



# REPORTING ON RACE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

GREAT POWER  
GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

Dedicated to Dori Maynard, 1958-2015  
*steadfast champion for accuracy and diversity*



## INTRODUCTION

**T**he shocking scenes were captured by news outlets across the country. In the summer of 2014, tens of thousands of unaccompanied children from Central America poured across the U.S. border seeking refuge. Many were instead met by hostile protesters literally turning them away from towns. Then, less than six months later, on November 25, 2014, in the wake of a grand jury's decision not to indict the police officer who had shot and killed unarmed black teen Michael Brown, Ferguson, Missouri, erupted in fiery unrest. Protesters, many of them peaceful citizens calling for justice, clashed with National Guard members clad in riot gear. The crisis at the border, along with the police killings of Brown and other unarmed black males like Eric Garner and Tamir Rice, raised urgent questions about race and justice in America. Not even halfway into 2015, the death of 25-year-old African-American Freddie Gray at the hands of Baltimore police sparked anger, protest and violence. How did we get here, people wanted to know. For answers the first place many looked was the news media.

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The primary responsibility of every journalist is to gather, analyze and disseminate information, a crucial role in a democratic society. Journalists give voice to the unheard and provide the history and context essential for understanding matters of public interest. Now, more than ever, this means journalists must possess the ability, willingness and commitment to reliably and thoughtfully report about race. Even when it is not "the news," it is often part of the story.

Today, journalism is in transition. Over the past decade, we've seen the advent of digital media along with unprecedented fiscal restraints that have led to contracted budgets and cuts in staff. Newsrooms have had to replace experienced journalists who have longstanding ties to the communities they serve with new staff who are still learning the ropes; other news organizations have asked reporters to double and even triple their workloads. These challenges

leave journalists little time to reimagine and refine an approach to their craft that best meets the needs of an increasingly diverse society.

The chief mandate of good journalism is to inform and educate, and journalists play a vital role in shaping perceptions about social groups. At its best, it informs the public about the inequities that trouble our nation by exploring their root causes and identifying potential solutions. This includes taking a closer look at policy, legislation, practices and assumptions that drive disparity and discord. It means knowing enough to ask the right follow-up questions and hold decision makers and those enlisted as experts accountable. For many, race-based conflicts and inequities in housing, education or wealth accumulation are simply part of the natural order of things. But are they? Journalists are obligated to investigate that question. By digging deep, providing context and seeking out new voices and perspectives, journalists have the power to create a more informed and engaged citizenry and to inspire positive social change.

2 With these goals in mind, in December 2014, The Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change convened a group of the most innovative minds in journalism for a weekend of reflection, discussion and problem solving. At the Forum on Journalism, Race & Society, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, reporters, editors, producers, news executives and journalism, law and public health school faculty from across the country delved into thoughtful dialogue about how journalists can best offer comprehensive, inclusive and meaningful coverage of race.

We discussed best practices for reporting on poverty and privilege, immigration and segregation, community engagement and neighborhood change. We shared ideas for increasing audience engagement and youth participation, and discussed the continued importance of newsroom diversity. And we considered what new frames are needed to make sense of race in the new century.

In all, the goal of the forum was to formulate recommendations for newsroom decision makers as well as reporters in the field. We offer them as a baseline, knowing that there are news organizations across the country already focused on diversity and enhancing journalism's contributions to equity and fairness. For those already working in this vein, we offer them as a tool to assist in communicating with others, strategizing and refining the work. For those needing to embark on or strengthen their efforts, we offer them as an overview of some of the most vital components. Our hope is that the recommendations will serve as a jumping-off point for publishers, editors, producers, directors and reporters to discuss fresh approaches to covering race that will help journalism remain vital, our communities stay informed and our country become a fairer and more equitable place for everyone.

# RAISE THE BAR

Investing in more and better journalism on race  
is a socially responsible growth strategy.<sup>1</sup>

# DIG

+ Make coverage more comprehensive

# DEEPER

*The history of racism in this country is well known, but its impact is complicated, affecting people in ways that are not always easy to recognize. Digging deep to explore the myriad manifestations, causes and drivers of disparity is the key to providing audiences with a deeper understanding of the complexities of race.*

**Question the Data** The goal of every journalist is to find the story that's not been told before. Once you've gathered studies and statistics relevant to your area of interest, examine those numbers by disaggregating by race, gender, age and zip code to look for patterns, inequities and inconsistencies. Reporting your numbers and explaining what they mean can illuminate the roots of long-running racial disparities and inspire a wealth of story ideas.

**Know the History and the Laws** When it comes to race, exploring the history and familiarizing yourself with the significant federal, state and local laws governing your beat is especially important. Sometimes a story that seems to be about one thing, for example, de facto segregation in neighborhoods or public schools, is actually rooted in a history of race-based policies rather than the result of cultural or personal preferences. Making connections between past legislation and current conditions can illustrate the profound effects policy and practices can have on the well-being of individuals, families and communities.

**Go Behind the Numbers** When reporting on racial disparities, be sure to tell the story behind the statistics and illustrate with the up-to-date data where appropriate. While always good practice, it is especially important with race-related reporting to explore the structural forces driving disparity because data alone can reinforce notions that certain groups are inferior, less willing to work or prone to criminal behavior. Explaining how the numbers came to be is critical to shaping informed opinions and building public will for racial equity.

**Cultivate Diverse Sources and Experts** Reporters have lists of reliable experts — often academics or government officials — whom they tap to provide context and analysis. But to offer audiences the most comprehensive reporting on race, it's important to give prominence to the opinions of those most impacted by the events, policy or legislation at the heart of your story. Local community leaders, activists and residents can provide keen insight, knowledge and historical context. Bilingual sources are particularly valuable in bridging English-speaking audiences and immigrant communities.

**Partner Up** Even newsrooms with tight budgets and short turnaround times can explore the complexities of race by partnering with nonprofit news organizations, researchers and advocates to share content, conduct research, analyze data and interpret legislation and court orders. The Center for Investigative Reporting, ProPublica and the Solutions Journalism Network are examples of the best in national nonprofit news organizations committed to collaborating for the public good. Locally based nonprofits and university research centers can also be excellent sources of content. See the Pew Research Center on Journalism and Media's report for a thorough list: <http://features.journalism.org/nonprofit-news-outlets/>

**Introduce Race 101** In the same way that all journalism students are taught the fundamentals of reporting, writing and editing, so too should they be given the skills to report responsibly on race. Journalism schools should place an emphasis on including a comprehensive curriculum on race and collectively develop a gold standard in journalism education on racial dynamics that would indicate excellence in the area and provide a structure for keeping up-to-date.

+ Generate story ideas that change the narrative on race

# FIND FRESH PERSPECTIVES

*Reporting on race can do more than alert your audience to problems. For many journalists, covering race means detailing acts of racism, exposing racists or describing racial inequities. But this narrow focus can be limiting, especially if journalism is to provide the thought-provoking content that challenges audiences to think more deeply to gain a clear understanding of racial dynamics.*

**Highlight Solutions** Sometimes the best stories are about people, organizations and initiatives that are making progress. Shining a light on policies and practices that have had a positive impact on racial equity in areas of education, employment, health outcomes or the judicial system can go a long way toward changing opinion about the supposed intractability of racial tension and disparity. Talk to community organizers and activists working for change. Find out where they think progress is happening, and follow the lead. If you've found a local initiative that gets results, explore why it has not been adopted locally, statewide or nationally. As the Solutions Journalism Network puts it, "...solutions stories engage people differently. They can change the tone of public discourse, making it less divisive and more constructive. By revealing what has worked, they can also lead to meaningful change."<sup>2</sup>

## **Question patterns and examine the status quo**

For generations, people of color have experienced slower gains in health outcomes, wealth accumulation, access to good jobs and educational achievement than their white counterparts. Since we know that this is not due to some inherent skin color-based deficiency, explore alternative explanations. Closely examine patterns of race-based disparities, such as those found in drug sentencing laws, arrest rates or public school suspension and expulsion rates, to reveal potential story ideas. If one racial group seems to consistently benefit from a public policy while another is disadvantaged, find out why.

**Explore Privilege** Responsible reporting on race entails more than just telling stories about people and communities of color. Sometimes this means illuminating the manifestations of white privilege. Consider shifting your lens to examine stories about advantage and legacy. For instance, who is most likely to gain access to capital, admission to exclusive schools, clubs and institutions? Who has the power to make decisions, and what happens when that power is challenged?

+ Embrace communities and increase audience engagement

# BROADEN REACH

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*It is vital that news organizations establish themselves as active members of the communities they serve by engaging in meaningful dialogue that fosters trust, open communication and respect. Deepening community engagement not only grows new audiences, it ensures content that reflects changing demographics in new and exciting ways. In an increasingly competitive media landscape, the survival of news organizations depends on reaching out to communities of color like never before.*

**Build Bridges Between Newsrooms** Consider reaching out to news organizations that serve communities of color to explore opportunities to share coverage, enhance understanding of issues and pool resources for deep investigative features and provocative lifestyle reporting. News outlets that serve immigrant and non-English speaking communities can also be invaluable sources of insight, knowledge and fresh perspective to mainstream outlets. Breaking down barriers between newsrooms can strengthen talent pools, enrich coverage and expose audiences to new and compelling content.

**Provide Forums for Feedback** To encourage stronger ties and more accountability, consider establishing an inclusive, representative and multi-generational advisory board in which members of the community can relay their concerns to the editorial staff. Sponsoring town halls, information sessions and forums on community concerns also gives news organizations a window into emerging issues. Proactive initiatives such as these not only generate brand recognition, but also build trust.

**Connect More Closely with Underserved Communities** Journalism's role in educating and enlightening citizens in a democracy can only happen if news outlets reach and represent all communities. Solicit and be responsive to audience feedback and prioritize increasing coverage of issues of key importance to underserved communities. Social media offers a wide array of opportunities for connecting. Create online forums for audiences to communicate directly with reporters and editors by hosting interactive sessions such as Google hangouts and Twitter chats. Encourage citizen journalism by creating a space to air or publish contributions from the public. The more inclusive and relevant the coverage, the more likely it is to grow empathy and audiences alike.

GROW AUDIENCES  
+ EMPATHY

## + Stay relevant by diversifying the newsroom

# ADD COLOR

*The past decade has seen unparalleled changes in the media landscape. In the fight to stay relevant, competitive and essential, one thing is clear: as our country's demographics change, so too must journalism. When it comes to reporting on race, it really does matter who is in the newsroom. A reporter of color is more likely to ask different questions, perhaps gain greater access to interview subjects of color, seek different experts and come equipped with a more nuanced understanding of racial history and context. They may have deeper and different connections or be bilingual — a great advantage especially when covering immigrant communities. The ultimate goal is for newsrooms to be staffed with editors and reporters who represent the rich and diverse communities they serve.*

**Build a Pipeline** Across the country, newsrooms are implementing new and innovative ideas for increasing diversity. In 2014, the entertainment and news website BuzzFeed<sup>3</sup> initiated a partnership with Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism to fund a fellowship for a full-time investigative reporter of color. According to BuzzFeed, the fellowship, which came with a full-time salary and benefits, was intended "to expand opportunities for journalists of color and other diverse backgrounds" and redress the growing lack of diversity in newsrooms. Investigate replicating such a program at your news organization by reaching out to journalism schools throughout the country to discuss the possibilities of fellowships and other partnering opportunities. Take the BuzzFeed example to the next level by offering more than one fellowship for five or more years in a row.

**Pay a Living Wage** Compensate freelancers fairly for their work. This is particularly critical for online outlets where contributors are often paid the equivalent of less than minimum wage. Also, place a priority on

sustaining paid internship programs so that these valuable training opportunities are available to everyone, not just those who are able to work for free.

**Seek Out High-Level Talent** Many organizations focus their initiatives to diversify on internships and entry-level applicants. But the greatest effects of diversification are felt when this commitment extends throughout the ranks. It's critical to include mid- and upper-level editors, reporters and management in diversity efforts. Including people of color among those who make decisions, oversee staff and play instrumental roles in determining story selection is key. Seek out potential hires at media outlets aimed at people of color. These seasoned reporters can bring talent, experience and a wealth of knowledge to your organization. Aggressively scout for talent by building stronger partnerships with the National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Asian American Journalists Association and the Native American Journalists Association.

37.02 %

NON-WHITE  
POPULATION  
OF THE U.S.

13.34 %

NON-WHITE  
FULL-TIME DAILY  
NEWSPAPER  
JOURNALISTS<sup>4</sup>

**Deploy Reporters of Color Across the Field**

Black and Latino reporters often find themselves relegated to the “race beat,” responsible for covering issues deemed important to communities of color. While well intentioned, this practice can limit the possibilities for expanding the scope of coverage in all areas. Reporters of color can bring new perspectives and fresh ideas as they tackle stories in politics, business, sports, education, health and the arts. A commitment to assigning reporters of color to a wide range of stories not only enhances coverage of key issues, it also gives reporters the opportunity to gain the breadth of experience essential for advancement within a news organization.

**Recruit Voices from Social Media**

Print and online outlets are uniquely suited to feature a breadth of diverse voices in opinion pieces, editorials and first-person accounts. Search Twitter feeds, blogs and websites for big thinkers and young activists. Solicit contributions from those who are using their social media reach to advocate for racial equity. Developing new talent and giving platforms to conversation-leaders will help your news organization remain exciting to the next generation.

**Start Young**

Increase the pool of future journalists of color by connecting with high schools and community centers with programs that ignite a passion for journalism. Organize company-wide outreach initiatives and make staff available to speak at schools, hold workshops, host newsroom tours and participate in mentoring programs. Consider sponsoring school newspapers, fostering essay writing contests and encouraging submissions in the opinion pages by high-school and college-aged writers.

# KNOW MORE

Leading the conversation on race means that news executives, editors and reporters must have the most up-to-date and comprehensive understanding of race in the United States.

## CONCLUSION

IO There is no doubt that the currents of change around race continue to gain momentum. They can be seen and felt in the rising awareness about the effects of mass incarceration on communities of color, in organizing around #blacklivesmatter, in nationwide protests and in demographer's projections that whites will soon no longer be the majority. As a society, however, we are repeating many of the same cycles, revisiting many of the same themes and reporting on many of the same conditions in communities of color that have riddled American society for decades. Given journalism's role in the pace and direction of change, the field's potential to inform conversations and improve realities has not been this significant since the civil rights era. We hope that these recommendations will provide both an approach and concrete steps for excellence in reporting on race in ways that will allow us to reach new, better and more equitable ground in the days and years ahead.

## PARTICIPANTS

Forum on Journalism, Race & Society  
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# COMMIT

Achieving excellence in reporting on race is not  
just the obligation of journalists of color, it's  
*the responsibility of all journalists.*

## Endnotes

- 1 PolicyLink. (2011). *America's Tomorrow: Equity is the Superior Growth Strategy*. [www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/SUMMIT\\_FRAMING\\_SUMMARY\\_WEB.PDF](http://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/SUMMIT_FRAMING_SUMMARY_WEB.PDF)
- 2 Solutions Journalism Network at <http://solutionsjournalism.org>
- 3 Smith, B. (2014, October 1). "What We're Doing To Keep Building A Diverse Editorial Operation." *BuzzFeed*. [www.buzzfeed.com/bensmith/what-were-doing-to-keep-building-a-diverse-editorial-operati#.vbNnp636](http://www.buzzfeed.com/bensmith/what-were-doing-to-keep-building-a-diverse-editorial-operati#.vbNnp636)
- 4 American Society of News Editors. (2014). *ASNE 2014 Census*. <http://asne.org/content.asp?pl=121&sl=387&contentid=387>

