



Beyond Objectivity

**Producing
trustworthy
news in today's
newsrooms**

Beyond Objectivity:

Producing
Trustworthy News
in Today's
Newsrooms

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Introduction

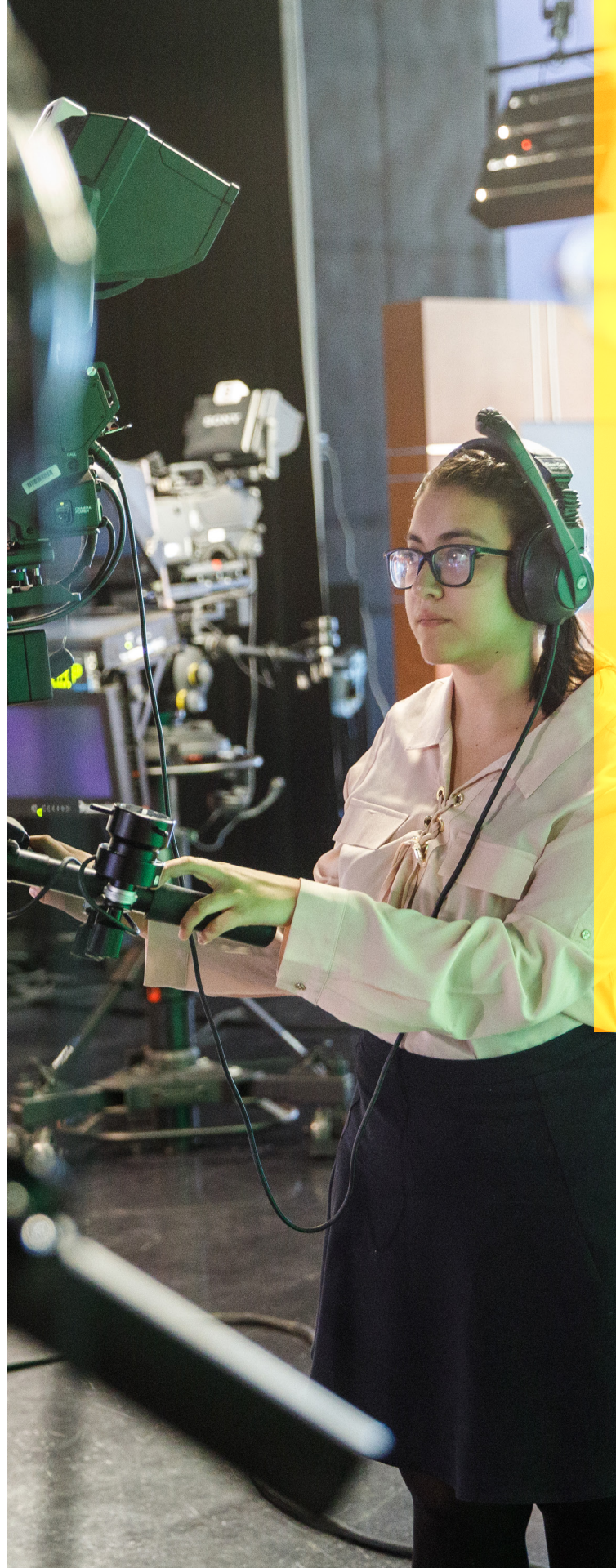
What does it mean today for a journalist or news coverage to be “objective”? Could or should that even be a goal any longer? If not, as we have concluded, how might you create a new set of standards for trustworthy news?

Today, the traditional concept of journalistic “objectivity” is under attack on multiple fronts. Cable news has turned the blurring of news and polarized opinion into a successful business model. Politicians have demonized mainstream media as “fake news.” Outright misinformation and disinformation, exacerbated by social media, have distorted the public’s perception of reality. And, when misunderstood, journalistic “objectivity” or “balance” can lead to so-called “both-sides-ism” – a dangerous trap when covering issues like climate change or the intensifying assault on democracy.

At the same time, some news media reformers deride “objectivity” as an unachievable or misleading goal, and many journalism practitioners no longer use the term. Newsroom leaders are confronting a generation of increasingly diverse young journalists struggling to reconcile traditional news standards with their concepts of “cultural context,” “identity,” “point of view,” and “advocacy journalism.”

Restoring a belief in the value of fair, fact-based reporting – trustworthy news – is arguably more important than ever. Surveys consistently show that most news consumers want journalism that is free of bias. And reliable news coverage is a cornerstone of democracy. But that requires a fresh vision for how to achieve that goal – a vision that replaces outmoded “objectivity” with a more relevant articulation of journalistic standards.

That is what you are about to read: a contemporary case for trustworthy news reporting. It builds on the history of how concepts like “objectivity” have evolved, flourished and flagged in American journalism. It draws



on insights from the best practices and best practitioners across print, digital and broadcast news organizations. It integrates the core principles of fact-based journalism with other important values in today's changing newsroom cultures.

We start with the story of how we got here – and why the traditional notion of objectivity has lost its power to define the highest standards of journalism. We end with a “playbook” for producing trustworthy news in today's newsrooms.

We provide actionable guidelines to help newsroom leaders: move beyond accuracy to truth; unlock the real power of diversity, inclusion and identity; create a credible policy for journalists' social media and political activities; focus on essential original reporting; show your work as an integral part of the journalism process; and develop a set of core values for the newsroom to live by.

This report is based on more than 75 interviews with a variety of news leaders, journalists, and other experts, as well as our own experience as lifelong journalists and a large body of scholarship. We worked with an invaluable team of three doctoral students and one undergraduate

at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University, who have done their own research into these issues: Rian Bosse, Stephen Kilar, Kristina Vera-Phillips, and Autriya Maneshni, respectively.

We are grateful to the [Stanton Foundation](#) for underwriting this report, and we look forward to the second phase of the project, in which we will bring our “playbook” to working newsrooms around the United States.

Our hope is to create a living document that enables newsrooms to work to the highest standards but also addresses the day-to-day concerns of today's and tomorrow's news leaders and journalists in a fast-changing reality. The mission to produce trustworthy news will never end. But it has to start somewhere.

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**How we
got here**



“Objectivity” is defined by most leading dictionaries as expressing or using facts without distortion by personal beliefs, bias, feelings or prejudice. Journalistic objectivity has been generally understood to mean much the same thing, although accuracy, fairness, and balance have variously been mentioned with it over the years.

In fact, the concept of journalistic objectivity has never been formally defined or codified in any enforceable professional standards, which do not exist for American journalism under the First Amendment. Yet, until relatively recently, objectivity has been generally accepted as a guiding principle in news reporting for about a century, roughly during and since World War I.

Its origins are murky, as the American press gradually evolved from small partisan and commercial sheets and newspapers to mass audience dailies supported by advertising and readers. Perhaps the best explanation comes from Columbia University Journalism School professor Michael Schudson, a leading news historian. He has cited American journalists’ adverse reaction to both government propaganda during World War I and an aggressive new domestic public relations industry as leading to an “objective reporting” movement.

“With interested parties seeking control of newspaper content, the reporters insisted that they would bow to no one and nothing but to their own ethic of disinterested, fact-based, balanced, and fair-minded reporting,” Schudson wrote in *The News Media: What Everyone Needs to Know*. “This new model of professional journalism, often called ‘objective’ reporting at the time and after, was further institutionalized and maintained because it served newspaper editors as a kind of discipline for directing and controlling their increasingly large staffs of young reporters learning their trade on the job.”

For many decades, there was consensus about the concept of objectivity in mainstream media newsrooms, including government-regulated radio and television. News and opinion were kept largely separate, with opinion labeled as such. Newsroom staffs and leadership were virtually all white and male, and their news coverage reflected that. What reporting there was about women was mostly relegated to “women’s pages.” Coverage of Black and immigrant communities was largely left to ethnic newspapers.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the concept of journalistic objectivity became steadily tested by the

challenges of covering McCarthyism and the Red Scare, the civil rights movement and violent opposition to it in the South, urban uprisings and their underlying causes in cities across the country, and the Vietnam War and anti-war movement. Publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 prompted more skeptical coverage of the federal government. The role of the press in the Watergate scandal and President Nixon's resignation in 1974 spawned widespread aggressive investigative reporting of all kinds that continues today. There was more news analysis, mostly labeled, and more colorful "new journalism" writing in some newspaper feature sections.

Yet, the concept of "objectivity" – including "balance" – was still considered the standard by the leadership of most print and broadcast news media. For example, early stories about scientific evidence of climate change and the role of human behavior were often "balanced" with the views of climate change deniers. When asked in surveys, readers said they expected the news media to report "both sides" of stories.

Gender and racial integration of newsrooms finally began in recent decades. But it was relatively slow, and it had not percolated up to the senior leadership of newsrooms, which were still effectively top-down workplaces. Yet, as early as the turbulent 1960s, some younger journalists, especially investigative reporters, began to question what objectivity really meant if it did not challenge power, privilege and inequality.

New challenges to the status quo of journalistic objectivity came with cable television, and then, more profoundly, the internet. Cable television, which is outside federal regulation of over-the-air media, produced highly opinionated news networks, including Fox News and others on the right and MSNBC on the left. The internet, including social media, became filled with opinionated information and misinformation. Both also offered opportunities for mainstream media



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Former executive editor,
The Associated Press

journalists to offer opinions that sometimes appeared contrary to journalistic objectivity.

As Americans grew increasingly ideologically divided, they came to believe primarily the media with which they agreed – and to disregard the rest as disinformation. This was greatly exacerbated by politicians and ideologues who demonized the mainstream news media as “fake news.” Opinion polls recorded new lows for the American public’s trust in the news media.

Meanwhile, the business and audience models of news media were changing radically. Newspapers lost much of their print audience and advertising to the internet. Many papers were bought by large chain owners that maximized profits by drastically reducing the sizes of their newsrooms. Most television stations also were bought by chains, while the three major networks (and stations they owned) were bought by large entertainment corporations. Nonprofit National Public Radio and local public radio (and some public television) stations became significant news

media. As did, more recently, an increasing number of start-up local, regional and national nonprofit news sites on the internet. Collaborations of various kinds among news media to share reporting resources, unheard of not long ago, became more commonplace.

At the same time, American society has been in upheaval over discrimination against and abuse of women, abortion rights, persistent racism and white nationalism, police brutality and killings, the rights and treatment of LGBTQ+ people, income inequality and social problems, immigration and the treatment of immigrants, the causes and impact of climate change, voting rights and election integrity – and even the survival of our democracy. Reporting reliably on all of this has critically challenged mainstream media newsrooms, and it has called into question their diversity, tradition of objectivity, and credibility as sources for news.



The mainstream media “has allowed what it considers objective truth to be decided almost exclusively by white reporters and their mostly white bosses,” Wesley Lowery, an influential 32-year-old Black Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, has written. “And those selective truths have been calibrated to avoid offending the sensibilities of white readers.”

“I’m not arguing for subjectivity,” Lowery said in an interview for this report. “I’m actually whole-heartedly endorsing objectivity as properly defined; the argument is that, in practice, that’s not what it is.”

Some white male newsroom leaders still use the word objectivity, although their concepts of it vary. *New York Times* executive editor Joseph Kahn rejects its use to achieve “neutrality” or “both sides” balance in stories that do not reflect reality. “There is no such thing as perfect



neutrality, and defaulting to 'both sides' framing on divisive issues can be insufficient and misleading," Kahn said in an interview with *New York* magazine. "But the journalistic process needs to be objective and transparent, and we need to challenge ourselves and our readers to understand all the facts and explore a wider range of perspectives."

However, Kathleen Carroll, former executive editor of the Associated Press, said she has not used the word objectivity since the early 1970s because she believes it reflects the world view of the male white establishment.

"It's objective by whose standards? And that standard seems to be white, educated, fairly wealthy guys," she explained. "And when people don't feel like they find themselves in news coverage, it's because they don't meet that definition."

Andrew Mendelson, associate dean of CUNY's Craig Newmark School of Journalism, agreed that the standard of objectivity has been used to reinforce the status quo in news coverage. "You could then throw a word like objectivity around and say, 'Well, that's not objective.'" he said. "That's a quick way of shutting down and sending a message that this is not suitable. That's a very good power dynamic in the word objectivity. It's the same as saying, 'You're being an advocate,' and that quickly shuts down any dissent."

NYU professor and journalism critic Jay Rosen has famously disdained the traditional concept of objectivity "as a form of persuasion in which journalists tried to get us to accept their account by saying something like, 'I don't have a point of view, I don't have a starting point, I don't have a philosophy, I don't have an ideology. I'm just telling you the way it is. So believe it, because this is the way it is.' That's the view from nowhere."

"Objectivity enforces the 'view from nowhere' as a norm," Dylan Smith, editor and publisher of the nonprofit *Tucson*

Sentinel local news website and founding chair of Local Independent Online News Publishers, said in response to a survey of journalists conducted for this project.

"That's why, both in my newsroom and in my work on SPJ's [Society of Professional Journalists] Professional Standards and Ethics Committee, I push to avoid the use of a term that can be used to detract from journalism's pursuit of the truth."

"The journalist's job is truth, not objectivity. It is getting close to the reality, notwithstanding that we all have biases and passions."

Neil Barsky,

Founder

The Marshall Project

"Objectivity is not even possible," said Stephen Engelberg, editor-in-chief of *ProPublica*, the national investigative journalism nonprofit. "I don't even know what it means."

"The journalist's job is truth, not objectivity," said Neil Barsky, founder of *The Marshall Project*, an influential nonprofit news organization that investigates the criminal justice system. "It is getting close to the reality, notwithstanding that we all have biases and passions."

"Objectivity" is news coverage "through the lens of largely white, straight men," said Emily Ramshaw, 40-year-old co-founder of *The 19th* national news

website, the stated mission of which is “to elevate voices of women, people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community.”

“*The 19th* is light years away from my early career clinging to the myth of objectivity,” Ramshaw said in an interview.

“The voices in stories were overwhelmingly white and male,” she explained, “as well as the leadership and decision-making in most newsrooms.”

When asked whether a relatively recent increase in female top editors and executives of news media has produced any change from “white male” dominance of newsrooms, Julia Wallace, a Cronkite School professor and former editor of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, said, “Not really. When women are in charge, there is not that much change. Women who made it to the top were operating by men’s rules.

“Objectivity was wrong, a failed concept,” she said. “It was a mistake to head down the path of dishonest objectivity.” As an example, she cited a history of racist reporting about subjects like lynchings in the South. “We pretended we were printing the truth when we were seeing the world through a certain lens.”

Wallace added, “Now, it has to be about changing the culture.”



That is what reporters in some newsrooms are trying to do. A growing number of journalists of color and younger white reporters, including LGBTQ+ people, believe that objectivity has become an increasingly outdated and divisive concept that prevents truly accurate reporting informed by their own backgrounds, experiences and points of view.

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“The consensus among younger journalists is that we got it all wrong. We are the problem. Objectivity has got to go.”

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San Francisco Chronicle

The San Francisco Chronicle, said in an interview. “We are the problem. Objectivity has got to go.” The younger journalists in the Chronicle newsroom “are a very diverse group,” Garcia-Ruiz explained. “They are willing to share their lived experiences to call out bullshit, despite their status in the newsroom. There can sometimes be a chasm between them and the older veteran reporters.”

“I think there is an age divide growing,” said Erik Hall, a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* sports editor who is a board member of NLGJA, the Association of LGBTQ Journalists. “I think more veteran journalists think ‘objective’ means tell both sides. And I think a younger generation is coming up feeling strongly that, on some issues, there is a fair way to tell it, and telling both sides isn’t the fair, or fairest, way to tell a story.”

Mark Fisher, a veteran senior journalist at *The Washington Post*, described in an interview what he saw as “a generational conflict that has emerged between younger folks who want to practice journalism that matches their personal views and older folks who want to maintain traditional standards of fairness and rigor. There is a generation of folks coming into the newsroom with great skills and their own views, seeking more advocacy for their views of the correct side in stories. They want to



infuse stories with the language of the reporter. They say we should not be reflecting both sides, but what they see as reality. They object to objectivity as morally bankrupt.”

Asked about this assessment, *Post* executive editor Sally Buzbee said, “There is some confusion about the value of good reporting versus point of view. Among some of our journalists, there is a desire to change the world in some specific ways. Climate change, immigration and education are examples. It’s not primarily a generational point of view. It’s not fair and accurate to say it is all young people.

“Advocacy in newsrooms is a real issue,” Buzbee added. “We don’t pretend that it is not a problem. We won’t be scared to address it forthrightly. We don’t come down on the side of a traditional point of view. We stress the value of reporting – what you are able to dig up – so you (the reader) can make up your mind. We spend a lot of time on this issue.”

Yet, Buzbee no longer uses the word objectivity “because it has become a political football. If the term objectivity means the world view of middle-aged white men, it has become attacked as a word that is used to keep the status quo.”

“Objectivity is not a very useful word,” said Steve Coll, former dean of the Columbia Journalism School. “It is a legacy that younger journalists rightfully question.”

“The word itself is so fraught and subject to debate,” said *Philadelphia Inquirer* editor Gabriel Escobar, explaining why he does not use it. “The younger journalist cohort is more vocal and more demanding on accountability,” he added. “They hold us accountable, and they challenge what they think is too restrictive.”



That cohort at *The Inquirer* and many other news organizations is becoming more diverse, if not necessarily representative of the diversity in their communities or the country.

Among the most diverse is *USA Today*, where the newsroom staff is over 50 per cent women and 37 per cent journalists of color, according to its most recent quarterly diversity report. Engelberg said *ProPublica*'s staff is also over 50 per cent female and 40 per cent journalists of color. However, he added that "we would like to have more Hispanics, more people who are devoutly religious, more people who have been in the military."

Escobar said *The Philadelphia Inquirer*'s newsroom and its leadership are now 45 and 48 per cent female and non-binary, and over 30 per cent journalists of color. However, the paper has been criticized recently for not having any Black male reporters outside its sports department.

The *San Francisco Chronicle*'s newsroom is 47 per cent female and 34 per cent journalists of color, according to its most recent staff census. Garcia-Ruiz said his direct reports include four white men and women and four men and women of color.

Kevin Merida, executive editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, said he has prioritized the diversity of his newsroom leadership team, including a Latino deputy managing editor for state and local news, a Black video editor, a Latina audio editor, "the only Latina sports editor in the country," and a Palestinian-American head of the digital news operation. "It has been easy to find and identify people inside and outside," he said. "We're always exploring people in the newsroom, people on the rise."

At the *Tampa Bay Times*, its 15 Diversity Goals, adopted in February 2020, set a goal for its newsroom diversity to

reflect its four-county region in Florida. As of the February 2022 update, the *Times* newsroom was 51 per cent women and 24 per cent people of color, still below the 34 per cent racial diversity of its region. It has held newsroom diversity and inclusion training sessions and created a program in which veteran staff members mentor younger ones. It also has established a newsroom "leadership pipeline, in which potential managers are groomed to step into positions of authority," according to the goals statement.

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Chairman,
NBCUniversal News Group

Rene Sanchez, the new editor of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* and *The Advocate* of Baton Rouge, said he is working with HBCUs, including locally Xavier and Dillard, "to form a pipeline for interns and beginning reporters. We intend to reach out to more of them throughout the South."

"You're going to be more accurate if your newsroom has more kinds of different people in it," said Kathleen Carroll, the former AP executive editor.

When Cesar Conde took over as Chairman of the NBCU News Group in 2020, he announced the “50% Challenge Initiative” for the group, which comprises NBC News, MSNBC, and CNBC. It set staff diversity goals of 50 per cent women and 50 per cent people of color. After two years, Conde’s group is more than half women and nearly 34 per cent people of color.

“This is not just the right thing to do. It’s also the right thing to do for the business. This is going to help us be a more effective and trustworthy news organization,” Conde said in an interview. “Because at the end of the day, we are trying to serve all of the communities in the U.S. and around the world. And in order to more effectively serve all of the communities that we aspire to serve, we have to represent them.”

“Do we have a fair mix of those perspectives, of those stories across the organization as a whole?” asked Noah Oppenheim, at the time president of NBC News, emphasizing the importance of newsroom diversity of all kinds. “I think you arrive at that mix not by hiring all the same people or making everyone conform to the same point of view,” he said in an interview.

“But you arrive at that mix by taking the 30,000-foot point of view and making sure you have a room full of people that have a diversity of perspective. And then what ends up on the air or on our platforms is going to be as diverse as the room it came from.”

Oppenheim added that he began hiring journalists who live away from the coastal elites, some of them former print reporters from local newspapers, and encouraging them to stay in their home cities, creating regional diversity and “trying to make sure that we are covering the stories that matter to a wide range of communities.”

“We’ve always talked about diversity in terms of skin color. And I’m not diminishing that in any way” said Jeff Zucker, former president of CNN Worldwide. “But there

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NYU’s Jay Rosen has pointed out what he sees as a “contradiction” in efforts to diversify newsrooms, in which journalists hired for their differing identities and life experiences may be expected to put them aside when working. That contradiction is what many in the new generation of journalists are rebelling against.

Sean McLaughlin, vice president of news for Scripps broadcast stations, acknowledged a tension between “being completely objective” and the pressure for journalists to be “more authentic and more human and

more real.” Scripps has “constant seminars and trainings on ‘be yourself’ and ‘bring yourself to work’ and ‘be comfortable,’” he said. “But, then, in your on-air work, would that be viewed as having a bias or a lack of ability to be objective in covering news stories? It’s a tricky area.”

Kathleen Carroll believes newsroom leaders should be understanding about this and deal with it on a case-by-case basis. “I think identity already influences assignments and decisions, and that we should be very open about it,” she said. “And I don’t mean that I have to put my entire resume at the bottom of every story. But I think forbidding or holding people back from assignments ought to be very individual and specific.”

“What we always challenge our journalists to do is to recognize that you have a bias, and to check the bias at the door,” Scott Livingston, who oversees 72 newsrooms as senior vice president of Sinclair Broadcast Group, said in an interview. “But bring that diversity of thought to the editorial meeting or the content strategy session, so that other people can understand that there are multiple ideas or opinions regarding a certain story. And then that opens the door to me to be a little bit more curious to learn why someone may think that way that leads to objectivity, if you will, because of those other voices that may be in the editorial process.”

One advocate of increasing diversity in newsrooms, Maxine Crooks, vice president for talent strategy and development for ABC-owned television stations, said that bringing in “more voices” enhances coverage and can build more trust with news audiences. She explained that her ideal newsroom culture is one that allows diverse journalists to share their perspectives, even on stories they are not covering, and that encourages reporters to dig deeper and look for nuance.

“Since COVID and racial reckoning,” Crooks said, “people understand that reporters are people. They’re allowed to

be more communicative of their feelings on the air. They are allowed to show impact but remain professional in their roles.”

Julia B. Chan, editor-in-chief of *The 19th*, said in an interview that she encourages journalists to bring their full, lived experiences to the newsroom. “We need to recognize that journalists are human beings with feelings, thoughts, and experiences that inform and inspire the way in which they share with the world, and how all of these things benefit the reporting and journalism they create — they add nuance, context and perspective to the work.”

In some newsrooms, “it’s going to involve changing some ways we’ve done things for a very long time to

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get to that point,” McLaughlin said. He advised holding “a little more candid discussions in our newsrooms” about this. “What are things we can talk about in these kinds of discussions? And what’s not? What’s personal? And what’s part of me as my profession?”

“It would be a bad decision to tell people they can’t cover a certain subject because they’ve had experience with that subject,” Steve Coll said in an interview while he was still the Columbia Journalism School dean. “There should be agreement by the reporter that past experiences will not color that reporting. Some young journalists now say that their experiences will affect how they cover the story. That function should be to collect evidence about it. That is reporting-led journalism.”

At the same time, Coll added, editors need to engage with young journalists of color – and consider “broader ideas of formats for new voices. All the talent in a newsroom needs to be recognized in the core news product.”

New York Times editor Joseph Kahn said in an interview for this report that he relies on daily discussions about sensitive stories. “How does that kind of collective group of reporters and editors who are involved feel that it adds up, that the collective coverage adds up as a statement of our overall kind of empathy, openness, fairness on this question?” He pointed out that claiming complete neutrality could erode news consumers’ trust in a news organization. “I don’t think we’re all completely neutral individuals who come to this as sort of blank slates, and to pretend otherwise, to our readers or our viewers, I think contributes to a sense that we are not being completely forthcoming.”

“Conflicts of interest always need to be avoided, though journalists’ life experiences and identities may make them an ideal person to tell a specific story,” Kimberly Cataudella, a *Raleigh News & Observer* reporter, said in a response to the survey of journalists for this

report. “Editors recognize that we operate both with and for the community. We’re integral members of our neighborhoods, towns and overarching communities, not just the journalists sitting on the sidelines, not allowed to take part in the bigger picture. Our identities help shape our coverage, and our presence in our communities helps us make them better, along with helping us recognize their shortcomings.”

“As a journalist of color, I have been told time and again that my identity doesn’t matter, that I have to shed it all to worship at the altar of objectivity,” said Saeed Ahmed, former director of digital news at NPR. “I bristle at that notion. My lived experiences should inform what I cover.”

Ahmed said that, at multiple times in his career, editors have made story assignments based on false assumptions about his identity. “I was assigned to cover a pro-Palestinian rally by one editor, only to be taken off a story by another editor who said I couldn’t be ‘objective,’” he recalled. “I am not Palestinian, nor an Arab. This

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assertion was made simply because I had a Muslim-sounding name.”



Some news leaders are making significant changes in their newsrooms to meet the challenges detailed in this report. They are creating new avenues of communication among reporters and editors, newsroom staff affinity groups and caucuses, plans and progress for newsroom and coverage diversity, and increasing numbers of staff meetings.

At *USA Today*, Nicole Carroll said she seeks diversity of participants, experiences, and views in daily “brainstorming sessions” about news coverage. “We need diversity of opinion when we talk about things” like “deciding what stories to pursue,” she explained.

When relevant for the subjects being discussed, Carroll said she invites journalists from appropriate newsroom affinity groups, and she responds to those who come to her with suggestions or concerns, including Afro-American group members about race coverage, Asian-American group members about coverage of attacks on Asian-Americans, and LGBTQ+ group members about transgender coverage. Carroll said that Gannett, *USA Today*’s owner, has numerous such “Employee Resource Groups” at many of its papers.

Carroll added that she and her newsroom leaders “have found more value in diverse people’s lived experiences” in these discussions. She said there are no prohibitions against staff members working on stories involving their identities or life experiences unless they demonstrate a strong bias.

Barbara Maushard, senior vice president of news at Hearst Television, said Hearst has established employee-

run diverse affinity groups – women, Black and Hispanic journalists, LGBTQ journalists, even those who are parents – for conversations with each other and with management about coverage and other issues. “It’s about figuring out how we use the full self of anyone in the newsroom to help tell important stories that they might be more knowledgeable about, more aware of,” Maushard said in an interview, “but also with the team of people and those systems that are in place – your editors who are checking for facts, but also checking for fairness.”

After a June 2020 crisis at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* over a “Buildings Matter, Too” headline on a story about protests of the police killing of George Floyd, the newspaper commissioned a Temple University audit of its staff and coverage. Its research “revealed a body of content that overrepresented white and male voices” and “sourcing norms and editing traditions (that) favored an imagined print reader who was older, whiter, wealthier, and more suburban.”

The Inquirer hired a newspaper vice president for diversity, equity and inclusion and promoted Gabriel Escobar to be the paper’s editor. He created newsroom working groups of 70 to 80 volunteer members to analyze content, coverage, and newsroom culture – with a steering committee that includes Escobar.

“They do research, talk to other newsrooms and make recommendations for steps we should take,” Escobar said in an interview. They produced and Escobar implemented a detailed “Anti-Racist Workflow Guide” that covers story generation, reporting, content creation, editing and presentation. He also created a “content consult channel” on the newsroom’s Slack network, on which anyone can ask the newsroom to weigh in on an assignment or story. Escobar said any issues that arise are “usually satisfactorily resolved” by reporters and editors, sometimes without his intervention.

At the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Emilio Garcia-Ruiz said he has encouraged members of the staff to raise any concerns with him and his managing editor/director of news. “We talk to reporters and re-edit things on our site,” he said. “It’s an informal group of folks – about half a dozen younger people in the newsroom who want to be heard when they see something. They take it privately to the director of news. We get back to them to discuss it. Issues are raised (about stories) without the reporters who wrote them being publicly pilloried. We’ve set up a structure to surface issues without blowing up the room.”

“When changes in policy are being considered,” Garcia-Ruiz added, “we take it to the room for discussion, as was recently done about establishing a policy on sufficiently checking out what police say before reporting it.”

At the *Tampa Bay Times*, editor Mark Katches said he formed a diversity committee of editors and reporters, chaired by a reporter, “to work on having our coverage reflect more of our community” which meets regularly. It set the 15 diversity goals for the newsroom. “It helps round out our coverage,” Katches explained in an interview. “We have better coverage of the LGBTQ community for example. We are trying to reflect more about people of color in our paper.”

Kevin Merida said he inherited three very active staff caucuses – Black, Latino and Asia-American/Pacific Islander – when he became editor of the *Los Angeles Times*. Staff members also communicate with each other about issues on unofficial Slack channels. Discussions occur “right in our story meetings, in the context of what we should cover,” he said. “Our ten o’clock meeting is pretty big and diverse.”

Journalists in his newsroom “have multiple sets of identities,” Merida explained. “They are all different kinds of people. We find ways for our journalists to share more of that,” including “first-person essays” on the front page.

He cited a Latina reporter’s personal story about the low vaccination rate in her community, and a gay police reporter’s personal story about his own gay marriage and a potential U.S. Supreme Court threat to the legality of gay marriages.



CBS News established a Race and Culture Unit in July 2020, with the mission of promoting diverse perspectives in coverage. Its executive producer, Alvin Patrick, said in an interview that people of color are finally being listened to and valued in newsrooms in a way they weren’t when he broke into the network news business.

“I don’t think anyone can go back and say, ‘Oh, my goodness, the broadcast networks were holding lynchings in the newsroom’ or whatever. No, that’s not how it worked. It was about getting the benefit of the doubt. It was about the value of your ideas, of your experiences. And so that’s the currency I think people of color simply didn’t have in newsrooms before. That they now have, which I think is a really, really good thing.”

Wendy McMahon, co-president of CBS News and Stations, has appointed “executive producers of community impact” at CBS-owned stations. “I’m trying to reset the industry in my corner of the world,” McMahon said in an interview. “How do we go back to truly surfacing stories from the streets and from neighborhoods versus from the newsroom and from the (police) scanner?”

The ABC Owned Television Stations created an eleven-person “race and culture content team,” including a dedicated “multi-skilled journalist” in each of their eight local stations. “We have to be able to use the voices of people whose neighborhoods we don’t normally go into and tell these stories from their vantage point,” ABC vice president Crooks said.





At KABC-TV in Los Angeles, president and general manager Cheryl Fair has relied on community journalists embedded in various neighborhoods to find news and residents' voices in places where they live. "As important as it is how our reporters feel personally – and it is important – and their voices are being heard internally," she said in an interview, "I think the voices that we have decided are important to elevate here are the voices of the community in a meaningful and very obvious way. I think that part of what's happening is (that) now we're allowing people to tell their truth. As long as our facts are correct, they can tell their truth."

The San Diego Union-Tribune has assigned more of its reporters, including an increased number of Latino journalists, to coverage of diverse communities in its region, including neighboring Tijuana, Mexico. "I think our slogan is 'Know your community,' and I think we really are knowing our community," Alejandro Tamayo, who leads the newspaper's visual team, said in an interview. He added that the newspaper had formed an advisory board of residents of the region who listen to presentations from *Union-Tribune* journalists and offer feedback and coverage ideas.

The Associated Press announced a new "Inclusive Story-Telling" chapter in the AP stylebook that "emphasizes the importance of inclusive reporting and editing to ensure accuracy and fairness and offers guidance to recognize and overcome unconscious biases; use thoughtful and precise language; reach beyond usual sources and story ideas; include necessary context and background; avoid tokenism; and make content accessible."



Newsroom leaders interviewed for this report said they are struggling with their newsrooms' policies for their

journalists' use of social media – and other activities in which they express their opinions or engage in activism. This comes after many of the same newsrooms had encouraged social media use and appearances on broadcast media by their journalists to promote themselves and their news organizations to grow audiences.

“You can’t be an activist and be a *Times* journalist at the same time.”

Joseph Kahn,
Executive Editor,
The New York Times

Some news media have maintained strict policies against their journalists expressing opinions about the news on social media or taking part in advocacy or protests.

Oppenheim, for example, said NBC News wants its journalists exerting influence through their reporting and not in protests or opinions on social media. "There are lots of ways, a lot of wonderful ways, to influence policy and culture, and journalism is just one of them," he explained. "And I think our position is that if you choose journalism as your route, you are giving up some other options that are available to the general public."

"You can't be an activist and be a *Times* journalist at the same time," Kahn said. "All of our newsroom journalists should act as if they are representing the institution that they're working for when they're making public comments about major issues in the news."

Claudia Milne, senior vice president of standards and practices for CBS News and Stations, agreed that “how you represent yourself on social media in your personal life reflects on the organization that you work for.” Yet, she has found it difficult to set policy about this for CBS.

“You may, for example, express sympathy for victims of racism. You may demonstrate compassion for victims of gun violence,” she said. “But you wouldn’t be able to express support for organizations that advocate for gun control or Black Lives Matter.”

“Everyone wants black and white” in a new policy, Milne explained. “We’re not allowed to say this, we are allowed to say that. And my mantra, and I say it 25 times a day, is almost nothing is black and white. In our universe, everything is shades of gray.”

“We’re trying to create an environment in which we don’t police our journalists too much. Our young people want to be participants in the world.”

Kevin Merida,
Executive Editor,
Los Angeles Times

While CBS stations do not allow reporters to express opinions on controversial issues in their reporting or on social media, Wendy McMahon said that she is trying to create “safe spaces” in their newsrooms for people to share their views and feelings.

“I think we have to have thoughtful conversations with people,” she explained. “We have policies, they all accept the policies when they come to work. They don’t always understand all of that, or their life might influence something. And, so, we’ve got to go back and say, ‘Let’s help you understand, not that there’s anything wrong with how you feel or who you are, or what you think about this. But the credibility of you as a journalist and the brand of the organization can be at risk.’ So, we need to think about how we can find a happy medium.”

Ellen Crooke, senior vice president of news for television station owner TEGNA, has similarly concluded that “there is no easy answer to this, and it requires great thoughtfulness in news leaders. So, the old way of going about it—nobody shares anything controversial on social media, nobody talks about their lived experience—that’s not going to fly anymore. We have to find that balance.”

At *USA Today*, Nicole Carroll said staff members are encouraged to express their opinions about any issue in news meetings. And they can assert in public facts, such as “Black lives matter,” or support democracy or human rights. But they are still forbidden from being overly opinionated on social media or participating in demonstrations “that could impact a newsroom’s ability to cover the topic fairly.”

After several newsroom crises at *The Washington Post* over the use of social media by a few of its journalists to attack others on the staff, Sally Buzbee issued a new social media policy stating that “a *Post* journalist’s use of social media must not harm the editorial integrity or journalistic reputation of *The Post*...*Post* journalists (who are not opinion journalists) should ensure that their activity on social media would not make reasonable people question their editorial independence, not make reasonable people question *The Post*’s ability to cover issues fairly.

“How do we instill trust in the news media? Part of that is transparency. And part of transparency is being clear in how you go about doing your work.”

Carrie Fox,
President and CEO,
Mission Partners

“Our newsroom’s diversity strengthens our journalism, and *Post* journalists can bring their backgrounds, identity, and experiences to their social accounts. It is not appropriate to use your social media account to advocate for causes, issues, government policies, or political or judicial outcomes...Social media is not the platform to engage in disputes with your colleagues.”

At the *Los Angeles Times*, Kevin Merida has been taking “a fresh look” at its social media and activism guidelines for his journalists. “We say they should not compromise the newspaper’s reporting,” he said. “We evaluate how people may participate on a case-by-case basis. They have to consult with an editor. I don’t necessarily think that, if you participate in something, that it is not possible to cover something. We are trying to find that line...We’re trying to create an environment in which we don’t police our journalists too much. Our young people want to be participants in the world.”

“Twitter complicates everything,” media critic and former newspaper editor Margaret Sullivan said in an interview.

“I always felt that journalists could speak up for free speech and press rights. Then, what about civil rights, racial equality, police brutality? I felt like we ought to be able to speak up about those things in moderation on social media, but I dislike and forbid reporters being truly partisan, campaigning. I think it’s a spectrum, and I’m moving on the spectrum.”



At the same time, some news leaders are mulling whether and how to incorporate certain values into their news organizations’ missions and news coverage. Wesley Lowery has urged them to adopt “moral clarity” as a guiding principle. “I want a values-based journalism, where we clearly state what we believe and what the premises from which we operate are,” he said.

“I feel like it’s a motivating factor rather than what should determine what’s written,” Steven Waldman, president of Report for America, said when asked about “moral clarity.”

The Washington Post adopted “Democracy Dies in Darkness” as its slogan in print and online. It and *The New York Times* have started multi-reporter democracy beats covering voting rights and other challenges to American democracy. They also now use words like “lies” and “racism” as factual terms in their news coverage.

“I don’t want to throw labels like racist or lying around willy-nilly, the evidence should be high,” *Times* executive editor Kahn said in an interview. “But I think it’s true that, when the evidence is there, we should not default to some mealy-mouthed, so-called neutral language that some people see this as a falsehood, while others do not. When the evidence is there, we should be clear and direct with our audience that we don’t think there are multiple sides to this question, this is a falsehood. And the person



repeating this falsehood over and over is guilty of lying.”

Claudia Milne of CBS News pointed out that story and beat selections can reflect a news organization's values. “I think one of the ways in which you can address how you have been covering some of these issues, but still hold on to your editorial principles and values, in terms of impartiality and objectivity, is actually about the act of choosing to cover them,” she said in an interview.

She connected story assignment and coverage decisions to audience trust in the news media. “This is one of the big critiques of the news media, and arguably the reason why there's such a lack of trust over so many years, which is that for the last 20, 30, 40 years, traditional mainstream news media has covered white, middle class, coastal elites, essentially. And it wasn't that we covered those stories in a biased way. It was that we chose to cover those stories and not the stories of everybody else.”

Waldman noted that Black and Hispanic communities began distrusting the news media before conservatives did. One way to rebuild that trust, he said, is doing more beat reporting in their communities. That's what young journalists funded and placed by philanthropy-supported Report for America do in dozens of local news media around the country.

“The more I read about what has gone on in the decline in trust, and how deep it is,” Waldman said, “the more I think the most important thing is probably to have a ton more local reporters from those communities, ideally, but certainly in those communities. Ideally doing beat reporting where they're really getting to know the community, getting to know the topic and vice versa, that the community is getting to know them, and interacting with them, in some cases on a literal face to face person level.”

Scripps News, a national news division of the E.W. Scripps company, has staffed bureaus across the country with reporters who have lived in those places.



In addition to traditional beats like medicine, it has beats called “The South” and “The West.” *The Washington Post*’s democracy beat reporters also live and report from regions and states where voting rights and threats to democracy are significant stories.

Newer nonprofit news organizations often are founded with specifically stated missions and values – both for fund-raising and for guidance for their staffs. For example, Elizabeth Green, co-founder and CEO of Chalkbeat, which covers education with websites in cities across the country, said it adopted antiracism as a core value. “We talk about it a lot,” she said in an interview. “Is this what an antiracist news organization would do?”

Carrie Fox, CEO of Mission Partners, works with nonprofit news organizations on what she called “positioning,” which may include developing a clear mission, vision, and values. She said that builds trust with an audience. “How do we instill trust in the news media? Part of that is transparency,” Fox explained. “And part of transparency is being clear in how you go about doing your work.”

The nonprofit *LAist* local news website, part of Southern California Public Radio, along with station KPCC, adopted values, which appear on its website and include “Systematic racism exists,” “We are facing a climate emergency,” “Democracy and civil participation are good things,” and “Diversity, equity and inclusion – in everything we do – are critical to our success.”

Kristen Muller, chief content officer for *LAist* and KPCC, explained that the values guide their coverage, staff performance and recruiting. “To me, it did not feel like we’re saying something that isn’t kind of widely accepted,” she said, acknowledging that the website and station operate in a relatively liberal region.

Emily Ramshaw, *The 19th*’s co-founder emphasized that its mission has not deterred its growth, financial support, or credibility. She pointed to millions of page views for its stories in other news media that pick up and publish them. “They see us as additive” to their coverage, “not as an issue site.” Ramshaw said **The 19th** is a \$10 million a year operation with a staff of 50 – 65 per cent of whom are women of color and “approximately 30 per cent LGBTQ people.”



American news media, like the country itself, are undergoing a critical period of profound change in the face of growing public mistrust. There is no clear, single path for them to follow. Instead, as a myriad of news organizations work to inform the American public in these rapidly changing times, the authors of this report have formulated from our research these guidelines to help light the way.





Trustworthy News Playbook

1.

Strive not just for accuracy, but for truth

Honest, credible, trustworthy journalism cannot thrive without unflagging editorial independence. Your newsroom leaders and your journalists should have the freedom to cover news without catering to, fearing or tolerating pressure from corporate management, advertisers, donors, interest groups, politicians, or government officials.

Accuracy starts with a commitment to verifiable facts, with no compromises. But facts, while true, aren't necessarily the whole truth. Therefore, your journalists must consider multiple perspectives to provide context where needed.

That said, avoid lazy or mindless “balance” or “both-sides-ism.” If your reporting combines accuracy and open-mindedness to multiple points of view, the result should still reflect the most honest picture of reality you can present – what Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein call “the best available version of the truth.”

2.

Unlock the real power of diversity, inclusion, and identity

A truly diverse newsroom is more likely to create trustworthy news. That starts with a commitment to hiring a staff that reflects the diversity of your community – not just ethnic and gender diversity, but people with different economic, educational, religious, geographic and social backgrounds. That probably means expanding your recruitment efforts beyond the usual sources (such as journalism schools or other news organizations) and possibly re-examining your job criteria (such as the requirement of a four-year college degree) to see whom they might be arbitrarily excluding. It also means holding newsroom leaders strictly accountable for attracting and retaining a diverse staff, which probably means hiring outside their comfort zone.

Your diverse newsroom should also create opportunities for talented staff members from underrepresented groups to grow into leadership positions. That may

well require establishing a formal mentorship program, creating structured opportunities to take on leadership challenges, and laying out a clear path for advancement. A diverse newsroom leadership team will also help you retain a diverse team of journalists – a stiff challenge, especially now.

But even a diverse newsroom will not succeed without an inclusive culture that encourages its journalists to speak up and allows them to be heard by their colleagues and leaders. You may want to consider establishing a formal structure for listening to diverse newsroom perspectives and responding to them, as some of the examples in the preceding essay illustrate. Whether you rely on organized affinity groups, regular newsroom “town meetings,” or some other mechanism, your newsroom leaders should commit to sometimes difficult conversations about story selection, coverage, even language – conversations that are open to all, not just the journalists involved in a particular story.

Those difficult conversations may also address the complicated issue of a journalist's identity and its relationship to news coverage. Today's newsrooms encourage their journalists to “bring their full selves to work” but then send

mixed messages about how much personal background and life experience should affect their assignments or their reporting. We share the consensus among most of our experts that a healthy newsroom encourages but doesn't force candid conversations about identity and life experience. Decisions about specific assignments should not be governed by arbitrary rules but made thoughtfully, on a case-by-case basis. The same goes for first-person journalism that reflects a reporter's own identity. Handled properly, the diverse life experiences of the newsroom will enhance your news coverage.

Even if you've created the open newsroom culture that we're describing, unlocking the real power of diversity also requires a commitment to reflecting diverse perspectives in story selection and reporting. This means not only listening to your own team, but also listening deeply to the people you are supposed to serve, with special attention to groups that mainstream journalism has traditionally ignored or stereotyped. Some news organizations rely on community advisory boards. Others collaborate with community nonprofits on events or charitable projects. Still others have established new neighborhood beats – more on that a bit further

on. The goal of all these efforts is inclusive and responsive coverage of all aspects of your community.

3.

Create a clear and consistent policy to guide your journalists' social media and political activity

What is the right relationship between an open and inclusive newsroom culture and the freedom journalists have to express their opinions on social media or participate in political events, like rallies or protests? It's not an easy question to answer.

On social media policy, the principal authors of this report fall on the conservative (small "c") end of the spectrum, as do many of the news leaders whom we interviewed. Our view is that allowing journalists to express opinions on controversial social and political issues erodes the perception of fairness and open-mindedness – of "trustworthiness." We don't buy the argument made by some that personal social media

feeds should be exempt from the newsroom's policies. The journalist is a representative of the news organization no matter what the platform or venue and gives up some personal rights to free expression as a result.

Participation in political rallies or protests is a trickier issue. It is obviously simplest to ban all political activity other than voting, as some leading organizations do, but we found inconsistencies among the newsrooms we studied and no firm consensus on where to draw the line. Again, the issue is maintaining the trust of the news consumer without overly or arbitrarily restricting the ability of your journalists to "be themselves."

And all that said, some mission-driven news organizations may well choose to allow social media and political activity consistent with their core values. (We'll say more about "newsroom values" in a moment.)

The key is to articulate and communicate your policy clearly; expect to address gray areas; enforce your policy fairly and consistently; and be prepared to reinforce it from time to time. It may be wise to assign a senior executive to whom employees can turn for guidance. As the saying goes, "it's complicated."

4.

Focus on enterprise, investigative, and accountability reporting

Channel your resources into original reporting that gives your readers, viewers, listeners and users valuable information that helps them make better decisions and lead better lives. Try to add value with every story you report.

Investigative and accountability reporting should focus on all aspects of American life, not just politics and power. Your newsroom's agenda should be driven not just by the quest for journalistic glory but by a deep understanding of your various communities' priorities and needs.

Consider bringing back or expanding the beat system in your newsroom, even if it's a smaller operation where reporters may have to cover other assignments as well. Journalists on a beat develop unique expertise, come up with original story ideas, and connect more deeply with the people they cover.

Think about creating new beats, like the democracy beat, or restoring old

ones, like the labor beat, again based on what the people you serve care about most.

Consider collaborations with other news organizations – particularly niche newsrooms with deep expertise on a particular subject – as well as nonprofits like [ProPublica](#) and [Report for America](#) – to deepen your reporting. A growing number of newsrooms are working with [Solutions Journalism Network](#) to investigate potential solutions to society's most pressing issues.

5.

Show your work

It's no accident that "transparency" has become a watchword if not a tired cliché in talking about how to increase trust in news. Sharing your newsgathering and editorial processes may not come naturally, but it can be an effective way to build a stronger connection with skeptical consumers. Digital platforms make it easy to share additional information without breaking the flow of a story.

We are not suggesting that you share every newsroom debate about coverage or the role of identity and life experience in assignments.

In fact, the open culture we described earlier will be a "safe space" to the extent that candid conversations stay in the newsroom. But trustworthy news doesn't happen by magic, and reporting about the hard work of reporting can be a good way to demonstrate open-mindedness, fairness, and a commitment to accuracy. Journalists in many popular podcasts detail their reporting methods already, to good effect.

When appropriate, explain the genesis of stories and open a window into newsroom decision-making. Consider providing access to raw materials and other sources when it doesn't jeopardize confidentiality.

If your news organization has a mission statement, share it. The same goes for your news standards: publish them.

Hold yourself and your news organization accountable for errors, and correct them promptly and prominently.

Consider hiring a "public editor" or ombudsman to address concerns about coverage. At a minimum, and consistently with our recommendation of a more open newsroom culture, we suggest you name a newsroom executive whose

job it is to field complaints and questions.

Another collaboration to consider: The nonprofit **Trusting News** has a broad set of recommendations and offers workshops to help newsrooms build trust through transparency.

6.

Define your newsroom's core values – and live by them

It may seem difficult to reconcile the notion of a newsroom having “core values” with an absence of bias, which research consistently shows is a high priority for news consumers. There is a difference between having a “point of view” and engaging in advocacy journalism, although defining that line can be tricky. We are leery of claims by some journalists to have “moral clarity” on controversial issues. But every newsroom has essential premises and assumptions that shape story selection and reporting.

For example, there is broad consensus today about the reality

of climate change and the threats that it poses. That may well inform how many resources a newsroom devotes to reporting on the issue as well as any point of view its stories reflect. The same might go for opposition to systemic racism, say, or support for LGBTQ rights.

Should a newsroom state what it believes in and make those views public?

We leave that choice to the individual news organization, but in keeping with our support of an inclusive and open newsroom culture, we recommend engaging in a structured but candid conversation with your team about the core beliefs that guide your journalism. To the extent that your values and editorial priorities influence story selection, weight, placement, framing of issues, and even tone, acknowledging that may create a more authentic connection among your journalists and with your public.

One value we believe is worth stating out loud is support for democratic institutions, which are under attack on multiple fronts. Trustworthy news is essential to sustaining a healthy democracy.





Conclusion



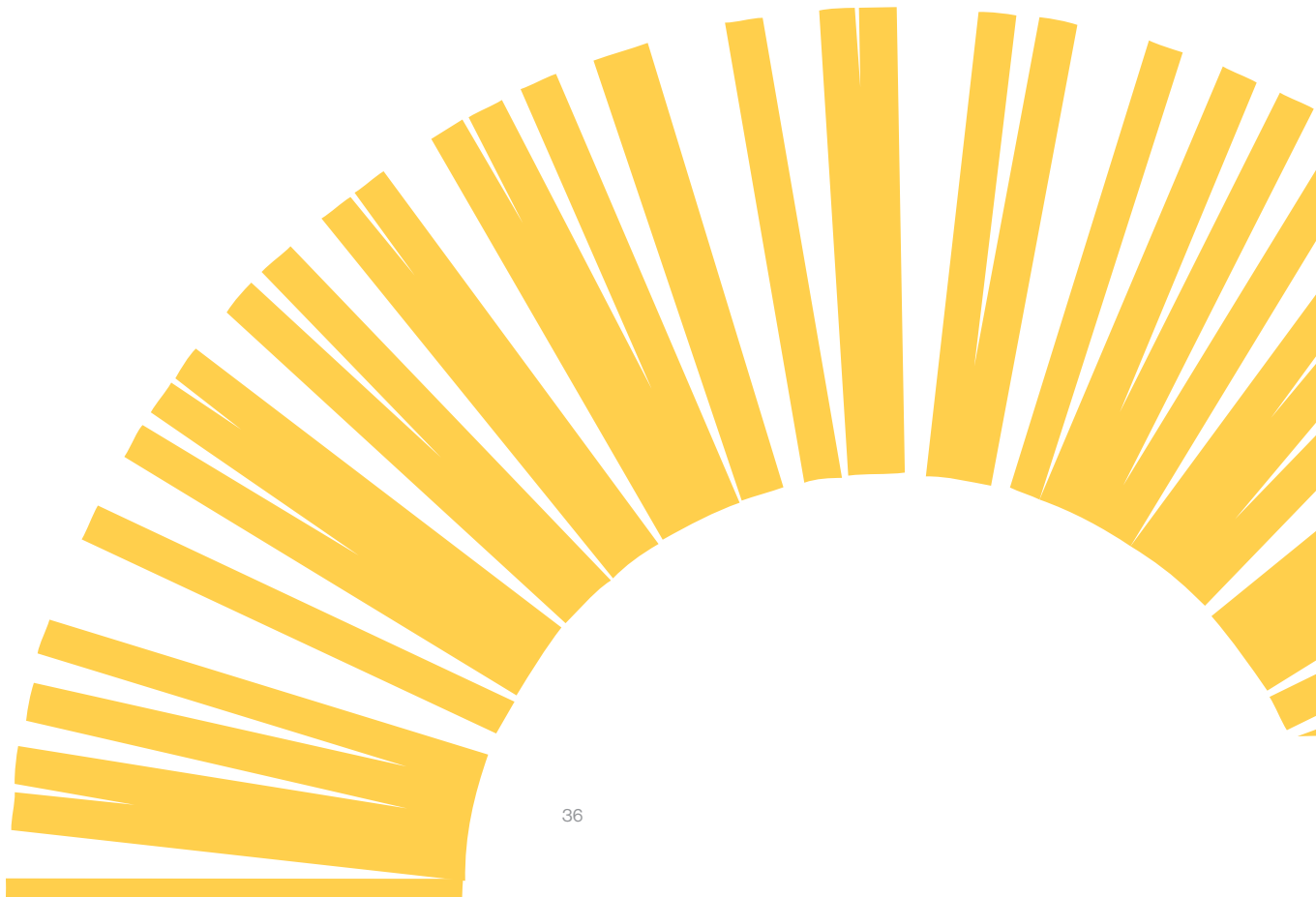
What we hope ties these guidelines together is our own core belief that journalism must address the needs and aspirations of our increasingly diverse society more effectively than it has in the past.

That means striving to reach not only an audience, but all audiences, and no longer with one-size-fits-all, traditionally white male “objectivity,” a journalistic concept that has lost its relevance. It means avoiding replacing that with some new rigid orthodoxy, which could also impede accurate and fair reporting. It means building a newsroom that reflects the communities it serves and embraces diversity to provide strong, more accurate and responsible journalism.

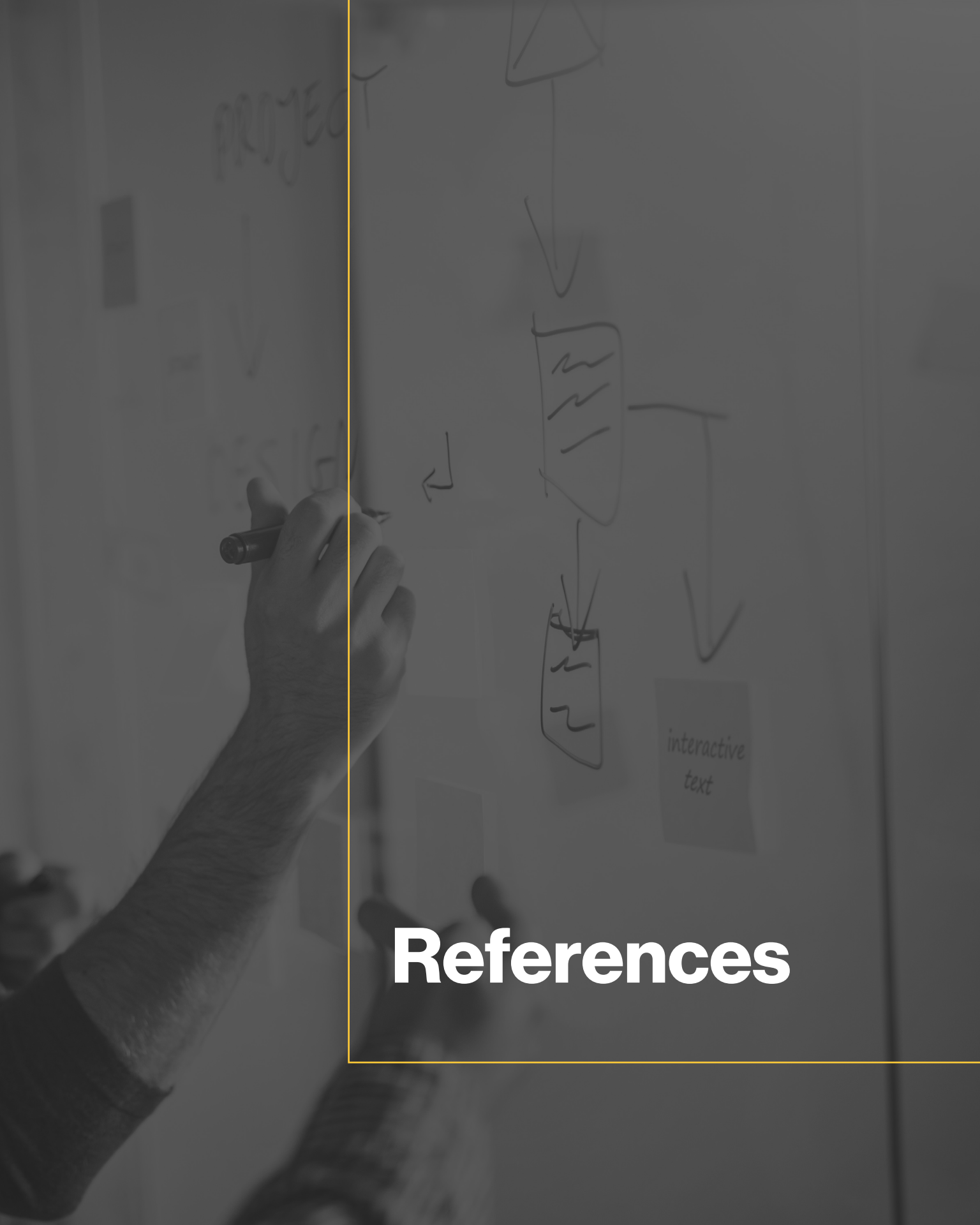
Producing trustworthy news for the communities of today requires a new kind of news leader, committed to the kind of newsroom we have described and confident enough to replace yesterday’s top-down model with an inclusive culture in which ideas can bubble up from anywhere – and the best of them can flourish.

One of the ironies we have observed is that journalists, who cover change for a living, are often change-averse themselves. We live in a time when the business and practice of journalism are under threat from economic and political forces. Meeting that challenge will require the courage to contemplate change, some of it incremental, some of it fundamental.

The stakes are high, but so is the potential to strengthen and even transform an institution that is vital to the survival of America as we know it.







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Events

Columbia School of Journalism. (2022, Sept. 13) The Objectivity Wars: Finding a path forward for journalism. Participants: Masha Gessen, David Greenberg, Wesley Lowery, Andie Tucher, Lewis Raven Wallace. Moderator: Kyle Pope
<https://youtu.be/GS0G97eEKb4>

Knight Foundation (2022, July 7) Signal and Noise: Trust and Polarization. Panelists: Wesley Lowery, Femi Oke, Gerald Seib. Moderator: Gina Chau.
<https://youtu.be/PlqfD2oOK6c>

Washington Post Live (2022, June 17). Reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein discuss the 50th anniversary of the Watergate break-in, how they got the story and its lasting impact.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mgCgOOCmUQ>

About the authors



Leonard Downie, Jr., the Weil Family Professor of Journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, started at

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About the Cronkite School

The Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University is widely recognized as one of the nation's premier professional journalism programs and has received international acclaim for its innovative use of the “teaching hospital” model. Rooted in the time-honored values that characterize its namesake — accuracy, responsibility, objectivity, integrity — the school fosters journalistic excellence and ethics in both the classroom and in its 13 professional programs that fully immerse students in the practice of journalism and related fields. Arizona PBS, one of the nation's largest public television stations, is part of Cronkite, making it the largest media outlet operated by a journalism school in the world. Learn more at cronkite.asu.edu.

About the Stanton Foundation

The Stanton Foundation was created by Frank Stanton, who is widely regarded as one of the greatest executives in the history of electronic communications and one of the television industry's founding fathers. Dr. Stanton served as president of CBS for over 30 years. He created the first televised presidential debate, between Kennedy and Nixon, which is widely viewed as having had a major impact on the outcome of the election.

The Foundation supports areas in which Frank Stanton wished to continue his philanthropy beyond his lifetime. Those areas include protection of First Amendment rights and creating a more informed citizenry.



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