; and they foster deeper trust with sources because sources are more likely to speak to journalists they believe will more fairly report on the issues that matter to them. In essence, journalists argued that they provide more authoritative voices when reporting on issues or groups with which they share an identity or experience. If readers accept the authority of these journalists – which they argue is more likely, given the reasons above – then this presents a potential avenue for trust between mainstream news organizations and underserved communities to be restored.

Journalists were not unanimous, however, in these assertions. Although they comprised a minority in this dissertation's sample, some journalists did not believe that the changes to journalistic practice outlined above would produce more inclusive or equitable journalism or would increase trust in news coverage. These journalists pointed to the long-standing nature of traditional journalism norms in making their arguments. If these norms have largely been accepted and working for decades, they reasoned, then a sufficiently compelling case has not yet been made to change them. For example, Kathy English (2017) said the *Toronto Star's* policy that "journalists do not take public stands on public issues or become the news" is "aligned with longstanding journalistic values and the ethics policies of most credible news organizations in Canada, the U.S. and around the world." In addition, the *Post-Gazette's* Keith C. Burris (2020) said that "when you announce an opinion about a person or story you are reporting on you compromise your reporting. And your editor may take you off the story. This is a long-held tradition at this newspaper and at every good newspaper." Some journalists thus do not perceive

a substantial need to adjust norms and practices that have long been in place and help ensure fair and trustworthy journalism.

Finally, journalists engaged with central tenets of FSE in arguing that their positionalities strengthen, rather than impair, their reporting. By outlining the many advantages of reporting with an identity- or experience-based connection, journalists argued that producing socially situated knowledge results in accounts that are both more truthful and more authoritative. Adopting a framework of strong objectivity thus enhances the credibility of journalists by assigning legitimacy to the perspectives they bring to their reporting. By “starting inquiry ... from the lived experience of people usually ... excluded from knowledge production,” journalists are more likely to include a wider variety of perspectives, ask more critical questions, interrogate deep-seated assumptions, and consider the larger structural forces behind particular events and issues (Steiner, 2018, p. 1858). Ultimately, this would help mainstream news serve a larger number of communities, produce more equitable journalism, enhance the credibility and authority of reporters, and increase trust in news.

## Chapter 6: Best Practice Recommendations to Journalists for Reporting Without Connection

The anecdote shared at the beginning of the previous chapter, about the interaction between a source and two reporters in the television drama *Alaska Daily*, highlighted the advantages that reporting with a level of connection to subjects affords to reporters and their work. Important to this chapter is the aftermath of what happened before this exchange – Eileen, the white reporter from New York City, was not able to convince Sylvie, the indigenous woman victim’s mother, to speak to her on her own; Sylvie only opened up when Roz, the Alaska native reporter who had similarly lost a loved one to murder, came along (McCarthy, 2022). However, news organizations can rarely staff reporters who share an identity or experience with every possible issue or group. Reporters thus routinely cover issues with which they share no prior connection. As freelance journalist Jenni Monet (2019) observed about indigenous reporters, for example, “the odds that an established media outlet will hire an Indigenous reporter in a capacity to write exclusively about the lands and issues they know well is virtually unheard of.”

This findings chapter examines the best practices journalists recommend to fellow journalists for covering issues, communities, or groups with which you don’t share an identity or experience. For instance, Black journalists offer advice to non-Black journalists about covering racial issues and transgender journalists recommend best practices for cisgender journalists covering trans issues. In offering such advice, journalists try to ensure that news coverage of underserved communities is as fair, accurate and equitable as possible – even when the stories are reported by journalists with no connections to those communities. Thus, this findings chapter seeks to answer the third research question (RQ3): What best practices do journalists recommend

to other journalists for covering issues, groups and/or communities with which one does not share a connection or affiliation?

### Self-reflection

The vast majority of journalists said to cover issues or communities with which one does not have a connection, one should ideally first conduct an honest self-assessment about what potential blind spots exist. Self-reflection is a powerful tool for reporters to critically examine what approaches or perspectives might not have been intrinsically obvious to them due to a lack of direct connection to the communities they cover. By acknowledging their knowledge gaps, journalists are better positioned to mitigate those gaps via several strategies in order to produce coverage that is appropriately nuanced. The journalists whose metajournalism is analyzed in this dissertation said journalists should constantly and deliberately ask what is missing from coverage; this question can often slip through the cracks over the course of daily newswork. According to journalist and Davidson College professor Issac J. Bailey (2018b), reflecting on what you don't or can't know, or what you might have missed, is a conscious exercise that should be performed daily: "If implicit bias is essentially having our thinking on auto pilot, the self-audit is the journalist re-taking the wheel." Expressing a similar sentiment, S. Mitra Kalita (2020) succinctly said: "It must become a way of life in order to become a way of work."

Journalists also said that conducting what they called "self-audits" is a moral imperative for journalists who strive to be accurate and accountable in their reporting (Bailey, 2018b; Wenzel, 2019; Blatchford, 2020). Freelance journalist Farai Chideya (2017) said that newsrooms cannot demand transparency and accountability from other sectors, such as business and government, if they are not also willing to be critical of their own practices: "if we journalists can't turn as unsparing a gaze on ourselves as we do on others, it speaks poorly for us and the

credibility of our profession.” Other journalists said that in order to fulfill its role as the fourth estate, news media must also internally reflect those ideals. As the staff of the *Stanford Daily* (2020) put it, “as reporters and editors ourselves, some of whom aspire to careers in journalism, we want to be able to take pride in the role the press plays in promoting democracy and justice.”

Journalists said that their colleagues not sharing an identity or lived experience with the communities they cover often causes them to miss stories or story angles that do not instinctually occur to them. However, sustained contact with people within their coverage area can serve as a powerful illuminator of those missing stories. Elvia Limón, an engagement reporter with the *Dallas Morning News*, recalled speaking to Black children in Oak Cliff, a southwest Dallas neighborhood with a majority Black population. She asked them what they recall seeing the most on the news, and most said police brutality against Black Americans. This “was a revelation ..., striking her that these children needed—and deserved—to see more positive news about their community along with the negative, but often necessary, coverage of violence and race relations” (Carlson, 2019). Because Limón does not identify as Black, it had not occurred to her that Black children would overwhelmingly report being exposed to images of brutality against African Americans. After reflecting on this blind spot, she was motivated to interrogate the coverage her newspaper published about the Black population of Dallas.

Some journalists said it was important to ask who is missing in coverage in terms of voices and sources. For example, Tyler Griffin, editor-in-chief at *The Eyeopener*, Toronto Metropolitan University’s student newspaper, suggested: “First and foremost, analyze your coverage and figure out who you’re missing. ... have I not been talking to women experts? Have I not been talking to enough racialized people? Have I not been getting opinions from people

with disabilities?” (quoted in Blatchford, 2021). Issac J. Bailey (2018b) encourages reporters to ask similar questions of themselves:

Are almost all your sources white men? Is your work devoid of voices that don't neatly fit into a number of “traditional” categories? If so, ask yourself why. Is it because there are no credible voices on your beat outside of the traditional ones? Or is it because your source list was built upon a foundation of traditional voices who most frequently recommend other traditional voices for inclusion in your stories?

Beyond sources represented in coverage, journalists pointed to other aspects of diversity that journalists should reflect upon in terms of their presence in coverage. Doris Truong (2021), director of training and diversity at the Poynter Institute and an Asian American, suggests the following questions: “Do our reports feature all the people who live in our communities? Do we include multiple generations? Do we seek out people who might not be fluent in English? Do we capture the humanity of the victims, or is coverage “othering” them and reinforcing the audience’s unconscious bias?” Journalists said that a crucial component of self-reflection is to critically assess the impact of one’s assumptions or implicit biases on reporting decisions. If journalists do not share a connection to the community they are covering, then they may have preconceived notions about what is or is not important or newsworthy to that community. Thus, journalists recommended that their colleagues go into any assignment with as open a mind as possible about what needs to be covered. For example, a reporter from Philadelphia public radio station WHYY met with community members in Germantown, a majority Black neighborhood, to discuss a potential story on a lack of resources and infrastructure for cyclists. “But wires seem to have crossed,” according to Andrea Wenzel (2019), who conducted the ethnographic study of the newsroom:

The journalist said that after the community member showed him around the area, he didn't find a newsworthy story, but he did not communicate this to the community member. Meanwhile, the community member expressed frustration with the reporter's

assumptions about the neighborhood. The community member complained, “Journalists come in with assumptions even after having a conversation about the assumptions.”

Curbing assumptions is also a special consideration for white reporters who cover marginalized communities; it can be easy to adopt a savior complex lens in stories, even if inadvertently. As Native American journalist Sterling Cospoer told fellow journalists: “Don’t go into it thinking you’re going to be a champion saving some disenfranchised people. Be a humble reporter and do your job” (quoted in Ahtone, 2017).

Several journalists said that their colleagues should discuss the importance of self-auditing with their editors and encourage them to implement formal mechanisms for auditing the diversity in and of stories at the newsroom level. For instance, Taylor Blatchford (2020), a *Seattle Times* engagement reporter and a white woman, encourages journalists to set specific goals: “Do you want to examine your internal staff diversity, or the sources used in your stories, or the representation in your visual journalism? There’s not a one-size-fits-all approach, and you should tailor the ‘diversity report’ to the needs of your newsroom.” Similarly, journalism scholar Andrea Wenzel (2019) said that “processes that involve reporters and editors in auditing and tracking the diversity of their sources offer a potential pathway to encouraging reflexivity among participating journalists and increasing the range of voices included in stories.” Having newsroom-wide support for these efforts can help journalists more easily and quickly identify any potential gaps in their coverage. However, institutional support will only go so far; journalists must want to recognize their knowledge gaps and actively work to mitigate them. Kevin Riley, an editor at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* and a white man, reminded his fellow journalists:

There’s no way around a personal commitment to diversity. You can mandate it at a certain level. You can require it in hiring. Those things help. ... But in the end, we all

have to look at ourselves in the mirror and say, ‘Do I care about this? And if I care, What am I doing about it?’” (quoted in Stewart, 2015).

### *Responsibility to develop expertise*

One of the most recurring recommendations journalists made for fellow journalists covering issues or communities with which they share no connection is to make an effort to develop some measure of expertise in their coverage area. Even though it is impossible to claim identities or experiences one does not share, journalists said that journalists can develop approaches to reporting that capture the nuance and complexity required for successful coverage of those issues. According to journalists, this is important because it is not only the responsibility of journalists who share an identity or experience with their subjects to cover them, nor are they the only ones uniquely qualified to do so. As Susan Smith Richardson (2015) said, with “any specialty beat, a reporter has to cultivate sources, identify experts, and learn the seminal literature.”

Journalists said that their colleagues can partly compensate for not having a connection to their coverage area by ensuring that they are well-informed about its historical and contemporary context. That is, journalists should be doing extensive and continuous research on their beats in order to ensure that they are equipped to serve as an authoritative voice on the issues. The recommendation to be well-versed in one’s coverage area is applicable to all newsroom beats, from the most traditional to the more recent. For example, as queer journalist Christina Cauterucci said, “[N]ot just anybody can write about gender. ... it is a skill that requires honing and expertise in the same way that writing about economics or something requires expertise” (quoted in Heckman, 2021). Melissa Jeltsen (2021), a freelance journalist who writes about gender and reproductive rights, similarly said that it is not enough for reporters to simply

regurgitate facts without context when covering abortion and “expect readers to understand what is at stake.” Jelsten (2021) suggested:

Reporters should work to find the people most affected by abortion restrictions and speak to them. They should seek out and interview doctors with expertise in abortion. They should contextualize abortion as health care, not simply political fodder. Those voices are out there. It is up to reporters and editors to put the work in to find them.

Nevertheless, a beat involving the most pertinent contemporary social issues (such as those pertaining to race, gender and/or sexuality) might present additional layers of complexity and controversy for which a journalist has to prepare. According to journalists, this is because these social issues permeate all other aspects of society, which makes it even more imperative to get the coverage right. As *Capital B* reporter Kenya Hunter (2022), a Black woman, said: “this could be a hot take but I think every single journalist needs to study race on some academic level.” Errin Haines Whack (2018), editor-at-large for gender-focused outlet *The 19th*\* and a Black woman, explained, “As race is an omnipresent force in American life, race coverage, which requires the same sort of expertise as business or education journalism, is essential to reporting on who we are as a society.” However, there often is not sufficient incentive or effort from journalists and news organizations to develop expertise in these subjects, given their complexity. Research and training in these subjects are not as straightforward as training in other areas, as Wendi C. Thomas, founder and journalist at nonprofit outlet *MLK50* and a Black woman, (2017) highlights:

Race and racism aren’t topics on which most journalists have formal training. And there’s little incentive to develop an expertise. Job postings ask for proficiency with Nexis and Pacer, CSS and JavaScript. But I’ve never seen a job posting that asked applicants to demonstrate a deep understanding about the difference between stereotypes and prejudice, or discrimination and racism.

This requires a dedicated investment on the part of journalists to educate themselves on these complex but crucially important issues. “As journalists, we’re tasked today with having a much

more complex, nuanced understanding of identity, representation, race, and—the big word—power,” Susan Smith Richardson, managing editor at *The Guardian US* and a Black woman, said (quoted in McCormick, 2019).

Journalists also said that an important part of developing expertise is active listening. Doing so demonstrates to colleagues, sources, and readers that you are serious about getting coverage right and willing to take the time to learn from those with expertise in other areas. As Doris Truong (2020a) put it, “If you are not a journalist of color, this is the time when you need to do the work. You need to listen to your diversity officers, your diversity committees, your employee resource groups.” Because of the prominence of social media and other avenues for user-generated content, interested parties have more means to call out what they perceive as problematic coverage and bring it to the attention of reporters and editors. Nonbinary reporter Ashley Dye criticized the persistent debates about using the singular ‘they’ in stories about nonbinary individuals, with one side maintaining that it is a grammatical problem while the other wants to respect how nonbinary individuals prefer to be addressed. Dye (2019) said:

Grammar does not determine whether a lived experience exists. We do. The beauty of language is that it’s created by and for us. Its mainstream use can no longer write people out of existence. Thanks to the rise of the internet and social platforms, marginalized groups have more immediate ways to call out these shortcomings. It’s our job to listen. It costs nothing to learn and respect how someone identifies.

As Erika Dilday (2020), CEO and executive director at the nonprofit Futuro Media Group and a Black woman, succinctly put it, “Journalists need to talk less [and] listen more.”

### Diversify sources

Journalists said that one of the most straightforward ways to produce news stories that are more accountable to those they cover is by ensuring that they increase the diversity of the sources they use in the stories. Having a variety of voices represented in news stories is a

prerequisite for equitable coverage because only diverse sources will be able to speak to a wide range of lived experiences.

A lack of diversity among sources can be especially obvious when “experts” are quoted in coverage. Because white men are overrepresented in professional, managerial and leadership positions across many industries, their opinions also tend to be overrepresented in news stories. For instance, journalist and scholar Cynthia Greenlee, a Black woman, noted a glaring lack of Black experts in stories about Black maternal health. Racial disparities in quality of maternal health treatment have been well documented, to the extent that Black women are more than three times as likely to die from birth-related complications than white women. Therefore, according to Greenlee (2018), it is imperative to represent these voices in stories: “Black experts—be they midwives, nonprofit staff, sociologists, or public health researchers—often have relevant lived experience or have cultivated deeper relationships with black patients and communities.”

Desiree Stennett of the *Orlando Sentinel*, a Black woman, also sought to develop a diverse list of potential sources when she joined the race and inequality beat. She found that asking fellow journalists to share their source networks was not useful because white men were overrepresented in those networks. Thus, she decided to spend time establishing relationships with women and minorities who could come to serve as recurring expert sources for her. For example, in terms of academic sources, many *Sentinel* reporters will speak to professors at the University of Central Florida, which is located in Orlando. Stennett, however, “makes a conscious effort to reach out to academics at Florida A&M University (FAMU) and Bethune-Cookman University, which are local, historically Black institutions” (Tameez, 2022).

Of course, efforts to diversify sources – particularly expert sources – in news stories should not be the responsibility of individual reporters, but a newsroom-wide initiative.

Journalists recommended that news organizations design and implement concrete tools to measure the level of diversity of the sources in their stories. For example, Philadelphia public radio station WHYY implemented several measures to increase its “cultural competency,” which the station defined as “understanding the nuances of the communities we cover, building relationships that further our knowledge and ability to accurately cover these communities, and recognizing and doing something about our own skewed lenses and how they impact the narratives we present” (quoted in Wenzel, 2019).

For reporters, directives aimed at increasing the diversity of sources include to “identify one diverse person or organization on their beat that they have not used before and arrange an in-person conversation” and to “identify two regular sources on their beat and find a diverse alternative” (quoted in Wenzel, 2019). The initiatives seem to have provoked some progress: “A little over a year after completing their first source audit, where 80% of local sources had been white, a snapshot of their ongoing audit showed just under 65% of sources were white. Sources identified as Black jumped from 4% in 2018 to 26% in 2019” (Wenzel, 2019).

### *Build trust with sources*

Journalists said that one of the most straightforward ways to demonstrate commitment to producing fair and accurate stories about issues or communities with which the journalist shares no connection is by gaining the trust of potential sources. That is, journalists say that their colleagues should put in the time and effort to demonstrate to sources that they are committed to telling their stories with nuance and complexity. Building trust with sources is often related to overcoming a longstanding distrust of mainstream media that certain communities have developed over decades. For example, Native Americans have long complained that mainstream media have systematically underreported and undervalued stories and issues that affect them.

Therefore, a reporter who works for a mainstream news outlet – who likely does not have Native American heritage, as the proportion of Native journalists in mainstream media is miniscule – might have a difficult time finding Native sources willing to speak with them. Journalist Sari Horwitz, who is not indigenous, spoke of the obstacles she faced when writing a story about crimes against Native Americans: “I am basically another white female journalist calling and saying, ‘I want to come and study you.’ There have been so many studies and so many efforts to figure out what’s going on, and this is just one more person coming, and then nothing changes” (quoted in Marcus, 2016).

As the journalists above implied, being perceived as an outsider who possesses no knowledge or understanding of the issues that certain groups face is one of the biggest hurdles to gaining the trust of sources. Reporters have adopted several strategies to develop trust-based relationships with the people they cover. One of these strategies is to simply spend an extended amount of time immersed in the environments of the story’s subjects. For instance, Katy Bergen of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* spent five months meeting people in one-on-one meetings and observing support groups for a multi-part series on transgender individuals or those supporting one in the Sarasota, Florida area (Bergen, 2015). Jill Burcum, reporting for the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* on the underfunding and general neglect of tribal schools, and her photographer both put in a significant amount of time in the local community:

They spent hours at one school over five or six visits, each requiring a four-and-a-half-hour drive each way. They stayed in a hotel on the reservation, part of a tribal casino, where they got to know the hotel staff. They made sure to eat at tribal restaurants and shop in tribal stores. They tipped well (quoted in Marcus, 2016)

By demonstrating that they are genuinely interested in learning about the realities of their subjects’ daily lives, and not simply showing up with a nominal interest to the extent that it gets them the story, journalists can bolster their awareness and understanding of issues and gain favor

with the community members they are covering, which will result in stories that better articulate the complexities of issues.

When potential sources are in especially vulnerable positions, developing a trust-based relationship is even more imperative. When *Mother Jones* reporter Becca Andrews wrote a story about the difficulties of obtaining an abortion in states with laws restricting abortion access (before the Supreme Court ruling that overturned *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022), she knew that she would need to earn the confidence of the woman whose experience would serve as the basis for the story. Because of the sensitive nature of the ordeal and the potential legal consequences involved for residents of certain states, it can be difficult to find women who are willing to speak to reporters, even anonymously. In order to ensure that her source felt comfortable telling her story to her, Andrews met with “Kate” in an informal, low-stakes setting so they could simply get to know each other. She also made sure to explain several aspects of the reporting process to “Kate” so she felt informed. “I took a while to just hang out with her and get a feel for who she was,” Andrews said. “After a while, I explained what ‘on the record’ means and the broad rules of journalism” (quoted in Jeltsen, 2021). Once she began writing the story, Andrews also “constantly checked in with Kate about the exact details she was including to make sure Kate was comfortable that they could not be used to identify her” (quoted in Jeltsen, 2021). Not only did Andrews ensure that Kate felt like she had a voice throughout the process, but Andrews also demonstrated an understanding of the complex circumstances around getting an abortion despite strict state regulations.

*Fusion* reporters Jorge Riva and Christina Constantini were also tasked with profiling a particularly vulnerable source: a transgender woman named Johanna Vasquez. As an undocumented immigrant Vasquez had been placed with men in a U.S. Immigration and

Customs Enforcement (ICE) detention center, was beaten by her cellmate, and spent seven months in solitary confinement because guards were not sure how else to handle her situation (Morrison, 2016). In order to earn Vasquez's trust, Riva and Constantini met with her several times without any recording devices, including notebooks. Vasquez then went on the record about her ordeal and appeared in a video that accompanied the story. Similarly, Monica Hesse of the *Washington Post* profiled Sara Simone, a transgender woman who had served in the military before her transition. Hesse likewise did not bring any recording equipment to her first meetings with Simone. She also sent Simone other articles of hers that had featured queer individuals, to demonstrate that she had some prior experience interacting with this community. Over time, Hesse noticed that Simone was increasingly trustful of her: she became more forthcoming about details about her life, and had even let Hesse meet her brother, despite Simone's initial reluctance (Morrison, 2016). By interviewing Simone's brother, Hesse was able to articulate a more nuanced portrait of Simone through crucial context from someone who knew Simone intimately.

Several journalists said that because building trust with sources takes time, it is essential to obtain support from editors to pursue these efforts. They recommended that fellow journalists have open and honest conversations with their editors about the time investment needed to produce a story, and explain why this investment is important. As Collier Meyerson (2017) noted:

Sometimes getting the right source to open up takes time. If you're writing for a digital outlet that expects a quick turnaround, push back on your editors. Tell your editors the story requires trust building, and that it will be better for the extra time.

#### Seek input from sources and community members

Another common recommendation for journalists who cover issues or communities with which they share no affiliation is to seek input from those who are members of those

communities and/or have direct experience with those issues, including sources, and directly involve them in the reporting process. These individuals are often willing to assist reporters overcome “trepidation” about covering issues with which they have no prior experience (Lieberman, 2019). As Gillian Branstetter, media relations manager for the National Center for Transgender Equality, put it: “I am happy to walk members of the media through any questions they may have about writing ethically about transgender issues. I think the vast majority of them want to tell important stories accurately, and respect the marginalized people they’re writing about” (quoted in Lieberman, 2019).

Involving community members directly in the reporting process can also mean giving them the opportunity to read drafts of completed stories before publication, even if this strays from traditional journalistic practice. For example, when journalist Katie Herzog (2017), who identifies as cisgender, wrote a story involving transgender people, “two trans people were invited to read the piece and give their feedback.” She said she knew the topic she was writing about – those who choose to de-transition – is complex and sensitive, and she hoped that having two individuals who identify as transgender reading over the story would help ensure that she was accurately and fairly representing the issue in her story. In the end, because her story was checked for accuracy by several trans individuals, Herzog believed it was “the most balanced, least opinion-based piece I’ve ever written” (quoted in Lieberman, 2019).

*Mother Jones* reporter Becca Andrews, when writing a story about women from Mississippi (one of the states with the nation’s most restrictive abortion policies) attempting to obtain the procedure, decided that she should directly involve one of her subjects in the story writing process. Because the story involved a controversial issue with potential legal ramifications Andrews wanted to make sure that her subject felt comfortable with the details she

was including in the story. As journalist Melissa Jeltsen (2020) explained in a behind-the-scenes story of how Andrews reported this story, “once she had written a draft, Andrews checked in with Kate about the exact details she was including to make sure Kate was comfortable that they could not be used to identify her.”

In addition, journalists can involve community members in their reporting process by crowdsourcing story ideas from them. This way, journalists hear directly from their audience what types of stories the latter feel are underreported and are thus better able to produce sufficient coverage that is accountable to those communities. For instance, “Code Switch,” the NPR program about race and culture, has found inspiration for several programs from listener ideas. One such episode tackled the question of “racial imposters,” or multiracial people who do not feel wholly connected to any one of their heritages. This story was born from an email from a listener who asked whether “you hear from other listeners who feel like fakes? God, I hope the answer is yes” (quoted in Kaleem, 2018). This strategy allows journalists to defer to those with lived experiences or identities connected to certain issues to dictate what stories should be told.

Other journalists have assembled ad-hoc advisory committees of community members for guidance and feedback on stories. For example, the creators of “The Lines Between Us,” a series about structural racism in Baltimore that aired on WYPR, the city’s NPR station, relied on a group of locals (including a police officer, a former prisoner, and an anti-racism trainer) to help guide their stories about generational inequality, incarceration, police encounters, public housing and more. Because the staff members of “The Lines Between Us” were mostly white, they said it was important to consult those with direct experience with the issues they were covering in order to feel “more accountable for how our characterization of a neighborhood, a person, or a topic might be perceived or felt by people of different classes and races” (quoted in Lanahan, 2014).

The journalists stressed the importance of being open to honest and often fraught conversations about complex issues and the news media's historical role in covering them insufficiently and inaccurately. Additionally, the more a journalist's advisory committee is composed of community members with diverse experiences and perspectives, the better that journalist will be able to capture nuances and complexities in the story. Erika Dilday (2020) recommended for journalists covering racial issues to

actively engage people of color on all levels and use community advocates and other people who work daily with marginalized groups to shape how things are covered and to identify what is missing. Don't assume that one person of color has the answer. We are different people with different ideas and different opinions on what is needed. Listen, learn, and assume that the answers have the same complexity as the problem.

#### *Find a trusted sponsor*

As outlined above, building the trust of sources in a community with which the journalist has no connection can take a significant amount of time and effort. This is because, when the community in question is marginalized and/or underserved in particular, there is often a level of mistrust of the mainstream media on the part of community members. Journalists said that one potential starting point that their fellow journalists can pursue is to find a sponsor within the community to advocate for them. Having a local leader who is trusted by the community vouch for them might help journalists overcome initial hesitancy from community members and secure interviews or other direct contact as a first step in an extended immersion. Indeed, as Erika Dilday (2020) argued, journalists should "use community advocates and other people who work daily with marginalized groups to shape how things are covered and to identify what is missing."

For Sari Horwitz of the *Washington Post*, who is not indigenous, a connection she made with a Native American survivor of sexual abuse who became an activist led to subsequent

interviews with other indigenous survivors. The activist who acted as Horwitz's sponsor believed it was important for a national outlet such as the *Post* to cover issues affecting Native American communities in order to increase awareness among a wider readership. As Horowitz recalled:

I sat at her kitchen table, and she told me a story about how her mother had been sexually abused, how she had been sexually abused, how her daughter had been raped. She started telling me all these different stories about the legacy of boarding schools and how that had led to so much sexual abuse on reservations. Each story led to the next one" (quoted in Marcus, 2016).

The activist's willingness to go on record – and Horwitz's treatment of her statements in the story – generated enough trust among other indigenous women for several more to come forward.

Early in the process of reporting his story about the mistreatment of transgender women in immigration detention, Jorge Rivas also met with Olga Tomchin, a representative at the Transgender Law Center who had done work in immigration detention reform advocacy. Tomchin helped Rivas navigate potentially treacherous waters when it came to filming the transgender women for a video component to the story. Rivas found:

The process of developing a relationship with a source or a source's representative wasn't different from any other story except for one thing: Tomchin asked if Rivas was going to film any of the transgender sources putting on makeup. Tomchin "explained that this trope in coverage of transgender women is widely considered a superficial demonstration of femaleness to which cisgender women are rarely subjected" (Morrison, 2016).

By illuminating Rivas to the potential misrepresentation of trans women by having them overtly perform their femininity, Tomchin steered Rivas toward using more nuanced approaches which, in turn, would garner him additional favor with, and trust from, the vulnerable transgender women he was seeking to interview. As such, Tomchin proved to be a valuable resource to Rivas during the reporting process and helped ensure that the story would be layered, accurate, and accountable to its subjects.

### Seek input from other journalists

In addition to community members, journalists should also seek out fellow journalists who would be in a position to give input based on a shared identity or experience with the issue being covered. Journalists said that, much like consulting community members, the counsel of fellow journalists might help identify blind spots in stories, provide valuable perspectives from those with direct experience with those issues, and demonstrate a commitment to coverage that captures as much nuance as possible. The student journalists at the *Stanford Daily* (2020), for instance, said that they “look to our own colleagues to make sure we are telling these stories correctly” Furthermore, Erika Dilday (2020) said that “veteran journalists have to learn to understand where and how their limitations will hurt a story.”

Many journalists expressed an awareness of their responsibility to get things right when reporting on an issue or community with which they have no connection. Freelance journalist Christine Grimaldi (2016), for example, said that over the course of producing a story about LGBTQ+ romance novels for *Slate*, she “had been obsessive about the need to do right by a wide-ranging community that wasn’t mine.” In order to ensure that her reporting was as accurate and fair as possible, she “had fact-checked the story line by line, and asked writer friends, in addition to my editor, to evaluate whether I approached the topic with appropriate nuance and sensitivity” (Grimaldi, 2016). Although Grimaldi admitted she was not able to avoid all missteps (including failing to check the gender identity of a named source), she nevertheless believed that her efforts to consult with LGBTQ+ reporters minimized other potential gaffes and exemplified her good intentions.

Grimaldi also cited the work of Meredith Talusan, *BuzzFeed*’s first openly transgender staff writer, who has served as a consultant on several news stories involving the LGBTQ+

community. For example, Talusan advised on name and pronoun usage in a story published by online magazine *Matter*. Because the story featured a couple who are both trans, using the appropriate names and pronouns and avoiding deadnames was a complex task, so there was, as Grimaldi (2016) described, a lot “of back-and-forth on gendered pronouns and names.” In the end, the reporter decided to use “a source-selected, gender-neutral substitute, rather than a deadname, for the portion of the piece describing one of the sources prior to their transition” (Grimaldi, 2016). Being able to seek counsel from fellow journalists who belong to the community about which you are writing can be extremely valuable to journalists who might not know best practices for portraying that community. In the case of Francesca Mari, the reporter for *Matter*, Talusan’s input allowed her to avoid many pitfalls associated with misgendering or misidentifying transgender people.

When he got the idea for a podcast examining whiteness and racism in America, journalist John Biewen decided that he could not embark on the endeavor alone. He sought out a “copilot” in Chenjerai Kumanyika, a journalist and academic who identifies as Black (Shaer, 2019). According to Michael Shaer, who wrote a profile on Biewen and Kumanyika and their podcast, Biewen understood that he lacked the lived experience and perspective to wholly capture the complexities and impacts of racism. Thus, he needed “someone to help him process what he would learn” (Shaer, 2019). Kumanyika, for his part, asserted it was important to share “what it’s like to live as a member of a group that is marginalized and oppressed” (quoted in Shaer, 2019).

### *Present complexity*

Many of the recommendations outlined thus far stemmed from journalists’ conviction that journalists covering issues or communities with which they do not share a connection must

take extra pains to present those issues or communities with as much complexity and nuance as possible. Without appropriate preventative steps, journalists run the risk of injecting homogeneity and stereotypes into their stories, even inadvertently, if they do not share the lived experiences of their subjects. As Susan Smith Richardson (2015) notes, “whether by omission or commission, news coverage frequently reinforces stereotypes. ... As the editor and publisher of a news organization that focuses on race, I’m painfully aware that black life is too often cast in one dimension.”

Thus, journalists said that one way to minimize the frequency of stereotypes and increase the complexity of news coverage is for mainstream news organizations to cover a wide variety of issues that affect different groups. Journalists said that a majority coverage of underserved groups in mainstream outlets focuses on a narrow aspect of their experience – for example, gay marriage for LGBTQ+ communities, or crime and police brutality for Black communities. As Jennifer Vanasco (2013) pointed out, “there are other issues that the [LGBTQ+] community cares deeply about,” such as immigration, criminal justice reform, and healthcare and medical issues. “There’s a lot more to the LGBT community than marriage,” Vanasco (2013) said. Similarly, while Jos Truitt (2014a) said that reporting on injustices suffered by transgender women is vital to increasing awareness of those issues, “stories about the full spectrum of our humanity are necessary to represent trans women as real people to media consumers. We deserve to have stories about our lives and accomplishments told in ways that don’t reduce us to our genitals.”

Black journalists underscored the need to move away from “people of color porn” coverage, which present an incomplete picture of Black communities. As *Washington Post* columnist Karen Attiah, a Black woman, said:

Too often we have this idea that covering ‘Black stories’ means covering pain, trauma, and racism, which in and of itself, is not only taxing, but a limited way to look at the totality of what it means to be a Black person in America. We need more stories that center us, without having to constantly cater or explain ourselves to a white gaze. We are more than just our pain and trauma” (quoted in Ingram, 2020).

Journalists said that mainstream outlets would do well to follow the lead of minority outlets, who have long sought to produce coverage that covers the gamut of a community’s experiences. For instance, despite dedicating much coverage on social injustice and police brutality, Black outlet Blavity also covers “positive news to inspire and uplift the community,” such as Marvel’s new Iron Man, a black teenage girl named Riri Williams based on Disney Channel star Skai Jackson—and “a feel-good story on a community coming together to help a homeless teen” (quoted in Spike, 2016). Another suggestion, made by those such as Charles Whitaker, dean of the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University, is for mainstream outlets to have a dedicated race beat. “What it does is pour time, resources, energy, and voices into the reporting. If somebody is really dedicating resources, we can change the conversation. Now, we get the pathology stories, and we don’t get as many success stories and research stories,” said Whitaker, who is Black (quoted in Richardson, 2015).

Journalists said that another way to present more complexity in news stories is to include historical context surrounding contentious issues. This is important because stories should not only serve audiences with connection to the issues being covered, but also a wider audience. Historical context moves a story beyond immediate occurrences and explains why an issue is particularly problematic. For example, regarding then-President Donald Trump’s remarks about then-Senator Kamala Harris, *Roll Call* columnist Mary C. Curtis (2020) said:

When the sitting president calls a woman with much more political experience a ‘monster,’ and says it would be ‘insult[ing]’ if she became vice president, well, journalists have to do more than just regurgitate the quote. They need to unpack the history and the racism behind the characterization and not be shy about doing it. If we

don't, readers won't get the complete story and informed readers will know we are missing it."

Similarly, Errin Haines said that including context in news stories can an educational purpose in revealing patterns that underscore the deep roots of an issue:

I think it's just really important that at all times we tie the stories we are doing to the historical context and foundation that really shows how this is all systemic. There are so many people who are ready to dismiss the types of things that we write about as a one-off or anomalies. I would encourage anyone writing about race in America to be familiar and have a working knowledge of US history and its role in the things you are writing about. We've been here before (quoted in Ho, 2017).

### Develop an "equity lens"

Journalists also recommended that their colleagues develop an "equity lens" to use during their reporting process in order to write stories that capture the complex nature of social issues. Reporting from an equity lens means keeping equity issues at the forefront of the reporting process. Freelance journalist Lawrence Lanahan (2014), for instance, suggested the following considerations as a starting point for covering minority communities: "Are government policies and institutional practices disproportionately affecting particular groups? This approach will lead reporters away from tear gas clouds and shattered storefronts and toward less sexy but more telling stories like municipal zoning decisions and federal Title VI reports." Journalists also said that abortion needs to be covered with "care and sensitivity," because failing to capture the complex nature of abortion policies and legislation can lead to misrepresentations that leave audiences even less informed about the stakes. "Sometimes I'll write something and I'll ask myself, 'Am I sugarcoating a little? Am I, like, trying to make this simpler than it really is?' It's an important thing for me to be asking myself when I'm writing," said *Mother Jones* reporter Becca Andrews (quoted in Jeltsen, 2020). Freelance journalist Christine Grimaldi (2016) said that one relatively simple step that journalists can implement to increase the equity in their

stories is to “ask all sources for their sexual orientation and gender identity at the outset of an interview.” While this might seem cumbersome, it helps ensure that all sources are treated equally and that the reporter makes no assumptions about a source’s gender identity or sexual orientation. Grimaldi (2016) emphasized the value in “standardizing the practice, even if it isn’t always practical. Asking only visibly trans people about gender identity further marginalizes them.”

An important component of reporting through an equity lens, journalists said, is to move away from “both-sides” journalism. That is, journalists should work to subvert the normative journalistic instinct of presenting multiple viewpoints in every story if one or more of those viewpoints actively work against accurate and accountable narratives. Often, as Alex S. Jones, director of the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard, explained, reporting through an equity lens by avoiding both-sides-ism means “not trying to create the illusion of fairness by letting advocates pretend in your journalism that there is a debate about the facts when the weight of truth is clear” (quoted in Lowery, 2020). For example, when covering “bathroom bills” that limit transgender people’s access to bathrooms that align with their gender identity, journalists might be reluctant to include that there is no evidence that links trans-inclusive policies to bathroom safety for fear of appearing biased (Allen, 2018). However, not including this would in fact undermine the accuracy of the story by misrepresenting the potential consequences for enacting bathroom bills. Distorted coverage is dangerous, journalists argued, because it foments “further distrust of the media within [underserved] communities,” said Philip Clapham (2020), project manager for the Colorado Media Project. As many journalists noted, reporting with an equity lens does not mean totally ignoring minority opinions; rather, it involves assigning them proportional weight in a story. As journalist Samantha Allen, a trans woman,

(2018) aptly put it, “Sunlight can only act as a disinfectant if journalists clear the clouds away. ... ‘Both sides’-style journalism would be less of a problem if the journalist always took the side of truth, even when it wasn’t somewhere in the middle.”

### Summary

When making recommendations to fellow reporters about producing more equitable reporting, the journalists featured in this dissertation once again called for a reconsideration of normative journalistic practices. In particular, journalists recommended that their colleagues place equity at the forefront of every decision they make during the reporting process. First, journalists argued that developing deep knowledge about one’s reporting area is a crucial aspect of a journalist's role. This is even more important if journalists do not share an identity or experience with the groups or issues they cover. Thus, developing expertise – such as thorough research and extended immersion – to bridge the gap created by a lack of connection to their coverage areas is a professional responsibility of the journalist. Putting in the effort to produce coverage that is as learned and insightful as possible will result in more equitable reporting. Another crucial component to equitable reporting is ensuring that coverage presents an issue or group with a maximum amount of nuance. Effectively representing the complexities of an issue or group in a news story helps minimize distortions that could negatively impact the ways by which the public perceives those issues or groups. Ultimately, reporting with an “equity lens” requires journalists to disengage from another normative journalistic practice, that is, to reject “both-sides” journalism (Tuchman, 1972; Rosen, 1999). Authentic equitable reporting does not privilege a large number of perspectives if including some of those perspectives might move audiences away from an accurate interpretation of the story. Practicing fact-based, equitable

journalism means centering the experiences of subjects and dedicating proportional space to minority perspectives.

By calling for a greater involvement of community members in the reporting process, journalists argue for adopting more participatory reporting models. This also subverts traditional journalistic practices by closing the gap between journalists and their subjects. Whereas journalists have historically been taught to keep their distance from those they cover for the sake of objectivity, contemporary journalists have been increasingly arguing that maintaining distance does not best serve the marginalized communities they cover. Building trust with sources and seeking input from sources and community members helps catch possible misrepresentations in stories before they are published, and letting sources look over drafts in some specific circumstances might also help protect the dignity and privacy of that source. The overall effect of these news practices is a potential increase in media trust from members of underserved groups, who see in reporters a genuine effort to present their stories with fairness, accuracy, and equity (Wenzel, 2020; Crittenden and Haywood, 2020; Richardson, 2022).

Additionally, journalists said that better treatment of sources in coverage can lead to an increase of potential sources who are willing to appear in news stories. Journalists underscored the importance of diverse representation in media coverage, both in terms of sources depicted in coverage as well as story variety. While previous research (Nishikawa et. al, 2009; Steiner, 2013) has shown that the ability of journalists to impact diversity in coverage might be limited without also addressing larger organizational forces, journalists feel that their efforts do generate tangible effects on the quality of coverage they produce. Journalists said that they were able to partly compensate for their lack of connection to an issue or group by maximally diversifying the voices they included in their stories, thus ensuring that they were representing a wide range of

identities and lived experiences. Additionally, journalists said that news stories must reflect the diversity of their subjects. That is, it is crucial that the identities or experiences of entire issues or groups are not cast in a single dimension. Coverage must go deeper, for example, than reporting the effects of police brutality on Black communities or the effects of anti-gay or anti-trans legislation on the LGBTQ+ community. Reporting on the wide spectrum of topics that interest and affect different groups leads to more equitable coverage by moving away from the notion that these groups are monolithic and instead signaling their heterogeneity.

Journalists advised their colleagues to consistently reflect on their thought processes and decisions while reporting a story. The practice of reflexivity, a crucial component of feminist standpoint epistemology and other critical frameworks, encourages more equitable reporting by facilitating the consistent examination of possible motives behind each decision. Journalists should embrace reflexivity as part of the reporting process: interrogating how their subjectivity – and that of their sources – can influence aspects of news production is critical to producing more equitable coverage. By reflecting on what identities and experiences they bring to a story – their standpoints – journalists can more effectively recognize their own blind spots and thus better predict what knowledge gaps they need to fill and what voices they need to represent in their stories. Practicing reflexivity as a reporter thus aligns with the broader contestation of normative journalistic ideals that encourage distance and neutrality from coverage areas. Not only should subjectivity and reflexivity not be removed from the reporting process, but should be embraced as “an asset to effectively co-construct” more equitable reporting” (Olmos-Vega et. al. 2023, p. 243).

## Chapter 7: Best Practice Recommendations to Newsrooms for More Equitable and Inclusive Coverage

The previous chapter discussed the recommendations that journalists made to their fellow journalists for better covering issues and communities with which they did not share an identity- or experience-based connection. This chapter examines what journalists say must change at the newsroom level for news coverage to become more equitable and accountable to the communities the news outlet serves. Therefore, this findings chapter seeks to answer the fourth research question (RQ4): What best practices do journalists recommend to news organizations for supporting journalists with varied identities and experiences and ensuring more equitable news coverage of their communities?

### Self-reflection

Much like journalists should constantly engage in self-reflection in terms of their reporting practices, as the previous chapter showed, many journalists in turn said that news organizations should be doing the same. While it is important for journalists to practice reflexivity over the course of their reporting process, change will only come if the same reflexivity occurs at the newsroom level. As Tonya Mosley, a Black woman and a senior Silicon Valley editor for San Francisco NPR station KQED who has also helped develop implicit bias trainings for newsrooms, put it: “We ask journalists to reflect deeply and examine how their own upbringings, interactions, and world views creep into their approaches to journalism [but] it takes ... a company/organizational commitment for there to be a true cultural shift” (quoted in Bailey, 2018a).

According to journalists, the first step for newsrooms is to acknowledge that they are missing the mark on diversity issues. Only by first recognizing that they are not engaging with every community they cover or do not have a journalistic workforce that reflects a wide range of identities and experiences will newsrooms be able to begin to remedy those issues. In recent times, for example, many news outlets have issued public apologies for failing to adequately cover a variety of issues. The *Lexington (Kentucky) Herald-Leader* was one of many newspapers to offer *mea culpas* for not covering the civil rights movement, while National Geographic apologized for its history of racist coverage – what journalism scholar and Black woman Meredith D. Clark (2020) called “a legacy of exploiting the Other.” Journalists said that newsrooms should also take close looks at the make-up of their newsrooms across a variety of diversity markers, such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, sexuality, nationality, immigrant status, and others. The act of creating formal reports on the state of diversity in one’s newsroom – like several professional publications, such as ProPublica, as well as student publications, like the Daily Northwestern, have recently done – helps newsrooms more clearly see the gaps in diversity that exist and lay out plans to rectify them (Blatchford, 2020).

Additionally, journalists said that newsrooms should seek feedback from their staff, stakeholders, readers, and other interested parties about what they perceive the newsroom’s shortcomings to be and how they feel it could do better on diversity matters. As Taylor Blatchford (2020), an investigative reporter for the *Seattle Times* and a white woman, suggested, news organizations should discuss what their respective newsrooms can do better and where they had gone wrong in the past: “Showing a willingness to learn and improve can go a long way toward building future relationships.” It can be especially valuable for newsrooms to gather feedback from minority and marginalized people, while simultaneously being careful not to put

the onus on them to lead the charge in rectifying the newsroom's shortcomings. For example, at the height of the social justice protests in 2020, the student newspaper at Emory University, the *Wheel*, solicited feedback from its community through an anonymous Google form. Further, the editor-in-chief, Madison Bober (2020), vowed to use her "privilege to amplify other voices in highlighting the shortcomings of the *Wheel* and work with willing BIPOC to change our practices, our recruitment and our coverage. The *Wheel* is not seeking to be educated from BIPOC, however, we are asking for concrete feedback to improve and examples of how we've failed in the past." The WHYY station in Philadelphia often solicits feedback on stories through community listening sessions, where it has gotten important feedback (and pushback) from listeners on, for example, "why WHYY tended to quote the same people" (Wenzel, 2019). This type of critique can encourage self-reflection on the part of newsrooms like WHYY and a reevaluation of sourcing practices.

### *Engage directly with communities*

Many journalists emphasized that news organizations should be deeply committed to engaging directly with the communities they cover. That is, newsrooms should not simply produce news from a distance, but should seek to interact with those that they cover on a daily basis so that community members feel that the news organization is actively invested in getting coverage right and values their experiences and input. According to Meredith D. Clark (2020), playing an active role within its coverage area helps news organizations "actively develop and embed values, norms, and practices to address past harms, prevent new ones, and produce multiperspectival journalism from the position of the oppressed in U.S. and global society."

Several news organizations who lead community-centric initiatives found that doing so helps foster trust between them and local communities. For example, *Mountain State Spotlight* in

West Virginia is one of several newsrooms that has partnered with Local Live(s), a project in which journalists discuss their behind-the-scenes reporting processes to a live audience. Lauren Peace, a reporter with *Spotlight*, found that such events not only increase transparency about their reporting practices, but also connect reporters directly with local residents:

I think we realized that a lot of people have no idea what goes into the story that they're reading via resources or fact checking processes, or the ethical decisions that we make each day. ... The original goal was to demystify that process. And then as we started hosting these events, we also realized that it was a really great way to bring in new readers (quoted in Castillo, 2021).

The *Dallas Morning News* tries to engage with underserved communities in particular by hosting “office hours” in public libraries in majority-minority neighborhoods. Audience development editor Hannah Wise and engagement reporter Elvia Limón regularly spend up to four hours at a time having conversations with community members in both English and Spanish. The goal of these office hours, according to Limón, is for the reporters “to listen—whether people had questions about Dallas, the paper, or journalism in general, or even if they just wanted to share things that were going on [in] their neighborhood that they thought deserved coverage. Complaints were welcome as well” (quoted in Carlson, 2019). Because many of those they encountered were not regular consumers of the *Morning News*, the reporters also perceived these interactions as an opportunity to grow readership by demonstrating an active investment in covering issues of interest and concern to those communities.

Engaging directly with communities can also help counteract a lack of diversity among reporters as compared to the overall population of an area. For instance, staffers at the non-profit news website *Honolulu Civil Beat* are majority white and non-native to the Hawaiian islands, while white residents make up only a quarter of Hawaii's population, with 10 percent being of Pacific Islander descent. While simultaneously attempting to increase diversity of its staff

through hiring efforts, the *Civil Beat* implemented additional strategies to better serve its readership, including “hiring weekly contributors who live on different islands and, on occasion, publishing reader submissions” (The Editors, 2018). In addition, in an effort to build and strengthen their relationships with community members, the newsroom began “sponsoring trivia nights, coffees for donors, and a speaker series” (The Editors, 2018).

Many journalists emphasized the role of the news organization in supporting and promoting these efforts. In other words, it is not only the responsibility of journalists at the individual level to do this outreach work, but the responsibility of each news outlet to throw its organizational weight behind these efforts. As Andrea Wenzel (2019), a journalism scholar who studied the WHYY newsroom, noted, “outreach initiatives will not have a sustainable impact so long as the people responsible for this work are siloed from core newsroom operations and hold limited power.” This means that news organizations must invest significant resources, both human and financial, to grow and sustain relationships with the communities they cover. As journalists Anita Li, an Asian American woman, and Sam Ford, a white man (2017), argue, reconceptualizing the role of a news organization within these communities can help sustained engagement: “[R]elationship development with the communities that a publication seeks to engage must be a priority, and that newsrooms benefit when they see themselves as providing services (i.e. context, listening, dialogue, community participation) and not just products” (Li and Ford, 2017).

#### *Develop clear guidelines and training programs*

As previously mentioned, journalists have argued that simply increasing the number of women or minority journalists within a news organization is not enough to ensure consistent and equitable coverage. Rather, another way that newsrooms can make deeper investments in getting

coverage right is to develop and implement training guides for reporting on underrepresented or underserved issues and communities. These training guides are especially important for journalists who do not share an identity or lived experience with those they are covering. For example, cisgender reporters are often assigned to cover stories that involve transgender individuals or issues, given that transgender reporters make up a small fraction of journalists. Many news organizations have begun designing best practice guidelines for their reporters when covering transgender issues, such as discerning whether or not it is critical to the story to mention whether a trans person has had gender-affirming surgery, or whether to include the person's deadname. Shannon Keating, the LGBT editor of *BuzzFeed*, says that mainstream news organizations have improved in their coverage of trans issues, including "using people's correct names and pronouns. They/them pronouns have been officially incorporated into more newsrooms' style guides" (quoted in Lieberman, 2019). In addition, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* developed a glossary of terms for reporting on LGBTQ+ issues. Examples of directives contained in the glossary include "to use the term 'transition' to describe an individual's process of gender confirmation, rather than 'sex change,' which is outdated," as well as "using the term transgender in place of 'transsexual' and cross-dresser instead of 'transvestite'" (quoted in Lang, 2017a). However, Keating sees room for further progress, including using fewer deadnames in stories.

In addition to terminology guidelines, journalists recommended workshops or training courses to news organizations as tools for increasing staff awareness about the effects of implicit bias and a lack of diversity in newsrooms. Black women journalists Tonya Mosley and Jenée Desmond-Harris, for example, created a workshop specifically to help newsrooms educate reporters about the potential harms of implicit bias in their newswork. These workshops often

include “history lessons, solid definitions of bias and exercises” designed to help journalists articulate their own identities and think through the ways that their positionalities might affect their approaches (Bailey, 2018b). The NPR station WHYY in Philadelphia underwent a “cultural competency training” with the objective of increasing source diversity within news stories (Wenzel, 2019). Participants said it was effective in illuminating the low amount of source diversity in their coverage and suggesting strategies for expanding their source networks. The media organization *Press On* offers several journalism workshops to newsrooms that encourage “people in the industry to think beyond ‘diversity’ and instead delve into the systems of power and oppression that shape newsrooms and the communities they cover. The training is part of a larger strategy to transform journalism by helping people in the industry identify and disrupt oppression in their newsrooms and begin shifting narratives” (Vasquez, 2020a). Journalists said that these trainings and workshops can offer fellow journalists useful tools for journalists to place equity at the forefront of their reporting process, particularly when they do not share an identity or experience with the subjects they cover.

However, training guides don’t have to solely be for journalists who cover without connection; they can also be useful for journalists who do share identities or lived experiences with certain communities. For instance, scholar Khalil Gibran Muhammad, a Black man, maintains that reporters of color as well as white reporters would benefit from training on how to equitably cover stories which center race. “The goal,” he said, “is not only to encourage journalism programs themselves to take greater ownership and responsibility for teaching the history and present of systemic racism, but also to make sure that in hiring practices, that they [newsrooms] are having a conversation with young talent — both people who are of color as

well as whites — to find out what their experience has been, what particular knowledge they have and how comfortable they are reporting on these issues” (quoted in Ordway, 2019).

### *Increase diversity of newsroom employees*

Many journalists said that, at a minimum, the make-up of newsrooms should reflect that of the community in which the news organization is situated. Journalists argued that while this action might not in itself lead to a general improvement of coverage, it would at least be an important step in ensuring that those responsible for producing news proportionally reflect those that they cover. Indeed, Taylor Blatchford (2020) said that “your journalism can’t be complete if your newsroom doesn’t represent the community you’re covering.” For example, the Los Angeles Times Guild estimated in 2020 that the newspaper would need to hire at least 18 more Black journalists to join the 26 already on staff for the number of Black journalists to correspond to the city’s proportion of Black residents (LA Times Guild, 2020). Journalists argued that the effort to align the demographic make-up of newsrooms with the larger communities in which they are situated is crucial because the more diversity in identities and experiences a newsroom possesses, the more varied and nuanced the coverage it produces will be. As journalist Swati Sharma (2017), a woman of Indian descent, said, “A newsroom that represents the country we cover is what a newsroom is supposed to look like. ... [I]f the mission is to hold our institutions and politicians responsible, to inform readers, to uncover corruption, even to tell a good story — it cannot be done with one kind of voice, with one point of view.” This means, then, that newsrooms must focus on hiring and retaining a diverse journalistic workforce.

Overcome barriers to entry in hiring

According to journalists, one of the most effective ways for news organizations to increase staff diversity is to eliminate many of the barriers to entry that have disproportionately

affected women and minority journalists. For example, the required qualifications included in job postings usually “are more accessible to people with privilege” (Clapham, 2020). These qualifications can include attending a prestigious journalism school (and higher education in general), where minority students make up a small proportion of the overall student body; and internships with media organizations, which are often unpaid and thus not financially feasible for many aspiring journalists (*CJR* Editors, 2016). Oregon Public Broadcasting, for instance, made all of their internships paid and reduced the number of temporary workers it utilized to focus on longer-term and more supported roles like fellowships for emerging journalists (Tameez, 2022). Proponents of abolishing unpaid internships say that journalism schools should also play a role in this effort by offering their own stipends or requiring employers to pay their students (Brandeisky, 2013).

Several journalists also emphasized that recruitment efforts need to go beyond outreach to “‘ethnic media’ enclaves” like the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ) and National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ). For example, Stephanie Foo, Malaysia-born producer at NPR, points to the *Snap Judgement* program’s practice of placing job ads on Craigslist, which can be “a unique way to attempt to open the pipeline for nontraditional candidates” (*CJR* Editors, 2016). Ben Smith, the editor in chief of *Buzzfeed*, made a conscious effort to recruit outside of traditional journalism networks, which also tend to be overwhelmingly made up of journalists who have benefitted from privilege. Smith, who is white, recommended sending job listings to journalists “connected to underrepresented communities” in order to reach those who might have followed non-traditional paths into journalism (quoted in Stewart, 2015).

Another hurdle that might constrain the hiring and retention of a more diverse journalistic workforce is the financial barriers associated with practicing journalism in high cost-of-living areas. Approximately one in five newsroom employees live in New York, Los Angeles or Washington, D.C. – three of the most expensive cities in the country – with a majority of other outlets located within major metropolitan areas (Grieco, 2019). Journalists without a history of financial stability might be unable to manage to accept or continue in jobs in expensive areas where it is difficult to make ends meet. Additionally, commonplace elements like unpaid internships disproportionately exclude journalists who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who might not have the financial means or familial assistance to take on unpaid work. Some newsrooms have implemented measures to combat the inequalities created by these financial barriers. Oregon Public Broadcasting, for example, “got rid of unpaid internships, which serve as a form of gatekeeping, and made them paid. It also reduced its use of temps and created a one-year fellowship program for emerging journalists” (Tameez, 2022).

Journalists stress the need to reimagine what it means for a journalist to be “qualified.” News organizations should expand their criteria for what counts as preferred educational background, skills and qualifications when recruiting. While institutional credentials like college diplomas and internships have been the measure of journalistic qualifications since journalism’s professionalization project in the early twentieth century, marginalized journalists bring a different set of “skills that come from other forms of life experience” (Clapham, 2020). For example, journalist Sarah Jones said that the resiliency that she developed growing up in poverty makes her a better and more empathetic journalist. She is not easily fazed and insists that she can more effectively articulate the impact of class in her stories (Jones, 2018). Ignoring the unique

strengths born out of lived experiences that journalists bring to their work could thus be considered “a form of structural and implicit bias” (Clapham, 2020).

#### Focus on retention

According to journalists, news organizations must go further than reducing barriers to entry – they must then retain marginalized reporters in order to truly uphold a long-term commitment to more equitable and accurate coverage. The reporters stressed that a commitment to diversify newsroom employees is not simply a matter of increasing the raw numbers of women or minority journalists on staff; there is a ceiling to how much impact that will make without also addressing the larger, structural causes of a lack of newsroom diversity. “Diversity isn’t a one-time thing where someone hires a person or two and checks a box,” said Hollis R. Towns, then-executive editor of the Asbury Park Press in New Jersey and a Black man (quoted in Stewart, 2015). Erika Dilday, CEO and executive director at the nonprofit Futuro Media Group and a Black woman, similarly argued that having a staff that technically fulfills diversity quotas “isn’t enough to address systemic problems” (Dilday, 2020). This is because hiring these journalists without then providing them with essential resources and support will not ultimately lead to more equitable and diverse coverage. Newsrooms must invest in other areas – such as editorial support for pursuing certain stories and time allowances for pursuing those stories, and monetary support – in conjunction with an increase in diverse hiring practices in order to achieve maximum effect. As Towns said, these changes do not happen overnight: “It takes time and resources to bring about diversity in coverage, diversity in thinking, and diversity in approach” (quoted in Stewart, 2015).

In addition, journalists say that treating diversity hiring as a “one-and-done process” can also place undue burden on minority reporters (Vega, 2016). If leadership approaches diversity

hiring simply by adding a minimum number of minority journalists in order to check a metaphorical box, those few journalists will likely be tasked with speaking for their entire identity group within the newsroom, particularly when it comes to pointing out gaps or misrepresentations in coverage. Journalist Pacinthe Mattar (2020), a Black woman, called these reporters “The Only Ones in the Room” and noting that, for them, “the responsibility is heavy.” According to non-binary journalism scholar Nikki Usher, this burden can have the opposite intended effect of diverse hiring initiatives, as being “asked to perform emotional labor in the newsroom ... would hinder [journalists] from being vocal about their concerns” (quoted in Dorsey, 2019). Indeed, several journalists spoke of the mental toll of being the token representative of a particular identity or experience in a newsroom. Journalist Susan Smith Richardson (2019), a Black woman, said that “explaining to reporters why their stories needed more inclusive sources or expressing to editors in daily news meetings why a story frame could be offensive to people of color kept me in a state of hyper-vigilance.” As Doris Truong (2020a), an Asian American woman, argued, the retention of a diverse journalistic workforce is not only overdue, but urgent:

The seemingly bottomless well of patience that journalists of color — Black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian and multiracial — have exhibited has run dry. We want meaningful changes, and we need them to happen now. We are tired of constantly trying to put bandages on the gaping wounds of newsroom hierarchies that perpetuate inequity.

Journalists suggest several avenues news organizations can use to increase retention of diverse staff. First, there needs to be equitable distribution of story assignments Tanzina Vega, for instance, said that “limiting who gets access to high profile assignments perpetuates the diversity problem” because diverse journalists are then rarely in line for major recognition such as industry awards (Vega, 2016). Further, ensuring a pathway for internal promotion of diverse

journalists is a solid strategy for increasing the longevity of journalists' careers in a newsroom. Maribel Perez Wadsworth, the president of news at Gannett and publisher of *USA TODAY* and a Cuban-American woman, made a concerted effort to increase the number of journalists of color at top leadership roles in her newsrooms: of 13 new senior leadership positions created by 2020, 11 were journalists of color, and seven were promoted internally. Wadsworth said those numbers show "that we all are really walking the talk. ... We are investing in our people who are getting the training, we are giving them the opportunities to stretch and that's readying them for roles" (quoted in Childers, 2020).

Above all else, minority and marginalized journalists must feel that their newsroom is a "safe space" for them to produce work. According to journalist Nicole A. Childers (2020), a Black woman, cultivating a secure work environment "starts with newsroom leaders being clear in their actions and expectations about what it really means to have a diverse and inclusive newsroom and making sure it is reflected in more than just hiring practices or establishing diversity quotas for sources." Beyond development programs, journalists say that newsrooms must provide institutional support that makes clear their investment in the success of diverse journalists. Newsrooms thus must undergo broader shifts in newsroom culture that go beyond simply adding a more diverse workforce and foster working environments where minority and marginalized journalists feel that their work is supported and their voices heard and valued.

#### Increase diversity in newsroom leadership

Another critical measure of newsroom diversity is whether news organizations' top ranks are also varied in terms of race, gender, class, and other forms of identity or experience. Journalists say that it is not enough to hire a diverse reporting staff if opportunities then do not exist for these journalists to move up the newsroom ranks. If minority or marginalized journalists

are hired at the entry level, and are not eventually entrusted to middle and senior management roles, then news organizations run the risk of losing them, for “people don't want to work where they can't grow” (Vega, 2016). Increasing newsroom leadership diversity thus represents another site for sustained investment in more equitable reporting on the part of news organizations.

Journalists stressed that having diverse newsroom leadership is critical for several other reasons. Firstly, a diverse newsroom leadership team aids in the retention of diverse journalists. Maria Carrillo, then the highest-ranking Latinx editor at the *Houston Chronicle*, said that minority managers can more effectively recruit diverse journalists because those journalists are more willing to accept the job if they see diversity reflected in newsroom leadership (*CJR* Editors, 2018). As Andrea Wenzel (2019) put it, “These [leadership] roles play critical roles in shaping editorial direction and mentorship.” Journalists also advocated for diversity in newsroom leadership teams because those leaders provide crucial input in the selection of which stories will be written and published. Having diverse journalists in editorial and leadership positions is important because, like reporters, they can bring insights or perspectives to their jobs that are uniquely informed by their identities and experiences. When a leadership team is overwhelmingly homogeneous, journalists said, blind spots often emerge in terms of what issues are covered and what stories are told. As Nicole A. Childers (2020) explained it, “This can lead to everything from selecting stories that only reflect narrow swaths of a community to having limited perspectives in reporting.” Diverse editors and managers consistently recognize the importance of certain issues and advocate for more extensive coverage and support for journalists. Thus, according to Joshua Benton (2018), a white man, “It matters who is making editorial decisions. ... Marginalized people, more than ever now, need to be at the table shaping the stories the fact-based news media puts out.”

The importance of having a variety of identities and experiences reflected in newsroom leadership also becomes evident during the editing process. Several journalists said that they have been asked by their editors to remove certain language or nuances from their stories because they were perceived as inappropriate or not objective. According to Nicole A. Childers (2020), the implication that the perspectives of journalists with minority or marginalized identities and experiences have no place in news stories constitutes “cultural editing,” This she says, “undervalues the expertise of many [diverse] journalists ... and results in coverage that reinforces stereotypes about diverse communities.” Maria Carrillo, the Latinx editor at the *Houston Chronicle*, said she strived to be the editor whom minority and marginalized journalists dream of having. She organized a support group for diverse journalists in the *Chronicle* newsroom and sought to “embrace and coach their story ideas with nuance” (*CJR Editors*, 2018). Carrillo said that she took her responsibility to mentor and edit the stories of diverse journalists seriously because when a newsroom leader “values you, values your ethnicity, your culture—boy, that’s just really empowering” (quoted in *CJR Editors*, 2018).

#### *Provide institutional support to journalists*

Journalists said that one of the most impactful ways that news organizations can invest in more equitable and accurate coverage is to provide institutional support to their journalists. This can mean anything from assigning several reporters to coverage of an issue or beat to providing financial backing to embed reporters in the communities they are covering. Several journalists expressed frustration in terms of newsrooms not having enough journalists to cover certain issues adequately and accurately. Journalists interviewed by *Nieman* staffer Hanaa’ Tameez (2020), who is of South Asian descent, “agreed that one reporter or one beat isn’t enough to cover a community, subject, or issue with nuance. At the same time, not having a dedicated reporter on

the beat can mean certain stories will get overlooked.” However, some journalists said that one way news organizations could tangibly demonstrate support for journalists covering underserved communities and issues is by not measuring the success of stories in terms of generated traffic. One anonymous reporter who covers race and culture said that his news organization “told me not to worry about pageviews. ... I thought I was gonna get fired at every moment. Now that I’m over a year into it, I feel a lot better” (quoted in Tameez, 2020). By understanding that stories about underserved communities might not generate the most clicks, but nevertheless devoting resources to making sure those communities are covered, newsroom leaders signal to journalists that they value this type of work and the populations that those stories serve.

Providing financial support for journalists to spend extended amounts of time engaging with the communities they cover is also a prerequisite for equitable coverage. This is especially true for reporters who do not share an identity or experience with these communities. Native American journalist Duncan McCue, a reporter for the Canadian Broadcasting Service (CBC), likened institutional support for indigenous coverage to support for international reporting: “You wouldn’t simply throw a reporter from another country into the deep end of a foreign country and expect daily journalism when they’re operating on their own in difficult circumstances. A foreign correspondent needs to have support” (quoted in Ahtone, 2017). Several journalists echoed this sentiment, and further noted that this kind of support will only produce dividends if it is continuous. Journalism scholar Andrea Wenzel (2019) said “This perceived distance between the newsroom and communities will likely only diminish if ... more staffers in the newsroom come from these communities and/or are embedded in them. Tackling this will require sustained resources that prioritize this mission at all levels of the organization.”

*Make a consistent, long-term commitment to diversity*

The undercurrent of many of these recommendations from journalists to newsrooms for producing more equitable reporting is the notion that all of those efforts require sustained and long-term commitments. That is, there is no single – or even several – “quick fix” for the issue of a lack of diversity among journalists and in coverage. News organizations must thus be willing to make long-term investments in hiring and retaining diverse staff, supporting journalists as they pursue stories about underserved issues and communities, and play a more active role within the communities they serve. As Amy Westervelt (2022), a white woman, astutely remarked, “you can hire diversity experts all day long but if you aren’t hiring [diverse] execs, listening to the [diverse] people on your staff, giving people support and agency, allowing everyone to be full humans, opening space for different perspectives & backgrounds, it’s never gonna work.”

For one, journalists said, sustained investments are crucial to hitting the mark on stories about complex issues. Many journalists specifically underscored the importance of getting coverage about race and racial issues right by investing the time and resources required to produce nuanced coverage. Austin Cross (2020), a Black journalist at *LAist*, argued:

“In the world of [news], time is at a premium. The environment rarely lends itself to amplify Black voices. Finding the right voice takes time. Listening to that voice in a non exploitative way takes time. Rewriting your entire narrative to reflect the fullness of the story takes time. Breaking out of colonial structures and power dynamics takes time. In this way, I believe, a news organization’s dedication to Black lives can be accurately measured by the time they allow their journalists to pursue the stories of Black people.”

Producing stories that appropriately contextualize racial issues and present them in their complexity is important, journalists said, because this media coverage can then steer larger and more nuanced conversations about race. As NPR television critic Eric Deggans (2015), a Black man, put it, “This should be an easy call for journalism outlets. If you want to see more nuanced discussion of race in America, you have to provide more nuanced and consistent coverage first.”

Sustained and long-term commitments by newsrooms to the communities they serve is also important, journalists said, to avoid the appearance of reporters “parachuting” into that community only to obtain a story. As Errin Haines Whack, then an urban affairs reporter for the Associated Press and a Black woman, said:

We can’t just be showing up in immigrant communities after an ICE raid. We should be reflecting these places, but we need to show up and show up regularly. Getting into communities like [the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, which recently made news for protesting construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline on its land] can be difficult. Trust and access has to be earned but that doesn’t mean we don’t try to do that” (quoted in Ho, 2017).

In order to effectively report on diverse issues, newsrooms must thus make continuous investments in communities that enable reporters to capture the nuances of issues. Truly accurate, accountable and equitable reporting can only come if a familiarity and rapport already exists between the newsrooms and the community at large. Although it takes a significant financial and time investment on the part of news organizations, journalists said that this commitment is vital.

### Summary

The journalists featured in this dissertation made a myriad of recommendations both to journalists who do not share a connection to the subjects they cover as well as to newsrooms looking to produce more equitable coverage. The recommendations outlined in this chapter to the latter, however, demonstrate that producing equitable coverage goes beyond individual strategies that journalists can implement; change must also occur at the structural level. Establishing and enforcing new sets of journalistic policies at the newsroom level is a vital component of providing coverage that is fair and accountable to all communities. Of course, this is easier said than done. As Vos (2017) and others have pointed out, once an institution adopts a working

paradigm, it is extremely difficult to dismantle it. Nevertheless, the insights quoted or paraphrased in this chapter point to several strategies that newsrooms can implement to improve the diversity and equity of their coverage.

For example, journalists said that news organizations must prioritize diversifying their newsroom employees. Having reporters, editors, and executives that embody a wide range of identities and experiences only strengthens the breadth and depth of news coverage, as the previous findings chapters have shown. Newsrooms must thus make a concerted effort not only to hire diverse journalists, but also retain them. Journalists said that they must feel supported by their newsrooms in their reporting process. Strategies that newsrooms can implement include providing financial and moral support for their reporting and increasing the number of diverse editors on staff who can edit their stories with an additional layer of nuance and provide mentorship. However, as some previous research (e.g., Bodinger-de Uriarte & Valgeirsson, 2015; Johnston & Flamiano, 2007) has shown, simply adding more diverse journalists to a staff will not automatically improve coverage. Again, newsrooms must also work to subvert the longstanding structural forces that keep reporters from producing nuanced and equitable coverage. Newsroom policies that encourage journalists to lean into their identities and experiences during their reporting process go a long way in retaining a diverse corpus of journalists and producing journalism that engages with a variety of minority and marginalized issues and groups. Building trust with journalists will thus go a long way in producing more equitable journalism, which will in turn strengthen trust between newsrooms and their surrounding communities.

Taken together, the recommendations to news organizations outlined in this findings section underscore the necessity of consistent and long-term commitments to diversity and equity

in staff make-up and story coverage. The need for a sustained investment by news organizations in diversifying staff and reshaping newsroom policies underscores the structural nature of journalistic cultures and practices. As Andrea Wenzel (2019) pointed out as she studied one radio station's efforts to implement many of the changes outlined above:

Given that, for most legacy organizations, the work of [producing more equitable coverage] requires pushing against years of entrenched cultures of whiteness, it is no surprise that these processes take time. But if these legacy organizations are going to survive, they must urgently prioritize cultural competency processes. Without these, they have little hope of building trust with journalists or communities of color, and claims of representing a "public" will become increasingly hollow.

Indeed, some newsrooms are already seeing the payouts of these sustained investments. The *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle*, for example, created Rochester Unite, "a years-long engagement effort ... to tackle lasting racial inequalities in upstate New York" (Kaleem, 2018). The initiative includes, in addition to traditional reporting, listening tours where community members are invited to interact directly with reporters; and the participation of the newspaper in other community projects, such as the formation of a Community Response Team to address major issues related to race throughout the city. Newsroom leaders said that these efforts resulted in a "growth in trust in the paper to write deeply and in a sustained way about race and inequality" (Kaleem, 2018). Karen Magnuson, *Democrat and Chronicle* editor and vice president, claimed that "the relationships we've developed increased our credibility with communities of color, and it's helped us improve our coverage of the total community" (quoted in Kaleem, 2018).

## Chapter 8: Conclusion

On March 16, 2023, Wesley Lowery visited the JOUR453: News Coverage of Racial issues class at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, College Park. A conversation about his upcoming book, *American Whitelash: A Changing Nation and the Cost of Progress*, about the waves of racial violence that occur in response to essentially any racial progress made in the U.S., quickly turned into a conversation about news media's role in perpetuating harmful images that help fuel this hate. Lowery was asked why news organizations struggle to produce news that is for, rather than about, underserved communities, that is fair in its portrayal of these communities, and thus is equitable and inclusive to all groups news media purports to serve. Lowery said that nothing short of a “fundamental change” in journalistic norms, values and practices is needed for news media to live up to its promise to provide fact-based, nuanced information to a wide variety of audiences (Lowery, personal communication, 2023).

This dissertation intervenes in these dialogues happening in journalism schools, journalism groups and organizations, and newsrooms across the country. I demonstrate that, largely, journalists say that the active incorporation of their identities and experiences in their newsmaking processes is a crucial component of the “fundamental changes” that must occur for journalism to better serve constituents. I support this claim with evidence from journalists who outline the myriad ways by which they said that reporting with an identity- or experience-based connection makes their journalism more equitable and inclusive. For instance, as I show in Chapter 4, journalists said that it is impossible to separate their standpoints from their work because the sum of their identities and lived experiences necessarily informs how they interact

with the world. It would thus be futile and unproductive to attempt to suppress embodied subjectivity during the news production process. In Chapter 5, I outlined the specific ways journalists said reporting with an identity- or experienced-based connection to their subjects was an asset: they believed it provided an advantageous lens through which to approach issues; they produced stories that were more authentic to the people they featured; they possessed deeper knowledge about issues or groups going into the assignment; they strove to do the best job they could because they felt that they had a personal stake in the story's outcome; they were able to more quickly identify events as newsworthy; they were able to foster deeper trust with sources more quickly; and they produced stories that were more nuanced and complex. As such, this dissertation advances literature on journalistic identity and role conception by demonstrating how journalists' personal identities and experiences shape their professional values. While some research (e.g., Wallace, 2019a; Smith, 2018; Dahmnen et. al. 2017; Harlow and Hilgo, 2020) has recently emerged examining how journalists' subjectivities might impact coverage, this study provides a novel comprehensive examination of journalists' perceptions about the impact of their embodied identities and lived experiences in the reporting process. On the whole, journalists argued that their personal identities crucially inform their professional identities. It also argues that, by positioning this form of newsmaking as more equitable and legitimate than traditional "objective" reporting, journalists are constructing new conceptions of journalistic identity.

This dissertation also argues that a wide-scale reckoning of what it means to produce fact-based journalism is necessary for this "fundamental change." As I demonstrated in Chapter 4, a growing number of journalists state that support of movements for civil and human rights – such as for the rights of women, Black Americans, LGBTQ+ groups, immigrants, and others – should not be perceived as controversial. Thus, reporting which stems from the premise that

those groups deserve full and equal rights should not be dismissed as not fact-based. In large part, journalists argued that the norm of objectivity has become too muddled and contested to remain useful in the contemporary media landscape. Rather, they advocated for an operational framework that values subjectivity and reflexivity in the newsmaking process. This dissertation thus provides a comprehensive, scholarly examination of the ways by which journalists challenge the usefulness of the objectivity norm and call for embracing subjectivity in the news production process.

However, this dissertation also shows that journalists emphasized that embracing one's standpoints during the reporting process and producing fact-based journalism are not mutually exclusive. In fact, journalists argued that harnessing the advantages provided by their identities and experiences actually helps them produce "truer" journalism, since they are better equipped to capture nuances within stories and avoid harmful mischaracterizations and stereotypes. Journalists thus rejected the notion that being producing reporting with emancipatory aims is necessarily incompatible with producing factual reporting. Journalists generally resisted definitions of advocacy or activism that conflicted with their identities as professionals who ultimately aim to produce accurate and reporting. As Lewis Raven Wallace (2020, p. 14) put it: "journalists can seek the truth without engaging in a battle against the subjective or the activist."

This dissertation also contributes to literature on journalistic authority by showing that many journalists claim that reporting with identity- or experience-based connections in fact makes them more authoritative interpreters of news. The myriad advantages journalists specify to this approach to reporting helps them assert their authority over producing fact-based accounts that are more representative of, and fairer to, the communities and issues they cover. In other words, they argued that journalists should serve as "authoritative voices that are used to give

voice to the disempowered” (Dow, 2016, p. 61). Moreover, this dissertation suggests that the authority journalists say they earn through connection-based reporting might provide a potential avenue for increasing media trust among underserved communities. If these groups affirm the authority of journalists to fairly and accurately chronicle the issues that matter to them, then perhaps this approach to reporting can help news organizations increase trust with a wider audience.

This dissertation advances literature on boundary work by showing that journalists are increasingly placing reporting which embraces the subjectivity of the journalist within the bounds of professional journalistic practice. Whereas journalists have traditionally protected the ideal of the “objective” journalist by delegitimizing other modes of value-based reporting, most of the journalists featured in this dissertation called for the inclusion of fact-based reporting that embraced journalists’ standpoints to also be included within the bounds of legitimate journalism. These sentiments, however, are not universal, as this dissertation shows; a contingent of journalists continue to argue for the protection of objectivity as a fundamental journalistic value, rejecting the notion that journalism which embraces a standpoint informed by identity and experience can be equally valid and accurate. The perspectives of these journalists exemplify ongoing tensions among journalists, in a rapidly changing media landscape and sociocultural climate, about where boundaries should be metaphorically drawn around legitimate journalistic practice. This dissertation offers detailed insights into the current state of these debates.

This dissertation also contributes to literature on the potential of feminist standpoint epistemology as an operational framework of journalistic practice. While journalism scholars (e.g. Durham, 1998; Steiner, 2018) have outlined the potential advantages of employing FSE in

newswork, this study makes a crucial intervention by offering an in-depth look into the myriad specific strategies journalists recommend to other journalists and newsrooms for putting FSE tenets into practice. As Steiner (2018, p. 1862) asserted, “the extent to which FSE offers prescriptive models for good journalism requires considerable more articulation and development by scholars.” This dissertation attends to this question by offering a comprehensive look into the possibilities afforded by FSE for the production of more equitable and inclusive journalism.

The second half of this dissertation was concerned with what inevitably happens when newsrooms do not have a diverse enough staff to provide connection-based reporting on all subjects. First, I examined the best practices journalists recommended to their colleagues for ensuring that their reporting on issues or groups with which they do not possess a common identity or experience is as equitable and inclusive as possible. These included diversifying and building trust with their sources; seeking input from community members, advocates and other journalists; engaging in self-reflection; and developing an “equity lens.” The findings in Chapter 6 were consistent with scholarship which underscores the importance of diversity of all kinds among news staff. While the impact of increasing the diversity of journalists in producing meaningful changes in news coverage is inconclusive, there is also evidence that journalists perceive that they can make positive contributions to more equitable and inclusive coverage in their newsrooms (e.g., Johnston & Flamiano, 2007; Nishikawa et. al. 2009). Chapter 6 outlines some of those perceived contributions, and is therefore imperative that news organizations continue to ramp up efforts to diversify their staff along a wide range of identities and lived experiences.

Finally, I explored the best practices journalists in turn made to newsroom managers and leaders for increasing the equity and inclusion in their coverage. Not surprisingly, the foundational recommendation was for news organizations to increase the diversity of their reporting and editing staff. Journalists said newsrooms could work toward this objective by lessening barriers to entry, focusing on retention, and diversifying newsroom leadership. In addition, journalists said newsrooms should develop clear and robust guidelines and training programs; provide institutional support to journalists; and engage more directly with surrounding communities. The findings presented in Chapter 7 are consistent with scholarship which evidences the difficulty of displacing journalistic paradigms. In other words, while increasing diversity of reporters and editors is crucial, it is not sufficient to solve the root causes of inequitable journalism; changes must also be made to larger newsroom cultures. Chapter 7 illuminates a roadmap for newsroom leadership to reevaluate the ways by which their newsrooms operate, and how they can better support their journalists and audiences in the effort of producing more equitable and inclusive journalism.

#### *Limitations and directions for future research*

While this dissertation makes novel contributions to the field of journalism studies, it is also important to acknowledge its limitations. First, while I narrowed the scope of the project to metajournalistic discourse produced in response to three social issues – racial and ethnic justice, gender justice and women’s rights, and LGBTQ+ rights – I then analyzed the data as a whole and did not break down my findings more specifically. Future iterations of this study might look at, for example, whether there were any differences in the perspectives of men vs. women journalists, white journalists vs. journalists of color, journalists who work for legacy outlets vs.

those who work for non-profit and digitally native outlets vs. freelancers. Given that more than half of the journalists who wrote metajournalistic discourse in the data sample were women or non-binary, and that a majority of those who wrote about racial or LGBTQ+ justice were racial minorities and queer, respectively, it certainly seems that those with a personal stake in certain issues had more to say about their effects on journalistic practice. These analyses might generate further insights about the specific concerns and interests of these groups.

This dissertation looked only at media texts produced by journalists, journalism educators or journalism scholars published online on Twitter and in *Poynter*, *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Nieman*, and other outlets in the last decade. This means that this dissertation relies on the stated *perceptions* of journalists to generate its findings. In other words, I am only examining what journalists say and write about the ways by which their identities and experiences impact (or do not impact) their newswork, and the best practices they recommend for more equitable and inclusive coverage. I am not able to get at the extent to which what they say emerges in the news they draft or produce (which goes through an editing process in any case). Moreover, while I have no reason to doubt the commitment of journalists to the positions they state in their discourse, I do not have evidence that they believe what they say. Therefore, there are many potential avenues for expanding the scope of this project to further support and solidify its findings.

First, a content analysis that examines the journalism being produced by the reporters featured in this dissertation would provide invaluable insight into whether journalists' perceptions about the impact of their identities and experiences on their newswork materialize in their reporting. In other words, a content analysis of stories written by journalists whose metajournalism is featured in this dissertation, compared to reporting by journalists who have not

made explicit claims about their subjectivity in their reporting process, would serve to illuminate whether meaningful differences exist in the journalism by the former. Any potential content analyses would have to account and control for various factors; for example, the effects of the editing process on the meaning of the text as originally written, which, depending on the identities of the editor(s) and their similarities or differences to the reporters, could be significant. In addition, they would have to consider articles written in similar kinds of outlets (or even within the same one) to ensure an equivalent comparison. Nevertheless, content analyses would be a useful way to empirically test the arguments I make in this dissertation.

Additionally, the findings presented in this study would be enhanced through in-depth interviews with journalists, both those who are featured in the data set and those who are not. In the case of reporters whose metajournalism was included in the dissertation, interviews would enable the gathering of additional context behind the journalists' motivations for writing their pieces, as well as allow for their further reflection on whether they still felt the same way about the positions they took in their articles. It would also be useful to interview journalists whose metajournalism was not captured in my sample, or who have not produced metajournalism on the subject at all, to learn whether they express any differing or contrarian perspectives on the impact of embodied identities and experiences on newswork.

Finally, this study would be enhanced through a deeper dive into the ways by which journalists have historically produced discourse about the place and impact of journalist subjectivity in news production. As I outline in the literature review, for example, the Black press of the early twentieth century – indeed, most minority and ethnic presses in U.S. history – never claimed to be a value-free press. An expansion of this insight through the investigation of metajournalism from earlier time periods in American journalism history would shed light on the

similarities and differences in the ways by which journalists argued (or did not argue) for the incorporation of embodied identities and experiences into the newsmaking process. It would also further contextualize the arguments of journalists in each time period by examining the political, social and cultural contexts within which the metajournalistic pieces were produced.

### *Implications and future considerations*

This dissertation provides crucial insights into timely conversations that journalists are having about the most effective ways to increase diversity, equity and inclusion in news production. One major question, however, is the ultimate feasibility of the changes for which journalists are advocating. How would journalism professionals go about implementing the findings of this study, which require fundamental changes at the newsroom level in news organizations across the country? While there are no simple solutions, several potential avenues for changemaking exist. One of these, as Wesley Lowery indicated in his conversation with Merrill College students, is to “move from an establishment journalism that holds as its value maximizing profit” (Lowery, personal communication, 2023). To Lowery, this would involve making deeper investments in nonprofit and public journalism funding models. Some research suggests that non-profit news organizations (many of which are also digitally native) have distinct journalistic values – such as more collaborative reporting approaches and more direct interaction with community members – that help non-profit news organizations better approximate the ideal of journalism as a public good (e.g., Konieczna & Robinson, 2014; Westenskow & Carter, 2021). However, although expanding the offerings in non-profit and public media is a worthwhile endeavor, this is not a perfect solution: these models also subscribe to many institutional logics of for-profit news organizations, such as insufficiently diverse sourcing practices and external influences from funders, whether advertisers (in the case of for-

profits) or donors (e.g., Ferrucci & Alaimo, 2020; Boehmer, Carpenter & Fico, 2019). In addition, for-profit and corporate media chains comprise a significant portion of the U.S. media landscape, and this will not change anytime soon. Therefore, it is imperative to also develop strategies for more equitable and inclusive news production that can make meaningful differences in coverage in outlets of all types. This dissertation provides a comprehensive roadmap, based on discussions from journalists themselves, for implementing some of those strategies.

If journalists are calling for widespread changes in news values and approaches to journalistic practice within the social context and media environment of the twenty-first century, then what roles do journalism schools play in educating future journalists on equitable and inclusive reporting? Many journalism schools around the country are revamping their curriculums to emphasize courses that engage with subjectivity and DEI principles in reporting. For example, the School of Journalism at the University of Arizona introduced “Do No Harm: Journalists Who Care for Communities and Themselves” as a required course in the journalism major beginning in 2022. The course, among other topics, includes instruction about “reporting with/for communities [and] sourcing stories with people who don’t look like you” (“B.A. Degree requirements,” n.d.). A second required course, “Media Law and Ethics and Diversity,” equips students to “understand how the lack of diversity in newsrooms can prevent equitable coverage of marginalized communities” (“B.A. Degree requirements (Begins 2022),” 2022). The University of Texas at Austin offers courses on reporting about and with specific groups: for example, “Covering the Latino Community in the United States” and “Reporting on Gender and Sexuality” (“Bachelor of Journalism Degree Requirements,” n.d.). More conceptual and skills-based courses with an eye toward teaching aspiring journalists how to harness their identities and

lived experiences during the reporting process; equitably and inclusively report on those with whom you do not share a prior connection; and interrogate newsroom structures that impede more equitable and inclusive coverage; should be developed in the effort to train journalists who will produce news coverage that better serves a wide variety of audiences.

### Conclusion

On March 25, 2022, Felicia Sonmez's lawsuit against the Washington Post was dismissed. D.C. Circuit Court Judge Anthony Epstein ruled that Sonmez did not make "a plausible claim that The Post took adverse employment actions, or created a hostile work environment, because of her sex or status as a victim of sexual assault" (quoted in Klein, 2022). In other words, Epstein stated that the Post's decision was not an act of discrimination against a protected class, but rather primarily a business decision "based on concerns about the paper's perceived impartiality" (Gerstein, 2022). Indeed, Epstein wrote in his ruling:

Nothing in the complaint suggests that the Post would, for example, not suspend a reporter who made a public statement about the personal impact of the recent murder of a relative from covering stories about violent crime, or a reporter who made a public statement about the continuing trauma caused by his family's eviction from covering landlord and tenant court, or a reporter who publicly campaigned for members of one political party from covering elections" (quoted in Gerstein, 2022).

Less than three months later, in June 2022, Sonmez was fired from the Post for what the company called "misconduct that includes insubordination, maligning your coworkers online and violating The Post's standards on workplace collegiality and inclusivity" (quoted in Darcy, 2022). In the week leading up to her firing, Sonmez had been vocal online in her criticism of a colleague, David Weigel, who retweeted a sexist joke and was subsequently suspended (but not fired).

Sonmez's experience is not unique – as this dissertation has shown, many journalists have been professionally impacted because of some aspect of their personal identities or

experiences. Tensions between news organizations (particularly legacy outlets) and journalists about appropriate journalistic conduct and practice persist. This dissertation is a timely intervention into the ways journalists say the industry needs to change in order to better serve the needs of American audiences in the twenty-first century. In describing how journalists articulate the impacts of their embodied identities and experiences in newswork; the potential advantages that reporting with connection provides; and best practice recommendations to journalists for covering issues with which they share no connection and to newsrooms for hiring, retaining and supporting a diverse staff; the findings in this study have relevant implications for journalistic practice. Ultimately, I hope this dissertation provides a clear roadmap for journalism scholars and practitioners for engaging in efforts to make journalism more equitable and inclusive.

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