

From Covering Protests to Having Their Say: Racial and Cultural Shifts in American Newsrooms ¹

Introduction

As COVID-19 exposed the racial, ethnic and class inequities in the United States in 2020, the police murder of George Floyd on May 25 of that year and similar killings of other Black Americans led to a summer of street protests across America as part of the Black Lives Matter movement.

The coverage of these protests and demonstrations also spurred a racial reckoning in major U.S. newsrooms. In the first week of June, executives at newspapers in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and New York saw their staffs challenge their authority and cause shakeups in their newsrooms. Through internal communications and meetings, public statements, opinion pieces and organized protests, Black journalists in particular denounced the flaws they saw in mainstream protest coverage and called out racial injustices within the profession itself.

U.S. newsrooms began integrating in earnest after the 1968 Kerner Commission Report chastised the news industry for its white-centric coverage of racial protests and the plight of Black Americans. While their numbers dramatically increased, Black journalists have long expressed frustration regarding their treatment in newsrooms.² To this day, journalists of color, especially women, still trail in media jobs, with their numbers dropping off significantly at each higher level of leadership.³

In the summer of 2020, many Black journalists took a stand against long-standing newsroom practices. They challenged the profession's devotion to a perceived color-blind "objectivity," which many saw as protecting white patriarchy in the newsroom.⁴

After decades of trying, Black journalists convinced the industry that being Black represents a cultural standing worthy of a capitalized B. The Associated Press, the standard-bearer for style usage in U.S. journalism, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times and Washington Post as well as countless smaller outlets began capitalizing the B when referring to Black people around the world. Sarah Glover, a Black journalist at NBC and a former president of the National Association of Black Journalists, was a prominent voice who argued for capitalization. "This step is a good first step to affirm the significance of being Black in America," Glover wrote. "How may the journalism community hold the powerful to account without an internal review of its very own practices? The press must work to be sure all its habits are fair and equitable. Capitalizing the 'B' in Black to describe people and the community is a fitting first step."⁵

Newsrooms found themselves in the awkward position of covering and sometimes acknowledging their internal racial issues. In his New York Times' Media Equation column, Ben Smith traced this reckoning to the 2014 police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the mistreatment of Black journalists covering the protests that followed. Smith wrote, "Now, as America is wrestling with the surging of a moment that began in August 2014, its biggest newsrooms are trying to find common ground between a tradition that aims to persuade the widest possible audience that its reporting is neutral and journalists who believe that fairness on issues from race to Donald Trump requires clear moral calls."⁶

In 2020, the question of who led such discussions and made newsroom decisions was scrutinized. For instance, even though journalists of color could have been expected to offer authoritative reporting and storytelling on

COVID-19, which had especially devastated communities of color, research found that stories being told and experts being quoted were predominantly white and male, an example of the inequity of American news coverage.⁷

Industry-gathered data confirmed that few journalists of color often were at the table for newsroom decisions. Based on the respondents to a 2019 American Society of News Editors diversity survey, conducted in 2018, the number of organizations with at least one nonwhite person in one of the top three newsroom leadership roles fell from 27.8 percent in the previous survey to 26.4 percent. The decline in print/digital newsrooms dropped from 28.1 percent to 25.6 percent. In online-only newsrooms, the nonwhite leadership rose from 28 to 29 percent. The report on the survey added: “Overall, people of color make up only 18.8 percent of newsroom managers at both print/digital and online-only publications. Forty percent of management roles are filled by women among organizations that participated in the 2019 survey.”⁸ At the same time, the Women’s Media Center reported women of color represent just 7.95 percent of U.S. print newsroom staff, 12.6 percent of local TV news staff and 6.2 percent of local radio staff.⁹

The newly formed News Leaders Association, formed by the merger of the American Society of News Editors and the Associated Press Media Editors, put the annual study on hold after years of low response rates. The newspaper editors group began demographic surveys in 1978 and in 1998 had abandoned its goal of diversity parity in newsrooms by 2000.¹⁰

Still, Black journalists, alone or with allies, found ways to speak out in their newsrooms and give voice to their values.

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: Two Tweets, Two Different Decisions

Executive editor Keith Burris was already a controversial leader at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. As editorial editor in 2018, he had angered the staff with an editorial defending President Donald Trump’s comment about immigrants from “shithole countries” and arguing that “calling someone a racist is the new McCarthyism.” He contended the label should be confined to the likes of Bull Connor and Dylann Roof. He added: “There *are* nations that are hellholes in this world.”¹¹

In early June 2020, Burris’ leadership and the Post-Gazette’s newsroom practices came under more intense national scrutiny. Its editors barred one of its few Black reporters, Alexis Johnson, from reporting on Floyd protests after one of her tweets mockingly compared a disordered scene after a country music concert to perceived looting.¹²

“For my credibility to be called into question because of the tweet was very disheartening,” Johnson said after her reassignment became national news. “Black people have been covering these stories for centuries, for decades. We have felt the trauma, but we are still going to work, and we have been able to do that job accurately and fairly.”¹³ Editors also pulled Black photographer Michael Santiago off protest coverage for retweeting Johnson’s comments. Editors accused the two of being biased on protests.¹⁴

The same editors only admonished a white reporter, Joshua Axelrod, who had tweeted in support of Johnson and also tweeted a vulgarity about a man suspected of looting. He was allowed to report on the protests the next day. Axelrod was vocal about the unequal treatment. “I asked them if I was being punished or not,” Axelrod later said about his editors. “They basically said, ‘No, this is just a teaching moment.’”¹⁵

The paper’s union, the Newspaper Guild of Pittsburgh, filed a grievance. After many Post-Gazette journalists protested online to support Johnson and Santiago, editors removed from the newspaper’s website the protest-related content of some guild members who posted their solidarity.

Burris defended his actions in a front-page opinion piece, accusing the guild of calling “racism as a tactic in a

labor dispute, and that is repugnant.” He wrote that the issue was journalistic ethics, not race: “Because fairness, removal of bias, removal of even the hint of conflict of interest is our gold standard — all we really have as journalists.”¹⁶ Burris later appeared on Laura Ingraham’s Fox News show to blame “the Twitter mob” for turning the paper’s dispute into national news and unfairly casting him as a racist.¹⁷

Johnson responded to Burris on Twitter, writing that his piece missed the mark “when it comes to race-related issues in the newsroom” and “any leader who looks to gaslight its personnel when confronted with challenges to managerial decisions is not fit to remain in a position of power.”¹⁸ She later filed a lawsuit charging racial discrimination and illegal retaliation before landing a job at Vice. Santiago accepted a buyout and left the newspaper for Getty Images. On Sept. 5, the Post-Gazette announced that Burris was no longer executive editor and would oversee opinion coverage for the Post-Gazette and The Blade in Toledo, Ohio. His replacement was Stan J. Wischnowski, who had recently resigned as top editor at The Philadelphia Inquirer after that newsroom’s revolt over protest coverage.¹⁹ More on that controversy in this case.

Los Angeles Times’ ‘Summer of Turmoil’

The Los Angeles Times seemed to be reclaiming its journalistic prestige under executive editor Norm Pearlstine. But questions dogged its newsroom, especially regarding the treatment of journalists of color, and at least one veteran reporter contemplated filing suit for equal pay.²⁰ As protests roiled America in the summer of 2020, LAT film reporter Sonaiya Kelley used the newsroom’s internal Slack channel in early June to chastise editors for using its protest coverage to focus on looting: “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.”²¹

During a four-hour meeting in June, Black and Latinx Times staffers told Pearlstine of past and present mistreatments.²² Pearlstine, who is white, promised in a staff memo to review the protest coverage and to hire more Black journalists.²³ In early October, Pearlstine’s newsroom published an article headlined “L.A. Times shaken by a summer of turmoil and scandals.”²⁴ A few days later, Pearlstine announced he would be stepping down as editor. In May 2021, Kevin Merida, an African American and longtime journalist and news leader, was named executive editor. His portfolio includes high-profile and award-winning journalism on race and culture.²⁵

Crumbling Wall Between News and Opinion Desks

The opinion pages at major newsrooms usually have separate editing desks that are considered outside the purview of the rest of the staff. But in the summer of 2020, journalists in many sections criticized work appearing in their opinion pages, leading to newsroom shakeups. The newsroom reactions showed how these journalists believed their voice mattered, no matter where content was produced.

The Wall Street Journal faced internal criticism for a May 2020 column, “The Often Distorted Reality of Hate Crime in America,” by Gerard Baker, the white editor-at-large and former editor-in-chief.²⁶ The Journal’s union wrote an open letter to newsroom leaders complaining that Baker’s tweets did not meet the standards for journalists on the news side; he was allowed to write pieces for other publications, while the rest of the staff was not. The Wall Street Journal reassigned him to the opinion department.²⁷

At the same time, dozens of Philadelphia Inquirer journalists staged a walkout after the headline “Buildings Matter, Too” ran on a June 2 opinion piece by its architecture critic.²⁸ The Philadelphia Inquirer’s executive editor, Wischnowski, soon resigned. Inquirer journalist Diane Mastrull, leader of the NewsGuild of Greater Philadelphia, then wrote to union members: “To my colleagues of color, please take heart that you have been heard. But you must not grow silent. There is much within the Inquirer that still needs to change.”²⁹

In early September, Wischnowski, who is white, became the top editor at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, which

had its own newsroom reckoning earlier in the summer. The article announcing his hiring did not mention why he had resigned from *The Inquirer*.³⁰

A New York Times Opinion Piece and a Newsroom Revolt

Perhaps the most-covered newsroom shakeup occurred at venerable *The New York Times*, another case of newsroom staffers swiftly condemning content on opinion pages. At the *Times*, the editorial page editor has a lower public profile but equal rank with the executive editor. James Bennet, the *Times*' editorial page editor, was in the midst of a controversial tenure because of three hires, including one writer who lasted less than one day after her biased social media posts were found online.³¹

But Bennet was thrust into the national spotlight in the aftermath of an opinion piece by Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Arkansas, that had been published online June 3, a Wednesday. The senator urged for “an overwhelming show of force” by allowing the *National Guard* to help local law enforcement stop lawbreakers during the protests of police killings.³² News reports, including one from the *Times* that evening, noted that Cotton had made false claims, including that the leftist group Antifa had infiltrated the protests. *Times* journalists, as well as readers, called the rhetoric inflammatory. In spite of being warned of the publication's social media guidelines, many *Times* staffers tweeted: “Running this puts Black @nytimes staffers in danger.”³³ The paper's union added: “Invoking state violence disproportionately hurts Black and brown people. It also jeopardizes our journalists' ability to work in the field safely and effectively.”³⁴

Bennet, who initially had the support of the publisher, A.G. Sulzberger, defended the Cotton editorial, first on Twitter then with his own opinion piece on June 4. Regarding the safety of “our African American colleagues,” he wrote: “There's no concern I could take more seriously than that.” Still, he insisted, “Debating influential ideas openly, rather than letting them go unchallenged, is far more likely to help society reach the right answers.”³⁵ On Thursday, more than a dozen staffers called in sick in protest—the same time the *Philadelphia Inquirer* staff had called in sick over the headline “Buildings Matter, Too” on an architecture commentary.³⁶ By Thursday evening, the *Times* reversed its position on the soundness of the piece. Eileen Murphy, a *Times* spokeswoman, said: “We've examined the piece and the process leading up to its publication. This review made clear that a rushed editorial process led to the publication of an op-ed that did not meet our standards.”³⁷

On Thursday night and the next day, June 5, Sulzberger and Bennet met with the newsroom, with Bennet acknowledging some journalistic mistakes and saying he had not read the Cotton piece before its publication. On June 5, the *Times*' editorial page added an unusual, five-paragraph editor's note to the Cotton piece, stating that it had not met editorial standards.

On Sunday, June 7, four days after the Cotton piece had been published online, the *Times* announced Bennet's resignation. James Dao, deputy editorial page director who took responsibility for overseeing the op-ed, was reassigned to the newsroom.³⁸ The Cotton opinion piece never appeared in print.

During the tense week, *The New York Times Co.*'s thousands of employees held conversations about the situation via Slack. “It was a remarkable outpouring of not just feeling, a lot of serious thinking about what the incident meant to the newsroom, to the institution, and to the people involved in it,” *Times* reporter John Schwartz said during a University of Texas at Austin alumni event a week after the op-ed had been posted. The discussions led to broader conversations about race in the *Times* newsroom.³⁹

Conclusion

In early June 2020, advocacy by newsroom staff members gave voice to the concerns Black journalists have about coverage and their profession. This vocal dissent led to leadership changes at top publications.

A year after the protests, one major news outlet gave more latitude to its journalists as individual citizens. NPR updated its [ethics policy](#) in July 2021 to allow its journalists to participate in activities that advocate for "the freedom and dignity of human beings" on both social media and in real life. According to its own release, the new policy "eliminates the blanket prohibition from participating in 'marches, rallies and public events,' as well as vague language that directed NPR journalists to avoid personally advocating for 'controversial' or 'polarizing' issues."⁴⁰

The question remains whether journalists will gain more agency and spur fundamental changes in newsrooms. Through their newsrooms, can they impact how race is covered, how staffers are treated and how Black journalists navigate journalism with authenticity while speaking truth to power?

¹This case study was written by Adrienne Grubic and Dr. Kathleen McElroy for the purpose of discussion.

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¹³ Ryan Deto, "Interview: Alexis Johnson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reporter barred from protest coverage, shares gratitude for overwhelming support from allies." Pittsburgh City Paper, June 7, 2020, <https://www.pghcitypaper.com/pittsburgh/interview-alexis-johnson-pittsburgh-post-gazette-reporter-barred-from-protest-coverage-shares-gratitude-for-overwhelming-support-from-allie/Content?oid=17419732>

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