

# *The Investigative Reporters & Editors Journal*

FIRST ISSUE 2020

## **PUBLICATION WITHOUT REPRESENTATION**

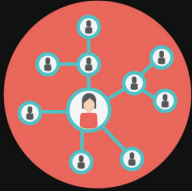
Our diversity  
problems stretch  
back decades



**“The way  
to right  
wrongs is  
to turn the  
light of truth  
upon them.”**

**– IDA B. WELLS**

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# IRE Journal

FIRST QUARTER 2020

Nadia Mohamed made history in November 2019 by becoming the first Somali elected to the city council of St. Louis Park, Minnesota. DYMANH CHHOUN / SAHAN JOURNAL

## DIVERSITY & INCLUSION

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# A look at IRE's diversity stats

For IRE to thrive, we need to keep improving diversity and inclusion in all that we do. We've made serious strides but have much further to go together.

In the past year, we've launched several initiatives. Our new IRE Journalist of Color Investigative Reporting Fellowship is entering its second year, with three fellowships awarded — up from one during the first year. We've also kicked off our new IRE on Campus program, with support for educators of color as well as Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Given that it's census season, we could use your help in updating your IRE member profile. If you haven't done so, please update your race/ethnicity in your IRE profile. Click "My Profile" on the left rail. Then click "Edit Profile" (the first tab on the top left).

Every member counts, and we want to be sure we have accurate information for everyone. ♦



**Doug Haddix**  
Executive  
Director of IRE  
and NICAR

doug@ire.org,  
573-882-1984 or  
on Twitter  
@DougHaddix

## IRE LEADERSHIP & STAFF

As of Jan. 1, 2020, journalists of color were represented among staff and leadership in the following ways:

**2 of 13**

board members. Cheryl W. Thompson is IRE's first black board president.

Representation on

**8 of 8**

board committees

**3 of 7**

contest judges

**21 of 58**

contest screeners

At least

**40%**

of regional planning  
committees for NICAR20  
and IRE20

**1 of 12**

full-time IRE staff members

## CONFERENCE SPEAKERS

At NICAR19 in  
Newport Beach:

**30%**

journalists of color

**50%**

women

At IRE19 in Houston:

**30%**

journalists of color

**59%**

women

## MANAGING EDITOR

Sarah Hutchins

## ART DIRECTOR

Larry Buchanan

## CONTRIBUTING LEGAL EDITOR

Sam Terilli

## EDITORIAL ASSOCIATES

Jessica Blake, Victoria Cheyne, Emily Wolf

## COVER ART

Anja Slibar

## IRE

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Doug Haddix

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Jennifer LaFleur, Investigative Reporting  
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Steven Rich, The Washington Post

Brian M. Rosenthal, The New York Times

Norberto Santana Jr., Voice of OC

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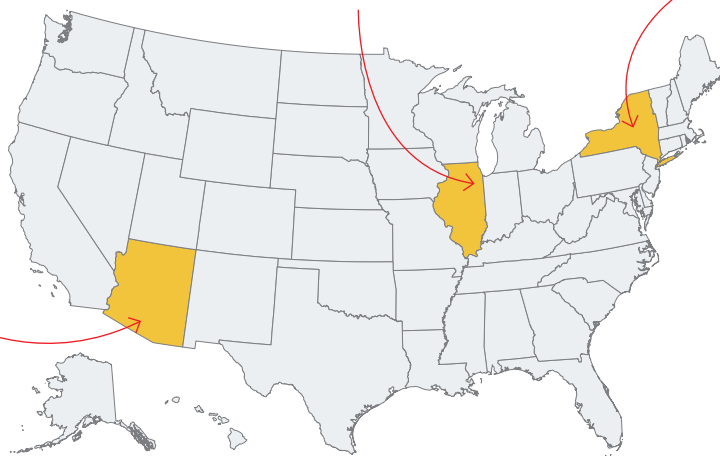
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**Chicago**  
Summer 2020

**Syracuse**  
Summer 2021

**Tucson**  
Jan. 2021



## Locations announced for IRE educator bootcamps

IRE will provide coast-to-coast training opportunities for college educators and students as part of the new IRE on Campus program.

Educator bootcamps supported by Lumina Foundation and Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University will take place at Loyola University in Chicago July 28 – Aug. 1, 2020, the University of Arizona in Tucson Jan. 5-9, 2021 and Syracuse University in summer 2021.

Each bootcamp will include four-and-a-half days of data training for college journalism educators. They will receive hands-on training, as well as assistance with syllabus creation and teaching skills. No data journalism experience or data teaching experience is necessary.

Scholarships (including tuition, travel and lodging) will be available for 10 educators of color to attend each bootcamp. Approximately 10 additional slots will be available for other college educators at each training.

Get more information on the bootcamps at [bit.ly/edu-bootcamp](http://bit.ly/edu-bootcamp). ♦

## Consider running for the IRE Board, Contest Committee

Starting in April, IRE will begin accepting applications for candidates for the IRE Board of Directors. This year seven of the board's 13 seats are up for election.

The initial filing period for candidates is April 6 - May 8. All candidates filing by this time will appear on the initial ballot when voting begins May 19.

You'll also be voting for two members of IRE's Contest Committee, which judges the IRE Awards. Those interested in judging will apply using the same procedure as IRE Board candidates and will be selected on the same ballot.

More details are available on the IRE website at [bit.ly/ireboard2020](http://bit.ly/ireboard2020). ♦

## Announcing the 2019 Philip Meyer Award winners

A sophisticated investigation that used machine learning to track hidden evidence connected to the opioid epidemic is the first-place winner in the 2019 Philip Meyer Journalism Awards. Other top awards go to investigations that uncovered substantial fire risks to communities in the West and tracked the causes of a refugee crisis in South Sudan.

First place is awarded to Reuters for "Hidden Injustice."

Second place is awarded to The Arizona Republic and the USA TODAY Network for "Ahead of the Fire."

Third place is awarded to "Forced Out: Measuring the scale of the conflict in South Sudan," by Al Jazeera and supported by Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting, African Defence Review and Code for Africa.

An honorable mention goes to "Heat and Health in American Cities" by NPR / "Code Red: Baltimore's Climate Divide" from The Howard Center For Investigative Journalism and Capital News Service at the University Of Maryland with additional work done by WMAR-TV and Wide Angle Youth Media.

Learn more about the winning stories at [bit.ly/meyerwinner2019](http://bit.ly/meyerwinner2019). ♦



**Philip Meyer Award**

Whether you're reporting from your car or sharing your work on social, these tools will help your investigations shine online.

# Digital first

## SHARING ON SOCIAL

### Audiogram

[getaudiogram.com](http://getaudiogram.com)

Free, but paid options get you more posts per month

A whopping 85 percent of Facebook videos are watched without sound. That's a challenge for journalists who work in radio or create podcasts. Audiogram allows you to easily caption your podcast teasers to increase audience engagement. Compatible with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and LinkedIn, Audiogram is easy to use and produces a shareable video in minutes. With a free membership, users are allowed two posts per month, but paid options with more posts are also available.

### Data GIF Maker

[datagifmaker.withgoogle.com](http://datagifmaker.withgoogle.com)

Free

This free Google News Lab tool allows you to create a simple animated graphic based on data. Google provides three different styles of graphics, all compatible with social media sites. Select your style, plug in your data, create your labels and you're ready to post.

### Fyuse

[fyu.se](http://fyu.se)

Free

Is there something about your story that's too complex to be captured with a basic photo? Fyuse allows you to create interactive 3D images by fusing together photos from multiple angles. It allows viewers to get a better sense of the space by tilting or swiping their phone. Fyuse easily connects to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, allowing you to share your story with a click.

## REPORTING ON THE GO

### BOYA BY-M1 Lavalier Microphone

[bit.ly/boya-mic](http://bit.ly/boya-mic)

\$20 on Amazon

This mic is compatible with smartphones through a standard 3.5 mm headphone jack or adapter, making it great for portable use. It comes with an omnidirectional condenser microphone, which produces high-quality sound on the go. With a price tag of \$20 on Amazon, this tool is easily accessible and affordable.

### FilMiC Pro

[filmicpro.com](http://filmicpro.com)

\$14.99

This app will help you turn your Apple or Android device into an advanced video camera. FilMiC Pro allows you to manually control features like focus, exposure, white balance and audio gain that you can't adjust as precisely in a general camera app. It allows you to film with customizable precision anytime, anywhere.

### 5-o Radio Police Scanner

[bit.ly/policeradio](http://bit.ly/policeradio)

Free; pay to remove advertisements

Available for Apple and Android devices, this app gives you a police scanner wherever you go. It offers more than 5,000 live feeds and covers police, fire and EMS channels. Search for channels by county or use location services to find channels near you. Save your favorites and play them in the background while you work. You'll be the first to know the latest updates.

## Journalists share their favorite mobile tools

### MARTINE POWERS

*The Washington Post*

To me, automated transcription is a game-changer for journalism. It's obviously a hugely important tool in daily news podcasting (my current job), but it's also extremely helpful in day-to-day reporting. And I am ride-or-die for **Trint** ([trint.com](https://trint.com)), a subscription service starting at \$48/month if billed annually.

When I covered breaking news, I got into the habit of recording all my interviews on my phone and then immediately pressing "upload" in the Trint mobile app. Trint would process the recordings while I was en route back to the newsroom. By the time I sat down at my desk, I would have a rough transcript of my interviews. As I wrote, I could check my notes for highlights and easily "Control-F" in Trint to search for a word or phrase to find the exact quote.

It's also great to have the transcripts of your interviews in an easy-to-access place on your phone. If the copy desk calls late at night, you can quickly jump into the Trint app, search for the details in question and listen back to double-check that what you heard was correct. It's magic.



### ALAN YU

*WHYY (Philadelphia)*

I like **Simplenote** ([simplenote.com](https://simplenote.com)) because it handles text with a simple interface. This is important for me when I'm in the field for a long time and have to type and file complete stories using just my phone.

For example, I covered the 2014 Umbrella Movement protests in Hong Kong for the South China Morning Post without a computer or tablet. For months I wrote all my notes and stories on an iPhone. I really saw the benefit of a note-taking app without complicated buttons and functions that can clutter a small screen.

In Simplenote, everything is easily searchable. The app has version tracking, so I can go back and find things I deleted by mistake. Plus it syncs across devices, and it's free.



# School's out

Weather and natural disasters can prompt schools to shut their doors, affecting parents, teachers and students. We asked two newsrooms to share how they used data to dig into closures.

**Intermediate Level** Andrew Ujifusa and Maya Riser-Kositsky, *Education Week*

After Hurricane Maria ravaged Puerto Rico in 2017, a team of journalists at Education Week used data to show how students, teachers and parents would be affected by a policy decision to consolidate public schools — many damaged by the storm.

Reporter Andrew Ujifusa traveled to Puerto Rico in late 2017 to report on the education system in the wake of Hurricane Maria. But it wasn't until the following spring that officials announced they'd be closing and consolidating hundreds of schools on the island.

Storm damage played a role in the decision, but the school system had been struggling with falling enrollment and budget woes long before Maria. The Puerto Rico Department of Education said it would close nearly 25 percent of its public schools — 263 buildings — before the start of the 2018-2019 school year.

"It was a big shock to the system," Ujifusa said, and one of the most tangible consequences of Hurricane Maria.

Education Week saw data viz as a way to make the numbers connect with readers. Students and teachers would be displaced. How far would they have to travel to get to their new buildings?

They requested data from the Puerto Rico Department of Education detailing which schools were closing and where those students would be placed. Initially, the department provided school names and a general location (a town or city).

The team repeatedly ran into problems stemming from the limited capacity of the education department. "What you would expect a state to

have in terms of basic information about things like schools, that doesn't exist in Puerto Rico to the same extent," Ujifusa said.

To measure the distance between schools, the team needed more precise locations. They scraped data from a map on the education department's website to generate building-specific addresses. But even the government's own data was flawed, said Maya Riser-Kositsky, a librarian and data specialist at Education Week.

While the department later provided the correct addresses, including latitude and longitude, the team struggled to get other basic data. Even the list of closing schools changed, Ujifusa said.

Once they had accurate data, Riser-Kositsky used Carto to draw lines between school pairs — a school that was closing and the building receiving the displaced students. But while Carto could draw a straight line between the two points and calculate the distance, it couldn't look at the distance by road. For that, Riser-Kositsky used a Google Maps API that calculates driving distance using latitude and longitude.

With the distance calculations complete, the team could analyze the average driving distance between school pairs (2.33 miles) and which grade levels would be most affected (grades K-5).

Education Week has continued to write about Puerto Rico's school system. In August 2018, Ujifusa went back to the island with photographers and videographers to see what had changed. They visited at least one school that received students after consolidation.

"It was a very obvious part of our coverage," Ujifusa said. "What is the actual school-level impact that these closures have had? ... And, not surprisingly, it wasn't a clean and easy experience for parents or for the school."

## Tools

Excel, Google Maps API, Carto

## Link

[bit.ly/PRschoolclosure](http://bit.ly/PRschoolclosure)



As wildfires spread across California in late 2018, CalMatters reporter Ricardo Cano noticed schools temporarily shutting their doors en masse. An analysis of more than a decade of school-closure data showed that since the 2002-2003 school year, California public schools have lost roughly 34,000 days to emergency closures.

After the Camp and Woolsey fires broke out, Ricardo Cano quickly calculated that more than 1 million public school students had been sent home.

Around the same time, state education officials asked schools to report their closings and seek a waiver that would protect their attendance-based funding. Cano did more research on the waivers and talked with officials. "I kind of got a sense that there was a way to quantify or calculate the impact of not only fires, but other disasters that impact schools," he said.

He put in a request for 20 years of school-closure records from the California Department of Education. Conversations with officials about how the data was collected prompted him to narrow his scope to 17 years. He received an Excel spreadsheet with one tab for each school year of data.

The spreadsheet contained numbers at the district level, but Cano wanted to look at individual schools. Senior developer John Osborn D'Agostino used a PHP script to reshape the data to focus on specific school buildings. The data also included the first seven digits of a 14-digit CDS code that identified school sites. The full CDS code (short for county, district, school) was essential for ensuring their analysis didn't duplicate schools.

To tally the number of students affected, Cano downloaded historical enrollment data from the

#### Tools

Excel, Gridoc, PHP,  
Google Sheets, Python  
(Flask)

#### Link

disasterdays.  
calmatters.org

state's website. He created his own unique ID code — a combination of the school year, CDS code and school name — that could connect enrollment data to closure data. Using his new relational field, he used an online program called Gridoc ([gridoc.com](http://gridoc.com)) to join the two data sets.

With data on enrollment and the length of each closure, they turned their focus to the cause of the closures. Cano learned that schools self-reported data to the state. "When we found that out, a kind of light bulb went off and we realized that we had to account for the potential human error in the records we got," he said.

The reasons for a school closure could be as general as "wildfire" or as specific as "There was a propane explosion," D'Agostino said.

They decided to break the reasons into categories including "wildfires," "infrastructure" and "natural disaster and weather." What seemed like an easy task quickly became complicated. Take power outages, for example. They initially placed those in their own bucket.

"But then there's wildfire-related power outages and there's weather-related power outages and then there's just (regular) power outages," D'Agostino said. "How do we determine whether that power outage counts as something else?"

Those questions lead to a lot of discussion and a shared methodology ([bit.ly/disaster-method](http://bit.ly/disaster-method)).

Cano used the data to identify the schools that missed the most instructional days because of fire-related closures. He drove to Clearlake, about two hours from Sacramento, to attend a school board meeting for the Konocti Unified School District. Schools there had lost 23 instructional days since the 2015-2016 school year, Cano found. He used the meeting to talk to parents and students, sharing his findings and learning about how the closures affected them.

To publish and visualize the data, D'Agostino and intern Mohamed Al Elew used Google Sheets and Flask, a Python web framework, to highlight trends by year and closure type. An interactive map allows users to search by school, district, county and closure category.

### Days lost to disasters in the 2018-2019 school year

TOTAL CLOSURE DAYS

4,898

SCHOOLS IMPACTED

2,262

STUDENTS IMPACTED

1,268,350

# You've got mail

Reaching people by snail mail takes longer than sending them an email or calling them, but the extra effort can lead to **committed sources who are ready to go on the record.**



We reached out to engagement reporter **Beena Raghavendran** and engagement reporting fellow **Maya Miller**, who work on ProPublica's Local Reporting Network, to learn about the letters they sent to more than 200 people, mostly in Memphis, Tennessee, who had been sued for unpaid bills. They considered their 10-source return rate a success. Remember: this approach is about quality over quantity.

1 Hello,

2 I'm Wendi Thomas, a reporter for MLK50.com, a nonprofit newsroom in Memphis, Tennessee. I'm working with Beena Raghavendran, a reporter at ProPublica, a national investigative newsroom. Our newsrooms are investigating systems that make it hard for workers in Memphis to get ahead.

3 You're getting this letter because we see in public records that you've been sued by Southeastern Emergency Physicians, a doctors group that files a large number of lawsuits here in Shelby County. We're not trying to sell you anything. We hope you'll help with a story we're reporting.

4 My research has found that hospitals such as Methodist and physician groups like Southeastern sue hundreds of people every year for unpaid bills. Some are really aggressive, pursuing patients although they know that many of them are low-income. They sometimes try to garnish deferred paychecks and even seize money directly from bank accounts.

5 To do investigations, we need help of people like you, people who have firsthand experience with these lawsuits and how it's affected their lives. Can you tell us a bit more about what you've experienced?

6 stories we've done in the past have sometimes led to real change: our investigation into Methodist's aggressive debt collection practices got the hospital to announce that it will stop suing its poorest patients and stop suing its own employees and garnishing their wages, and that it will stop collecting interest and attorney's fees on debt suits.

Please get in touch with us so we can talk. What you tell us will be used to guide our reporting, but you won't be quoted in any story without your permission. Here's what you can do:

EMAIL US at [redacted]

TEXT US at [redacted]

CALL Wendi at [redacted] or Beena at [redacted]

9 We promise not to share your contact information with third parties by choice.

To see other stories in this investigative series, go to <https://propub.li/memphis>

we hope to hear from you soon.

Thanks,

Wendi and Beena

## 1. Write at least one letter

Because they mailed more than 200 letters, Raghavendran and Miller hand-wrote two letters and photocopied them. Then their team personally addressed each envelope. The team wrote on behalf of MLK50 founder and reporter Wendi C. Thomas, who penned most of the articles in the investigative series.

## 2. Introduce yourself

Share your name and describe your news organization. Explain that you're a journalist and specify your beat or areas of coverage. You need to be credible and trustworthy.

## 3. Get to the point

If a stranger wrote you a seemingly random letter, you'd want to know why. Transparency is crucial. Explain who or what led you to the recipient and why he or she might be a good source. In Raghavendran and Miller's case, recipients were sued by a private-equity backed doctors group or another company and had high judgments as of 2019. Try to appeal to the recipient near the top of the letter.

## 4. Flesh out your story

In broad strokes, explain what you're currently investigating. Don't get bogged down by the details; you want the recipient to keep reading. Share what you already know or have learned from your reporting.

## 5. Tell them what you want

It's time for the crucial moment: asking for their help. ProPublica wanted to keep its ask broad and open-ended. You can drill into specifics later during follow-up phone calls with sources. "We wanted people to feel like they could share anything with us," Raghavendran said.

## 6. Explain how journalism can lead to change

The average person probably doesn't know the effects of powerful journalism. Try to illustrate how your story, which tells their story, can lead to change. Yes, you're asking for their help, but maybe you can make a difference for them and people like them, too. Don't promise that change will occur, but do explain the importance and potential impact of their contribution.

Thomas' earlier stories had already made an impact, and the ProPublica team wanted readers to know about that success. "It's another appeal for, 'Here's why you should share with us,'" Raghavendran said.

## 7. Share previous reporting

Generate a Bitly link and include it in your letter. These links are trackable, so you can see who's receiving the letters if they visit the link. Raghavendran and Miller said they didn't get many clicks, but it's still worth including. Don't make recipients work if they want to know more about your investigation or related stories.

## 8. Include a headshot

Include a page with your headshot and additional contact information or social media handles. Put a face with your name. This will help recipients see you as a real person, not a collection of words on a page. "We were trying to think of what would resonate with us," Raghavendran said.

## 9. Privacy disclosure

It's also a good idea to include a privacy statement. The one used in this letter is similar to the privacy statement ProPublica includes in online questionnaires. While it wasn't required, Raghavendran and Miller decided to include it to be transparent with potential sources. "We were asking people to share some deeply personal things with us, and so we wanted to make sure they had a full idea on what to expect from our end," Raghavendran said.

## Beyond the mailbox

### Connect in multiple ways

After mailing the letters, the team organized recipients' phone numbers and email addresses (found using Nexis and Pipl) in a spreadsheet and added links to their social media profiles. Raghavendran and Miller also posted their ask in graphics on social media and in relevant Facebook groups. They worked with MLK50 to post flyers around Memphis. The team emailed, texted and direct-messaged people before cold-calling, tracking every interaction in a spreadsheet.

### Be prepared to sell your editor on a letter-writing campaign

ProPublica's engagement reporting team regularly plans elaborate campaigns with "multiple touches" to reach sources. In a smaller newsroom, however, you might have to convince your editor that the time and resources spent sending letters won't be a waste. "The people that you end up connecting with through this are not only going to be potential sources for this story, but they'll also be people who will then read your work," Miller said.

### Get to know your audience

While Raghavendran and Miller sent letters, they also thoroughly researched the community. They used annual reports compiled by nonprofit hospitals and spoke with health partners who were aware of the community's medical issues, area pastors and nonprofit organizers. Part of this phase included considerable discussion about how to approach people dealing with a stigmatized issue that may make them feel ashamed, embarrassed or closed-off.



# Publication without representation

*It's been more than 50 years since the Kerner Commission criticized newsrooms for a lack of diversity. We've barely moved the needle.*

By **Ron Nixon**, The Associated Press

**I**n 1895, journalist Ida B. Wells dropped a bombshell investigation into the lynching of African Americans across the nation.

Using data she gathered from accounts in white newspapers — she said no one would believe her otherwise — “The Red Record” showed lynchings were not in response to rape of white women by black men, but often because the relationships were consensual. The lynchings also were used to remove economic competition from blacks, Wells found.

Similarly, during World War I, W.E.B. Du Bois received leaked documents from a source showing the American government had instructed the French to treat blacks the same way they were treated at home.

Later, in 1925, Charlotta Bass revealed in The California Eagle newspaper that the Ku Klux Klan not only infiltrated a local California police department, but also had several black ministers on its payroll.

Although each of these early investigations broke news important to communities of color, none appeared in a mainstream news outlet.

Throughout American history, white-owned media organizations have covered issues of race and discrimination. But when it came to their own hiring practices, they largely reflected society as a whole.

Few, if any, media organizations had people of color

President Lyndon B. Johnson meets with members of the National Newspaper Publishers Association in March 1965.

LBJ LIBRARY PHOTO BY CECIL STOUGHTON











**TOP:** Nikole Hannah-Jones of The New York Times Magazine delivers the 2017 IRE Conference keynote address. Hannah-Jones is a co-founder of the Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting.

**BOTTOM:** Knight Scholars attend a welcome lunch at the 2015 CAR Conference in Atlanta. The IRE scholarship program allowed college students from several Historically Black Colleges and Universities to attend IRE's annual conferences and receive mentorship.

on staff in the '40s, '50s and '60s as they tried to cover civil rights struggles and other issues related to race.

That would change in the aftermath of civil unrest in several major cities in the mid-to-late '60s. Most mainstream media organizations were caught off guard. Few, if any, had reporters with sources or familiarity with the communities of color affected.

A panel put together by President Lyndon B. Johnson called the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, commonly known as the Kerner Commission, pointed to widespread racism and discrimination as key factors in the unrest that erupted. It singled out the press with particular criticism. The 1968 report lambasted news organizations for their coverage of race and pointed out the lack of



diversity in America's newsrooms.

"The press has too long basked in a white world looking out of it, if at all, with white men's eyes and white perspective," the report found. "Our second and fundamental criticism is that the news media have failed to analyze and report adequately on racial problems in the United States and, as a related matter, to meet the Negro's legitimate expectations in journalism. By and large, news organizations have failed to communicate to both their black and white audiences a sense of the problems America faces and the sources of potential solutions."

The report concluded by calling for more inclusion of people of color in newsrooms: "News organizations must employ enough Negroes in positions of significant responsibility to establish an effective link to Negro actions and ideas and to meet legitimate employment expectations. Tokenism — the hiring of one Negro reporter, or even two or three — is no longer enough."

Over the next few decades, news organizations would begin to hire an increasing number of journalists of color. Yet more than 50 years after the Kerner Commission report's blistering criticism of media diversity, questions persist about newsroom staffing, said Farai Chideya, a program officer at the Ford Foundation, in a 2018 report about the continuing lack of diversity in newsrooms.

"The Kerner Commission Report was very prescient in the sense that it talked about equity, that people have a legitimate need for representation in the media as being part of a democracy," Chideya said on WDET's "Detroit To-

day” program. Her report ([bit.ly/chideya-report](https://bit.ly/chideya-report)) found that newsrooms have made little progress toward fixing staffing problems, which create blind spots in coverage of race and politics.

Increasing diversity in U.S. newsrooms has been a primary mission of the American Society of News Editors since 1978. But as Chideya’s research found, the effort to bring newsroom diversity numbers in line with national population averages “has not materialized, despite the large demographic shift in America’s racial and ethnic makeup.”

ASNE’s annual newsroom diversity survey shows Latinos and non-whites made up nearly 12 percent of newspaper editorial staff in 2000. In 2018, people of color comprised 22.6 percent of employees reported by all types of newsrooms, compared to 16.5 percent in 2017.

Among daily newspapers that responded to the survey, about 22.2 percent of employees were racial minorities (compared to 16.3 percent in 2017), and 25.6 percent of employees at online-only news websites were minorities (compared to 24.3 percent in 2017). Of all newsroom managers, 19 percent were minorities (compared to 13.4 percent in 2017).

People of color represent 22.6 percent of the workforce in U.S. newsrooms that responded to the survey. Yet people of color make up about 40 percent of the population, census data show.

ASNE noted it had historically low participation in the survey, which is now in its 40th year. Just 17 percent (293) of the 1,700 newsrooms submitted information. So, it’s impossible to get a full picture.

There are no comparable surveys for the racial makeup of investigative or project teams at major news outlets. Still, anecdotal evidence suggests they remain overwhelming white and male.

Recent hires or promotions at mainstream and nonprofit news outlets have increased the number of journalists of color in the field of investigative reporting in both management and reporting.

Susan Smith Richardson was hired as CEO of the Center for Public Integrity, and Matt Thompson was tapped as editor in chief of Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting. Both are the first African Americans to lead two of the country’s oldest nonprofit investigative news organizations.



*Ron Nixon is the international investigations editor at The Associated Press. He previously served as homeland security correspondent for The New York Times, where he worked for nearly 14 years. He is a former IRE training director and a co-founder of the Ida B. Wells Society.*

Patricia Wen made history by becoming the first person of color to lead the legendary Spotlight Team at the Boston Globe.

Dean Baquet, who made his reputation as an investigative reporter when he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988, is executive editor of The New York Times.

Several news organizations now feature young investigative reporters of color as part of their investigative or watchdog teams.

Reporters include Kat Stafford of the Detroit Free Press, whose reporting into city programs has led to investigations by auditors; Faith Abubéy, another young investigative reporter and anchor at NBC-Atlanta (11Alive), has broken several key stories, including investigations about sexual predators on college campuses; and Aura Bogado, a reporter for Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting, has broken several national immigration stories.

Despite these reporters and many others, the overall number of journalists of color in investigative reporting remains abysmally low.

Several journalism organizations are also trying to address the issue, including established organizations such as the Asian American Journalists Association, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Native American Journalists Association and the National Association of Black Journalists, led by President Dorothy Tucker, an investigative reporter for CBS 2 Chicago.

IRE, under the leadership of Board President Cheryl W. Thompson of NPR and Executive Director Doug Haddix, also has grown its efforts to diversify the field of investigative reporting. In recent years, IRE has expanded the number of fellowships and scholarships it offers to journalists of color to attend national conferences and weeklong data bootcamps. The organization launched a new yearlong Journalist of Color Investigative Reporting Fellowship and increased the number of journalists of color tapped to speak at conferences and regional workshops.

The Ida B. Wells Society, which I co-founded, was created specifically to address the lack of reporters of color in the field of investigative journalism.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, an investigative reporter for The New York Times Magazine and co-founder of the society, said one of the society’s missions is to “take away the excuse” by giving young journalists of color the tools and mentorship needed to be fully prepared for investigative reporting.

Despite these efforts, the decision to diversify news staffs ultimately rests with those who have hiring power in newsrooms. Diversity must be seen as more than a numbers game. The hiring and promotion of journalists of color are essential for the long-term viability of the American press. ♦

# A seat at the table

*What will it take to make diversity a priority, what does inclusion really look like, and what's at stake if we don't take action?*

**D**espite all the talk surrounding hiring and retaining journalists from underserved communities, U.S. newsrooms continue to fall short when it comes to reflecting the communities they cover.

IRE Training Director Francisco Vara-Orta led a discussion with three newsroom leaders — Maria Carrillo of the Tampa Bay Times, Julia B. Chan of KQED News and Matt Thompson of Reveal from The Center for Investigative Reporting — to discuss why we're still struggling and where we go from here.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Francisco Vara-Orta** (IRE & NICAR): Why do you think our field has struggled so much with having newsrooms that reflect our nation's diversity?

**Maria Carrillo** (Tampa Bay Times): Even now, most hiring managers are white and most are male. And those folks — like all of us — hire people they are drawn to (through shared backgrounds and experiences) and with the skills that they value most. It's a cycle that's hard to break unless you have diversity in management or draw more people into the process.

We're just not making it a priority. It's really disappointing to me. I've been in the business for almost 35 years and it feels like less of a priority now than it did in the late '90s.

And I don't understand it. I feel like it's not only a moral imperative, it's a business imperative. If you connect to your communities, your readers are going to be the ones who support your journalism. I don't understand why more people in charge are not held accountable.

**Julia B. Chan** (KQED News): Maria, your perception of (diversity) not being as much of a priority now as it was in the '90s, I'm curious how you're seeing that play out?

**Carrillo**: In the late '90s, especially with Knight Ridder, which made a huge push to focus on diversity, a lot of companies were going to minority journalism conferences. You had recruiters who were keeping tabs on young minority journalists, trying to get them to join the fold. I think when the industry took a free fall, recruitment fell by the wayside. And there has not been a renewed commitment to doing that kind of nurturing and grooming like there once seemed to be.

**Matt Thompson** (Reveal): I would add that even in the years when diversity was an industry priority, hiring initiatives would often go toward trying to find candidates of color and underrepresented groups for junior or temporary positions rather than trying to infuse representation at every level of the organization. Managers were filling entry-level spots with people of color, but similar attention wasn't paid to creating pathways for those folks through-





**Francisco Vara-Orta**  
is a training director at  
Investigative Reporters &  
Editors



**Julia B. Chan**  
is the managing editor of  
digital for KQED News,  
San Francisco



**Maria Carrillo**  
is the deputy editor for  
enterprise at the Tampa Bay  
Times



**Matt Thompson**  
is the editor in chief of  
Reveal from The Center for  
Investigative Reporting

*“I think people look for and connect to people like them. When we don’t hold ourselves accountable, newsrooms don’t hold themselves accountable, the hiring continues and a lot of stuff gets done in traditional fashion.”*

out the organization.

There was also a wave of — and I think this is still kind of endemic in the industry — putting journalists of color in roles that are perceived by the organization as niche roles dealing with communities of color or covering issues related to underrepresented groups. I worked at newspapers where we had a diversity reporter who would be dispatched to any non-English language-speaking community or any time a story was unfolding in that part of the city. There have been certain beats where organizations have been especially prone to place journalists of color. And when editorial interests shift, those roles go away. The stories are not perceived as being as valuable as some of the beats that are construed as core in the organization’s editorial agenda.

**Vara-Orta:** Matt, you were part of a panel at the 2019 IRE Conference that focused on how we retain journalists of color. And I’m wondering, for all of you, do you feel like you ever worked in an inclusive newsroom, and can you describe what that looked like or what that should look like?

**Thompson:** I don’t know that I could ever say I worked in a newsroom that (was fully inclusive), and I include us now. I would venture to say this news organization (Reveal) is the best I’ve worked in on that front. I would also say it’s a very low bar. I think there are still a lot of challenges around inclusion.

And one of the things I said, Francisco, in our conver-

sation about retention, is I think it's important to consider both promotion and retention. And when I think about promotion, I think of it both at an organization level and also at an industry level. I think sometimes we talk about retention in a way that it's like retention at all costs. And it's not. It is not a loss for the industry if an organization loses a really talented journalist of color to a role that is bigger and allows them to do more journalism that amplifies their work and helps them serve more of the public that's not being served.

**Carrillo:** I've never worked in a newsroom that was reflective of the community that it covered. And that's true today, too. Like Matt, I'm working in a newsroom now where I feel like there's a tremendous commitment to diversity, but we're way behind. The opportunities to hire come infrequently, and we're still going through some downsizing each year. So, it's not going to change overnight.

**Chan:** I think one thing that has become really clear as we continue to have this conversation is that while the rallying cry of "Hire Journalists of Color!" is great, we also face the question of retention. So, we can hire, but why aren't we retaining? This is a conversation I've had with different newsroom leaders. Do journalists of color have support in their newsroom? More often than not, JOCs are finding they're the only one at the table, the only one in a meeting, the only one in the newsroom. How does the organization provide support for those folks so they end up thriving and developing to rise the ranks, breaking into leadership and continuing the cycle of bringing folks in, becoming that mentor and support system?

Hiring is just step one. Steps two and three need to be supporting and growing folks in a way that makes them want to stay, invest and bring in more folks. And though we're talking a lot about journalists of color here, to me diversity doesn't just mean race, but people from different backgrounds. Having people with different perspectives leads to richer journalism. And the more folks we have in newsrooms thinking this way, able to create infrastructure to encourage and support journalists of color and other diverse journalists, the better we'll be at retaining.

**Carrillo:** I think what happens and what Julia was talking about is that you have a lot of journalists, especially minorities, who just feel incredibly invisible in their newsrooms. They do not have mentors. They don't have people who connect with them, who understand what they're up against, what they're doing day to day. So, we end up not retaining those folks, and the cycle gets even worse.

And again, I feel like there is a responsibility from the people who own and run these companies. I'm sick of the American Society of News Editors survey. I'm sick of every year expectations that we're going to do a lot better. People

*"So, we can hire, but why aren't we retaining? This is a conversation I've had with different newsroom leaders. ... More often than not, JOCs are finding they're the only one at the table, the only one in a meeting, the only one in the newsroom."*

are not being held accountable, and they should be.

**Vara-Orta:** Maria brought up a great point. We hear about downsizing, layoffs, attrition. It's something I've heard managers say, "This is why we can't really do this" or "We only have this one position and we have to find the most qualified person." We know that can feel like coded lan-

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guage to historically marginalized folks, women, people of color, queer people. How much of this can we blame on economic forces, and where does the accountability lie? How do you hold the industry accountable?

**Thompson:** We've held news organizations accountable

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hold the industry  
accountable?”*

in lightweight ways, like the ASNE diversity survey. I'm interested in, and I think that there are more conversations among leaders of color about what, ideally, are the consequences of a more representative newsroom?

One vector of accountability that I think we should be talking about more is are we also POC-serving institutions? Are we not only representing, facially, our communities in the demographic mix of individuals that we have in the newsroom, but are we also putting the work into building audiences to really serve our full communities? Not just representing them, but really reaching them. If we put a serious effort into serving our full communities, I think that points you almost inexorably to the conclusion that you can't serve a community if you have no representation. If there are no conduits from a community into your organization's thinking, then you are going to be, at best, of ancillary interest to the members of that community.

We, like almost every news organization I've been a part of, do audience surveys. We know some of the demographic composition of our audience. And in case after case after case, those surveys come back with, “You are doing a really good job reaching the ethnic majority of the country.” And this is true even of organizations that are more diverse than average. But we need to figure out why aren't we reaching people who have real information needs and putting some accountability into that.

**Vara-Orta:** Any thoughts, Maria or Julia, on that?

**Carrillo:** I think to your question about the downsizing of the industry, yes, of course it's contributed to everything. But I think our problems and the downsizing have also exposed some of the things that have happened in newsrooms. Who are the stars in our newsroom? Who gets the support? And when you have those conversations, you see what people value and what they don't value. And sometimes what they don't value is what they don't understand and who they don't understand.

Like, say, you're working in Texas and don't have enough reporters who have cultural understanding in a city that's predominantly Hispanic. How important is that to your coverage? How important is that to the decisions you make about who you're going to promote and who you're going to hire? To me, that should be crucial. I think a lot of this goes back to management. We do not have enough diversity in management ranks.

**Chan:** I've been thinking about this a lot. To the question of accountability specifically, a couple years back, when news organizations started going public with their diversity numbers, that was a moment we all watched. ProPublica did it, BuzzFeed, NPR. The most recent Washington Post Guild report shed a lot of light on their situation.

For me now, the question is: What's next? Now that we

have several years of data, can we draw any conclusions as to how this accountability has impacted the journalism? Are folks stepping up diversity efforts because of these reports and because they're now accountable to the public? If it's impacting the journalism, how? What stories and projects have resulted from these efforts? Are we serving different communities in different ways? Because, if we deem that it's working, we could emulate these pathways. You go public, you work with your audience so they have buy-in into very audience-powered, audience-sourced journalism, and your reach widens.

**Vara-Orta:** I wanted to talk about the importance of tapping into that representation and outcomes. There's this marriage between the importance of diversity and inclusion when it comes to hiring and content. When I was at a journalist roundtable in Washington, D.C., one of the journalists there said, "I think if we had had more journalists of color, if we had had more women, if we had had more diversity overall, in the decision-making newsrooms of NBC and CNN, the 2016 election would have had a much different outcome." We wouldn't have treated Donald Trump like a joke. People of color recognized this rhetoric works very well in some pockets of America.

But, at the same time, who is winning awards? And what are they winning awards for? Isn't there an argument to be made about clicks and the content we generate writing about race and Black Lives Matter and the immigration debate?

So, I want to talk about parity. What do you do in those places where it's a predominantly white community, it's a predominantly white newsroom, but they're voting to elect people who are running on issues around race and immigration and sexual orientation and women's reproductive rights? What's your advice to managers who are navigating that process? And what should their newsrooms look like?

**Carrillo:** The challenge in every newsroom is that there are never great numbers of people. But I think you have to take what representation you have and give people a seat at the table. So, if you're going to cover an election, you want to talk about all the different groups who might be affected. Who can you get in your newsroom around the table to brainstorm, to talk about ideas, to think about some of the coverage and the ways you're portraying people? You should be tapping into whatever diversity exists in your newsroom.

A lot of our coverage is decided by a small group of people, instead of opening it up and trying to see where we could go for different points of view. And say we do a project on a black man who's convicted of a crime. I want black journalists on staff to be reading that story for their perspectives. I want different people to be in the pipeline to be talking about it. I think that's where we need to be now. We need to make the most of whomever we do have on staff.

And if we don't have enough diversity on staff, can we engage the community to help us drive more of the coverage?

**Chan:** I find myself saying over and over again: Give the audience a seat at the table. Now, to your point, Francisco, what if the community isn't diverse and the newsroom happens to reflect that? There are still different perspectives to be had there. And so hearing from (the audience) is key: What are they responding to? How are they commenting on stories? What trends and patterns can you suss from the ways folks are interacting with your journalism? I think there's still diversity and perspectives there to explore in order to support and perhaps even diversify the journalism you're doing.

**Thompson:** One of the wicked problems in incentivizing leaders of news organizations to understand how equity and inclusion play into their decision-making is that you don't know what you don't know.

And there's this sort of flattening effect I find in conversations all the time. You think because you've got a black person at the table that you are hearing from black America. Being a black person, I know the conversations I have about issues at a table filled with black folks are very different from the conversations we have in the newsroom. The types of questions we're asking, the types of stories that are considered are different by magnitudes of order. And the framings and perspectives that make it into the stories we tell are really substantively different.

So, if you don't have a conduit into that, there's no way of getting those stories and talking about those issues. And if you know that, then you have to take seriously the question of what am I doing to try to understand the meaty, juicy texture of these conversations, of the stories of communities that I, myself, am not in?

The second thing is, use your calendar. Count things. Do data visualizations for yourself. Take notes. I came from an editorial brainstorm today where I was the notetaker capturing everyone who was speaking. After the meeting, I went back and looked. Who was speaking? Who was not speaking? What does that breakdown look like?

If you're a manager, you likely have a stacked calendar. At the end of the week, set up time to go through that calendar and review. Who was in the meetings with me? How many times was I in a meeting with only folks who shared my gender, my sexuality, my ethnic identity? How diverse is the range of perspectives you have given yourself access to? I think that's one simple step you can take.

**Vara-Orta:** I think diversity still has a charged meaning for a lot of folks, that it means affirmative action. If you could design an inclusive newsroom, how would that look and why?



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*“I think there’s still diversity and perspectives there to explore in order to support and perhaps even diversify the journalism you’re doing.”*

*“I think it’s incumbent upon all of us — including white, male journalists — to turn around and help out someone else and make those connections as well.”*

**Chan:** One of the first questions I would ask is, what’s the makeup of the community or audience? To build a baseline of knowledge of the community we’re trying to reach: What do those demographics look like? How are different communities represented in the area? And from there, take stock of who we have in the newsroom. Those would be two buckets of information I’d want to see side by side.

From there I would want to craft a newsroom that makes sense strategically for what we want to be doing across platforms, both content-wise and coverage-wise, with people from a variety of backgrounds. And again, for me, diversity is not just race but a range of ages, experiences, socioeconomic backgrounds — people from J-school to community college graduates.

I’m a big proponent of hiring committees. I think a lot of pressure is put on hiring managers that brings out their own biases and their own experiences in the process. When you have a hiring committee — ideally a group of people from different parts of the organization — that can help challenge the different biases you have in order to identify that best candidate. When we hear someone say, “Oh, we just wanted to hire the best candidate and the best candidate happened to not be diverse,” questions need to be raised. What lens are you using to view that person as the best candidate, and what are some other lenses that could be considered?

**Thompson:** I think a lot about building a truly representative newsroom. I take seriously that journalism is a tool the public gave itself to optimize its own society, to optimize our own democracy. And the more distant we feel from that ideal, the less trust there will be in us as an institution.

My personal mission as a journalist is to find the most important stories that are not being told, stories of people on the wrong end of power, and to help those stories get told as powerfully as possible. And that compass leads me to want to know who is not at the table. What are they seeing, and what are they experiencing that journalism can shed light on? And how are we building within our news organization conduits for those experiences and those stories to reach us? And so, just from a mission perspective, I think an inclusive newsroom is one where that question is constantly being asked. Where the question of “Who are we representing and how?” is folded into thinking at every level.

**Carrillo:** The only thing I’d add to what Matt and Julia said is I can’t even wrap my head around the idea of an inclusive newsroom because I can’t even begin to think about how we’d ever get there.

I think part of our problem is a problem of culture, and newsrooms are still very top-down a lot of the time. What gets deemed important, and who is important? Those decisions are not made by a committee. They’re made in silos.

So, when I think of an inclusive newsroom, the best I see for us is newsrooms where the culture encourages a lot of conversation and encourages people to learn about the communities they think they know and to go out of their daily circles.

I will say I feel like I'm learning a lot from younger journalists. They are all about transparency, and they're also very much about hearing one another and being heard. I think if we can model the way the younger generation is coming up and the way they see the world, I feel like we have a lot to learn from them.

**Thompson:** I will totally co-sign that. I often say to myself: I want to create a better industry than the one that brought me up. And I think that's actually way too low of a bar. Because we've got different generations coming into the newsroom, and I think they have higher standards than that for our organizations, and I want to meet those standards.

**Vara-Orta:** So, let's say you're a manager or you're somewhat of a newsroom hiring influencer. I don't know what position that is, technically, but maybe you recruited folks. How do you now retain them? I think one of you brought up mentorship. That's something that has come up in a lot of conversations I've had over the years. And that's what helped me stay in journalism.

**Carrillo:** I don't know about you guys, but I'm exhausted. I spend so much time mentoring people. It feels like I spend more and more time mentoring people the longer I get in my career, like I gotta get it all in before I call it a day and see if I can keep the legacy going.

But people have to feel seen. They have to feel valued. And so, it's funny, Matt, I was thinking that, yeah, I don't know that we're going to leave the industry better than when we started because I feel like there aren't enough of us who are purposeful about mentoring, who give of our time freely. There are plenty who do, but there's not enough. And I've had male mentors. I've had white men who have mentored me. But primarily, I feel like I spend a lot of my time with women and minorities who feel like there's not a lot of other people they can turn to. So, I think it's incumbent upon all of us — including white, male journalists — to turn around and help someone else and make those connections as well.

**Chan:** I have another practical answer. As a manager, always have that conversation with folks about where they see their career path going, and always have an answer when they ask what their future is with your company. There have been several times in my career when folks weren't willing to have that conversation with me. Either they wanted me to stay in the job I was in or they didn't understand my value (or skillset) in order to see where I could be headed.

If one day there's a journalist in my newsroom who says,

*“I think the less we represent our society, the less our society needs or has any interest in what we’ve got to offer.”*

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“I want to do this one thing forever” — awesome. You can do this one thing forever. But most people aren’t like that. In fact, from the conversations I’ve had with my team, everyone has a dream — and some people have several! So, it’s just going to take time to help them figure out what exactly it is they want to do. Especially being in the digital space, it can get so murky. You no longer have traditional reporter or editor jobs. And when you’re a minority journalist, that plus being a digital journalist creates this whole other level of uncertainty and need for mentorship and support.

**Thompson:** I think that’s exactly right. Nothing makes people happier, more joyful than feeling like they are continually moving toward mastery of something they love.

And one thing I’d add is that there may come a point when their needs for themselves and the organization’s needs for their role diverge, and you as a manager are confronted with this question: Am I trying to make them better at the things the company wants them to do, or am I mentoring them and supporting them as an individual? And I have been fully transparent with everybody that, when it comes down to it, I want your growth as an individual. If I am going to supervise you, if you are one of my people, then I am going to be committed to you and your growth for as long as we both shall live.

And I think Maria is right. That, too, is exhausting and it imposes a cost. From an organizational perspective, recognize if you’ve got a couple managers from underrepresented groups, chances are they are going above and beyond. They’ve got an extra side hustle in trying to help others from underrepresented groups thrive and succeed. Making that work visible, holding everyone accountable for doing some of that work is the only way to make that a sustainable function for the industry.

**Vara-Orta:** When you’re building that culture of inclusivity, how do you do it in a way where it doesn’t really tokenize your reporters from these historically marginalized communities and it doesn’t breed resentment among your straight white male colleagues?

**Carrillo:** You know, I think we are so busy doing the 15,000 things we have to get done that we don’t make enough time to communicate and to get to know one another better and to understand different points of view.

Certainly, if you’re the people who’ve been in power and the dynamic is changing a little, that can be unnerving, and people can feel threatened. But a lot of people became journalists because we sort of share the mission, and I think we have more things in common than we don’t.

I’m very conscious when I’m in a meeting to make sure that somebody who’s not speaking up gets a chance to speak up, that people try to listen to each other, that you create that give-and-take. And, at some point, I feel like

we’ve all got to get on board. It should be a goal for everyone. And if you feel threatened by it, that’s kind of too bad. This is too important right now to our success and where we’re headed.

**Thompson:** What I said about being a supervisor and taking the needs and the growth of my people seriously is something that is equal opportunity. I apply that to everybody I manage. I think there’s a difference between someone who says, “I fear that I’m being treated unfairly, and I feel like I’m at a disadvantage in some way because of who I am,” which is something that I take very seriously, and someone who has perhaps a loftier opinion of their work and their ideas than it merits and is for the first time having professional competition. I think there’s a difference between those two things. When I’m having those conversations with folks, I’m trying to assess: What am I seeing here? Am I hearing a matter of fairness?

**Vara-Orta:** One thing I’m always trying to stress is what’s at stake here? I think sometimes it’s about the right thing to do. You want a more inclusive newsroom out of striving for a better democracy. And in other cases, maybe it’s an economic argument, particularly with corporate management about clicks and views and engagement.

So, what’s at stake here if we don’t take hiring and retaining seriously? What does the future of journalism look like if we don’t start doing that immediately?

**Thompson:** I think a slide toward irrelevance. I think the less we represent our society, the less our society needs or has any interest in what we’ve got to offer. And I think the longer-term consequences of that are we have an impoverished public square, that there are perspectives that do not have the gift of journalism applied to them, that cannot inject facts, ideas, debates into the public sphere. And we therefore have an impoverished and ultimately irrelevant press.

**Carrillo:** I can’t improve on that answer. I mean, it’s true. And it feels like we’re fighting now to hold on to everybody we can. We’re trying to prove our worth again and again. But if we keep losing ground and we don’t connect, then, yeah, we’re kind of doomed.

I’d hate to think the only journalism that can survive is in Washington, D.C., and New York, and the rest of the country isn’t going to have advocates out there taking care of their communities. So, it’s incredibly crucial, and it’s been so frustrating to me that we’re not further along and that it hasn’t been a stronger priority across the country. ♦

# How to be an ally

*Not in a hiring position? We asked five journalists to share tips and ideas for creating a culture of inclusivity, regardless of job title.*



**Ashley Graham**, WLNS (Lansing, Michigan)

**It's important for everyone in the newsroom to be open to "diverse" story pitches.**

Many journalists of color find that pitches related to their respective communities get turned down for being too "niche" for their audience. Newsrooms should always work to expand their reach, and telling stories from an underrepresented community is a great way to do that. The more diverse storytellers feel their perspectives, insight and knowledge will be considered, the more likely they are to pitch and produce those stories. Encourage journalists in your newsroom to spend time developing sources, seeking out experts and finding data that specifically relate to marginalized communities.



**Romney Smith**, WKYC (Cleveland)

**Ask tough questions.**

If your organization is struggling to hire and retain diverse talent, ask yourself and your management team why, and be honest. Are their voices heard and respected at editorial meetings? Are you supportive of stories that focus on a minority issue? Diverse talent should also be allowed to look diverse. I've worked at two TV stations that required straight hair, and it was expensive and unnecessary. It sends visual cues to viewers that the station isn't really accepting of diverse forms of beauty. If you want me, accept all of me.

**Build strategic partnerships.**

This can be through a mentorship initiative with a local college journalism program, sponsoring important minority community events or supporting your diverse employees by letting them do a story or series that specifically affects minority communities. Don't have that much wiggle room on air? Support a digital-only series and promote it in your on-air newscast.



**Ana Ley,**  
The Virginian-Pilot

### **Spread awareness.**

Respect that journalists of color have a connection with black and brown communities that white and white-passing journalists will never share, no matter how educated they are or whether they're multilingual. Keep the pressure on editors to hire more people of color, especially if you have the career capital to get their attention. A lot of black and brown journalists — especially younger ones — aren't taken seriously when they complain about newsroom inequities. Stop placing the onus on journalists of color to balance the scales.

### **Mobilize and recruit.**

At The Virginian-Pilot, our newly formed bargaining committee drafted contract language that would force Tribune Publishing to interview candidates of color for every job opening, to post every available position and to eventually employ a newsroom that more adequately reflects the demographic makeup of the communities we serve. We also hope to address pay gaps, which disproportionately harm historically marginalized groups.

Think about recommending people of color you've met at conferences or through social media when there's a job opening in your newsroom. Cast a wider net to include people you wouldn't know through your usual journalism circles.



**Lam Thuy Vo,**  
BuzzFeed News

### **Tell us how much you make.**

Minorities in newsrooms are often paid less than their white and male counterparts. What's more, journalists from communities of color may come from socioeconomically disenfranchised backgrounds — they've had to support relatives early in their career or were surrounded by family members who made working-class wages. They may not have the same idea of a "normal" journalism wage. This is why data is essential: Salary information about their colleagues and peers can help them make informed arguments for why they should make a certain wage without having to defend their worth. Check out [jocresources.com/salary](http://jocresources.com/salary).

### **Be generous with editorial space and bylines.**

If you've worked on a big story that was a success, you're often given more time, editorial support and manpower to report future stories. A lot of journalists love to hog this capital. Whether you were set up for success (your editor took a particular liking to you, you went to an elite school, you came out of school debt-free, etc.) or whether you genuinely worked your way up the ladder, your privilege is your wealth and, if you truly care about diversity, you should share it. Get less-experienced reporters involved in these stories and share your byline. Support their story ideas in pitch meetings.



**Madi Alexander,**  
The Dallas Morning News

### **Take responsibility for educating yourself.**

Many journalism organizations, including the Association of LGBTQ Journalists, the Native American Journalists Association and the National Center on Disability and Journalism, compile style guides. Just as you would consult these resources in the course of your reporting, do the same as you get more involved in diversity and inclusion efforts in the newsroom. Beyond learning the correct terminology, seek out personal stories or essays from people who belong to marginalized communities. A person's own words are the best way to learn about their lived experiences.

### **Get comfortable talking about pronouns.**

Asking about and correctly using someone's pronouns is one of the most basic ways to show respect for their humanity and their gender identity. Pronouns are not obvious, so don't assume anything based on appearance. If you accidentally misgender someone by using the incorrect pronoun, don't make a big deal about it. Simply apologize, correct yourself and move on. List your pronouns in your email signature, on business cards, on name badges and on your social media profiles. Ask for pronouns to become a standard part of any form or biographical information collected by groups and organizations.





Nadia Mohamed made history in November 2019 by becoming the first Somali elected to the city council of St. Louis Park, Minnesota.

DYMANH CHHOUN | SAHAN JOURNAL



# The New American Newsroom

*A startup chronicles the successes, struggles and transformations of Minnesota's immigrants*

**I**n October 2019, I participated in a panel in Columbus, Ohio, about refugees and how the media cover their stories. One of the panelists, a Nigerian journalist who came to Ohio in 2011, had decades of journalism experience in his home country. When the discussion veered toward the lack of diversity in American newsrooms, the journalist shared his experience of how he could not find a reporting job in an Ohio newsroom.

While the journalism market wasn't great in 2011, you would think that having a multilingual journalist with reporting experience would be a useful addition to any newsroom in changing America.

That wasn't the case.

I know because I had the same experience. In 2011, I graduated from the University of Minnesota with a journalism degree, and I had a hard time getting an internship, let alone a full-time reporting position. I had worked for the university's student newspaper and was a young journalist with energy and multilingual skills. The news media in Minnesota at the time were intensely covering the Somali community. I thought I could play an important role by using my language skills and connections to improve how journalists covered my community.

Evidence that mainstream media underserve, and in many cases misrepresent, the realities of the immigrant and refugee experience is not difficult to find. It's easy to come across headlines in local media that say "Angry local Somalis allege racial profiling, harassment at airports" or "Rochester murder victim (a Somali) had recent violent history." Recently, a local TV station did a story about Liberians in the community facing deportation. The station used images of protesters in the Middle East, soldiers clutching rifles and

By **Mukhtar M. Ibrahim**, Sahan Journal





For the first time, three of St. Paul City Council's seven members are from Asian immigrant families.

DYMANH CHHOUN | SAHAN JOURNAL



Joaquin Escudeno was concerned that his visits to a community health clinic would affect the green card application of his wife, Herlinda. GUY WAGNER | SAHAN JOURNAL

Somalis protesting in front of a district court. Yes, they included all of those elements in a two-minute story about Liberian deportations in Minnesota.

Minnesota's media landscape is predominantly white, and newsroom leaders are not investing resources in comprehensively covering immigrant and refugee communities. They are slow in making news coverage more inclusive, despite the increasing diversity and the rapid growth of Minnesota's immigrant and refugee population.

The latest data shows the state's three largest non-European immigrant populations — Mexicans, Hmong and Somalis — are deepening their roots in the state, even as the number of foreign-born residents slowly declines. Minnesota has the nation's largest Somali population — about 74,000 people — with 38 percent of those born in the United States, according to APM Research Lab. The Twin Cities is home to the largest urban Hmong concentration in America. There are about 88,000 people of Hmong heritage residing in Minnesota, with only 32 percent foreign-born.

When newsrooms lack staff that reflect the diversity of their community, they produce stories that lack nuance, context and depth. Some of the coverage is borderline racist and inflammatory.

There are great journalists interested in writing about immigrants and refugees. At times, however, they get bored or find it challenging to establish deep trust and connections in immigrant communities that have different cultural backgrounds, languages and faiths. This causes them to change beats or resort to writing superficial stories that misrepresent the realities of the immigrant experience.

### Telling authentic stories

When I became a staff reporter for Minnesota Public Radio News in early 2015, I was assigned to do general assignment reporting and covered everything from fires and crime to floods and snowstorms. They were the kinds of stories

you could find on dozens of local news sites.

To stand out from the crowd, I worked weekends and evenings to pursue stories that were closer to my heart and that I thought local media were missing. These were in-depth, original reports about immigrants and Muslim communities that made MPR News' coverage more reflective of the state. My reporting gave MPR News access to stories in immigrant communities ranging from a young boy aspiring to a career in politics to the impacts of deportation and hate crimes.

When I joined the Star Tribune in 2018 to cover Minneapolis City Hall, I continued to intentionally pursue stories beyond my beat. Instead of being encouraged to write more of those stories, editors and colleagues told me I shouldn't feel "pigeonholed," which I translated to mean that I shouldn't cover stories about immigrants and Muslim communities.

As one of the first journalists with a Somali background in Minnesota to work at a major news outlet, I felt an immense weight of responsibility. I tried to help colleagues find contacts in immigrant communities, translate interviews and pass on story ideas to editors and reporters in the hopes of boosting coverage of immigrants outside of the routine news cycle.

I worked hard to open pathways to communities that were invisible to mainstream reporters. I realized, however, that editors and reporters were not committed to forging new relationships with these communities. Most local coverage of Minnesota immigrants remains shallow.

I was not the only person frustrated with local news coverage of immigrants, especially the Somali community. I can't count how many times I was asked by local Somalis why I worked for the Star Tribune. Many of them dislike the paper's editorials about issues related to the community. In their eyes, there's no separation between news and editorial. They only see one name.

So, I had two choices. I could continue to work in mainstream news and change beats every few years, or I could



Hundreds of people, mostly Indian Americans, gather in the State Capitol rotunda to protest against policies in India they say target and discriminate against Muslims. DYMANH CHHOUN | SAHAN JOURNAL

quit my job and start a news organization that would put a front-page focus on Minnesota's new immigrants.

I chose the riskier option.

## Launching Sahan Journal

I left my full-time reporting position at the Star Tribune to return to Minnesota Public Radio News with the promise that the company would support me as I launched Sahan Journal, an independent nonprofit news organization.

Sahan's mission is to provide fair, groundbreaking coverage that illuminates issues affecting Minnesota immigrants and refugees. The startup newsroom is still in its earliest stages. We launched in mid-August and have produced nearly 100 original stories that have been co-published with MPR News, our primary partner.

MPR News is highly invested in supporting Sahan Journal and recognizes it as an opportunity to transform the narrative in covering important new segments of Minnesota's population. As the state becomes more diverse, Sahan is dedicated to providing high-quality journalism that chronicles the successes, struggles and transformations of Minnesota's immigrants.

Some of the stories we are producing are hiding in plain sight. For example, one Sunday afternoon in late September 2019, nearly 400 people, most of them Indians, crowded the sidewalks along a major street in the Twin Cities to protest the Indian government's security crackdown in Kashmir. I went there to document the protest. I thought I would meet some colleagues from the local news media. To my surprise, I was the only reporter interviewing protesters. After we published my story, I got emails and text messages from people thanking me for reporting on the rally.

When we launched Sahan in mid-August, one of the leading stories was about how the Latino community was wrestling with fear and frustration after a racist gunman attacked people at a shopping center in El Paso, Texas. Another story documented how the Hmong revitalized a small

town in rural southwestern Minnesota, and then, two decades later, struggled with the same question facing other rural parts of the state: How do you get young people to stay?

Recently, I went to a community event organized by East African youth. Mothers and children, the majority of them Somalis, attended the event about substance abuse and overdoses in the Somali community, a sensitive issue that many don't openly discuss. Several youth gave passionate testimonies about their experiences with substance abuse.

I went to the event hoping to meet sources and connect with some of the youth. I found no other reporter from a local news organization, apart from a journalist who works for a local Somali TV station.

We decided to produce a video and story about the event. More than 22,000 people watched the video on YouTube, and nearly 2,000 people read the story.

Other Minnesota news organizations can do these stories, but they often have other priorities. If reporters would cover immigrants and refugees the way sports reporters cover the Vikings and Twins, I wouldn't have felt the pressure to launch a news site that tells the stories of these communities.

For mainstream news outlets to do a better job covering refugees and immigrants, editors and reporters must first learn to view stories about these communities as important and newsworthy. Newsroom leaders should not task one reporter with covering communities that don't share culture, daily lived experiences, language and belief systems. This work requires a team and the full support of the newsroom. This level of support is necessary so journalists can spend many hours in communities telling rich and complex stories that bring the humanity of immigrants and refugees to the forefront.

Mainstream newsrooms should also be intentional about hiring reporters who speak different languages and have different religious beliefs or cultural backgrounds. And in doing so, they should support these reporters, nurture them, allow them to seek out professional development and eventually put them in leadership positions. If these reporters raise their voices when they see problematic coverage or point out gaps or mistakes in an editor's decision-making, they should not be penalized or labeled troublemakers.

Disrupting the status quo requires taking risks and constantly reassessing our biases and privilege.

After all, no one has a monopoly on how to tell stories about our communities. ♦



**Mukhtar M. Ibrahim** is the founder, editor and executive director of Sahan Journal. He previously worked as a staff writer for the Star Tribune in Minneapolis and Minnesota Public Radio News.

# The Source Report

*Three tested techniques for diversifying sources and coverage*

## The Diversity Dialogues: *A conversation series fosters new understanding inside and outside the newsroom*

By **Maria Polletta**, The Arizona Republic

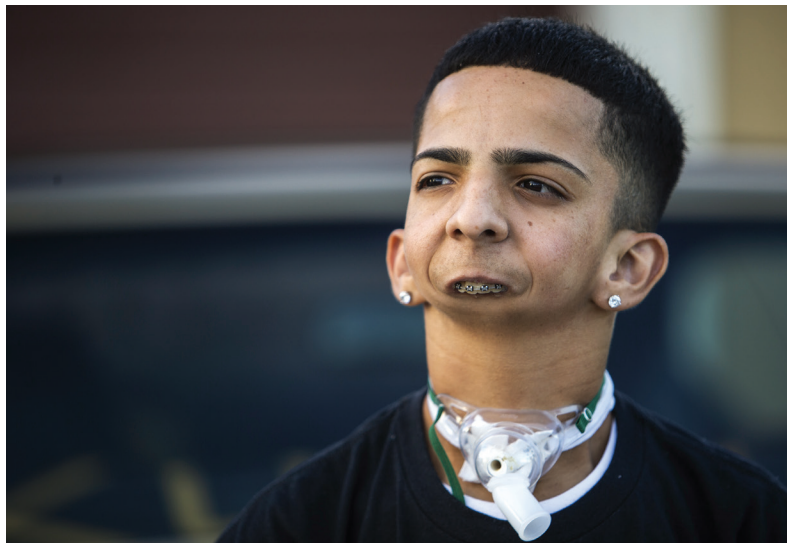
**F**ive years ago, an African American panelist at one of The Arizona Republic's Diversity Dialogues chided reporters for one-dimensional coverage of minority issues.

He appreciated that journalists sought his perspective on racist incidents and discriminatory policies, he said, but it was starting to feel like, "Press button in case of racial emergency."

Since then, The Republic's Diversity Committee — founded in 2004 to ensure the paper's coverage reflected its communities — has developed strategies to help diversify sourcing for all types of stories and build trust with populations who historically haven't felt heard.

It's not enough to speak to members of minority communities when an issue affects them. Journalists should routinely quote and photograph African American teachers, Asian activists, lawyers with disabilities and so on in stories where their demographics are irrelevant.

The most obvious way to improve diversity in coverage is to improve diversity in the newsroom. As Nikole Hannah-Jones put it during her 2017 IRE Conference keynote: "I'll solve your newsroom diversity problem in 10 seconds: Hire people of color." Our committee regularly advocates for newsroom parity and partners with diverse student



Isaiah Acosta was born without a jaw. His rap, with its inspirational lyrics about his painful past and ambitious future, drew international attention in 2017.

SEAN LOGAN/THE REPUBLIC

organizations to make young people of all backgrounds aware of internship opportunities.

Committee members also host the aforementioned Diversity Dialogues, a series for the newsroom and the public that invites leaders, academics, activists and others to open-



ly analyze and discuss The Republic's coverage of specific communities.

Sometimes that community is an ethnic or racial group or a population affected by a specific policy. Other times, it's simply a group of people journalists don't have a lot of experience covering, such as people who identify as transgender. The moderated discussions examine questions of terminology, framing, sourcing and visuals to determine what reporters could be doing better. The conversations have resulted in new story ideas, tip sheets and more voices for our opinion section.

At the end of each year, the committee hosts a mixer that serves as both a networking event and a "thank you" to former panelists and other diverse leaders who helped improve our coverage.

In 2018, we asked reporters outside of the committee to invite their sources. That resulted in higher-than-average engagement from the newsroom. Attendees participated in guided small-group discussions about coverage of their community, and each group shared highlights. Afterward, The Republic received two offers for community partnerships and a Republic reporter told the committee the "eye-opening" conversations made him rethink how he covers immigration and sources those stories.

That feedback — and feedback from readers — is common after committee discussions and events.

*Maria Polletta is The Arizona Republic's state government and politics reporter. She has served on the Diversity Committee since 2013.*

U.S. Senator Martha McSally, R-Arizona, with Isaiah Acosta, a 19-year-old rapper from Phoenix born without a lower jaw. Acosta was Sen. McSally's guest at the 2019 State of the Union.

DAVID WALLACE/  
THE REPUBLIC



## Three techniques for reporting on disabilities

**1. Quote the subject of the story first.** Stories that feed into "inspiration porn" often minimize or ignore the voice and perspective of the individual with the disability, Polletta said. An example would be a story about a football player asking a girl with Down syndrome to prom and only interviewing the football player.

In the story about the teenage rapper, Arizona Republic reporter Kaila White "made a point to feature his voice before anyone else's, since others so often wanted to speak for him," Polletta said.

**2. Do your homework.** "Kaila was unfamiliar with conditions that render people unable to speak and how they communicate if they do not know sign language," Polletta said, "so she did quite a bit of research in advance so that it wouldn't be up to the subject of the story to educate her every step of the way."

**3. Define the disability in the story.** In the case of the rapper, "(Kaila) explicitly said what he did have/could do and what he didn't have/could not do," Polletta said.

When reporter Kaila White covered a teenage rapper born without a jaw, for instance, she was careful to avoid what the disability community decried as "inspiration porn" during a Diversity Dialogue. The boy's family and doctors later said it was "the most accurate article they've ever read about raising a teen with physical disabilities like his."

When reporter Garrett Mitchell was asked to write about sugar skull tattoos, he was aware the story could appear insensitive if he treated the skulls as decorations rather than providing historical and cultural context. He also scoured the Phoenix area to include Latino perspectives.

And, as investigative reporter Dianna Nájuez was working on a series called "Faces of child welfare," she said she sought diverse lawyers and other professionals to avoid reinforcing the "inaccurate picture that people of color are only foster children or parents whose children have been taken from them."

The Republic is nowhere near perfect when it comes to diverse sourcing. But, as Nájuez said, "Because of my work with the Diversity Committee, I approach every series and each story with a question about who we are missing." ♦

# The Internal Audit:

## *A deep dive into existing coverage can prompt data-driven change*

By **Matt Largey**, KUT Austin

**T**he mission of public radio — and, ideally, all journalism — is to sound like the community we serve. It's our duty to ensure the stories we tell are reflective of the concerns and viewpoints of the entire community.

Many of us have a vague sense of how well we're meeting that goal, but we rarely have hard numbers to back it up.

That's why, in 2018, KUT undertook a project to try to quantify at least some aspects of how we were representing our community in our coverage. There is no perfect system to account for all of the factors but, as a starting point, we decided to focus on a few specific traits of our sources: gender, race and ethnicity, and expertise.

We hired a part-time employee, Sangita Menon, to devise a tracking system for this information. She conducted a three-month audit of our local news coverage between January and March 2018.

We never expected to be perfect, but what we found was disturbing.

The data showed our sources were overwhelmingly male — 69 percent. Three-fourths of our total sources were non-Hispanic white. We were vastly underrepresenting Latinx voices, which made up only 13 percent of our on-air sources, despite accounting for nearly a third of our region's total population. The voices of people of Asian descent also were underrepresented.

Only African Americans were represented in our sourcing in proportion to their population in our area.

Additionally, we found that when people of color were included in our coverage, it was frequently in stories about race. To truly represent your community, we believe, you must include a diversity of voices in all of your coverage.

We also found the majority of our sources were from the government — elected officials, spokespeople and local and state government workers.

Armed with this knowledge, which was surprising to most of our journalists, we sought to do better.

We designed a system to have our journalists track the demographics of their sources in real time. The idea was to make them think about their choices on a more consistent basis. If they write down and see the diversity of their sources as they go, it might make them consider whether there is another equally knowledgeable source with a different background than the usual suspects.

In the year since we began tracking in real time, we've seen ups and downs. On gender, for instance, monthly totals for male sources have been as low as 53 percent (November 2018) and as high as 68 percent (January 2019). Our male journalists continue to show a clear bias toward male sources. Our female journalists show a more even split. The percentage of sources of color has increased, and the domination of white sources has come down slightly.

We still have significant work to do.

White males still represent a disproportionate number of our sources. We've recently been considering what more we can do to encourage diversity in our sourcing. Conversations with other public radio stations doing similar work have generated some ideas, including designing more specific outreach to communities of color to cultivate sources before we need to call on them. We're also considering an information-needs assessment that would help us better serve people outside of public radio's traditional (whiter, wealthier) audience.

Of course, diversifying our own staff is a big part of the answer, too. Ours, like many other newsrooms, continues to be majority white. Making our newsroom more like our community is perhaps the best way to make sure we are serving our entire community. ♦

*Matt Largey is the projects editor at KUT, Austin's NPR station. He previously worked at WBUR in Boston.*



Seattle Times staffer Corinne Chin leads a Diversity and Inclusion Task Force meeting at The Seattle Times in October 2019. AMANDA SNYDER / THE SEATTLE TIMES

## The Newsroom Guide: *A living document shapes inclusive language, coverage*

By **Lynn Jacobson**, The Seattle Times

**B**etween December 2015 and June 2017, The Seattle Times had several opportunities to practice the art of the apology.

In that period, the newspaper made a number of high-profile missteps. Among them: a headline that portrayed the black victim of a police shooting in a negative light, and a front-page photo that failed to capture the historic moment when Hillary Clinton became the first-ever woman to be nominated for the U.S. presidency by a major party.

After a few tone-deaf attempts, editors gradually improved at issuing swift and nondefensive mea culpas. But for many journalists inside the newsroom, the amount of time and effort that went into saying “sorry” was frustrating and dispiriting. Wouldn’t it be better to put our energies into creating more inclusive coverage from the get-go?

While The Seattle Times historically had been a leader in promoting diversity in the industry,

*Lynn Jacobson  
is deputy  
managing  
editor at The  
Seattle Times.*

it was clear that we’d taken our eyes off the ball. This was the moment when The Times’ Guidelines for Inclusive Journalism ([st.news/inclusivejournalism](http://st.news/inclusivejournalism)) were born.

“We were hearing our colleagues ask for resources that could help mitigate some of the mistakes before they happen,” recalled lead video journalist Lauren Frohne. The result was a living document designed to help journalists frame and produce culturally sensitive stories.

Seattle Times staffers helped draft the guidelines and continue to update them.

Prime drivers of the change included a group of journalists who had created The Seattle Times’ award-winning “Under Our Skin” video project and the newsroom’s Diversity and Inclusion Task Force, led by senior video journalist Corinne Chin and then-assistant sports editor Ed Guzman. In the mix were veteran assigning editors who had worked on earlier diversity initiatives and some copy editors, long the keepers of journalistic standards.

As Chin recalled, former education editor Linda Shaw brought a diversity checklist used in the ’90s to one early meeting. It served as a jumping-off point for today’s guidelines, which urge staffers in various roles to approach their work





Seattle Times video journalists Lauren Frohne, front, and Corinne Chin film interviews for the “Under Our Skin” project at The Seattle Times in April 2016. ERIKA SCHULTZ / THE SEATTLE TIMES

with an inclusive mindset:

- Reporters are encouraged to question their assumptions, diversify sources and listen deeply.
- Designers, producers and photo editors are reminded to avoid stereotypes, consider play and context, and represent vulnerable populations with care.
- Editors are challenged to broaden their exposure to diverse communities and viewpoints and think in new ways about what constitutes “news.”

The guidelines are supported by other documents and tools designed to help move coverage in a more inclusive direction: the newsroom’s diversity statement ([bit.ly/st-diversity](http://bit.ly/st-diversity)), its style guide and a #sensitive-news-help Slack channel ([bit.ly/st-slack](http://bit.ly/st-slack)) that journalists can turn to for peer advice.

Those resources are in turn supported by the newsroom’s broader diversity and inclusion efforts, including recruitment and hiring practices, training and mentorship opportunities, and discussion groups.

Frohne said one of the goals of the guidelines is to bring conversations about diversity and racism out into the open. Another, according to Chin, is to get the newsroom to think more deeply about impact — and especially how coverage affects vulnerable communities.

“If we’re going to keep focusing on subscribers and audience and the people we serve, we need to think about how we’re serving them and if we’re doing a disservice to them,” Chin said.

Newsrooms looking to craft their own guidelines can learn from The Seattle Times’ experiences.

“Make sure you have a lot of support from the top, and be intentional about the rollout,” Chin said, “instead of letting it be another mass email that people never open.” At the Times, the guidelines were introduced to staff at an open meeting of the Diversity and Inclusion Task Force and are now required reading for all new employees.

Also, involve the copy desk. “The guidelines aren’t just about word choice and usage,” Frohne said, “but getting the insights of people who have a lot of experience working in that space is important.”

Finally, smaller news organizations without a lot of resources are welcome to adopt and adapt the Times’ guidelines.

Documents alone can’t make a news organization more inclusive. But they can help journalists become more comfortable examining their own blind spots when it comes to bias, race and racism. ♦



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# Troubling times for tribal media

*A free Indigenous press is  
essential for accountability,  
self-determination*

By **Bryan Pollard**,  
John S. Knight Fellow at  
Stanford University

**I**ndependent and rigorous journalism among tribal media in Indian Country is not the norm. But as tribal economies — and tribal coffers — grow, so does the need for dedicated, ethical Indigenous journalists to tell the important stories of our successes and challenges. Unfettered tribal media have a critical role to play in realizing the aspiration of tribal self-determination.

Today's tribal media exist in an economic purgatory that renders editorial and financial independence difficult to achieve. Many tribal media operations are in remote locations and publish or broadcast to a relatively small audience. The economic realities of these news deserts limit revenue models commonly found in mainstream media markets, especially subscriptions and advertisements, and require dependence on tribal governments to subsidize their operations. This dependence can chill — or worse, completely defeat — a free Indigenous press.

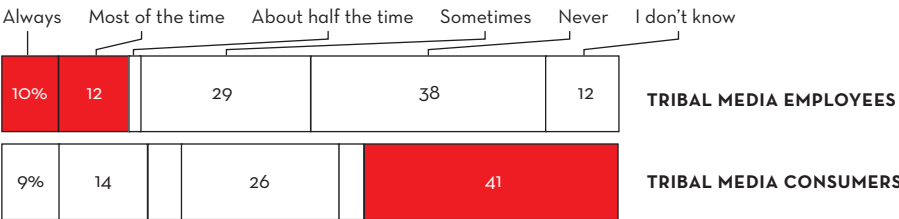
I first learned this in 2006 when I was only a few weeks into my new role as executive editor of the Cherokee Phoenix, the media outlet founded in 1828 for the Cherokee Nation. I received a call about a recently published story, and the caller was an elected official who held a seat on the nation's legislature.

It was a brief but tense conversation in which she demanded we retract the story. Despite my persistent prodding for specifics, she was unable to identify any aspect in need of correction. The call ended with only a thinly veiled

Findings from the Red Press Initiative

The Native American Journalists Association's Red Press Initiative studied the perception of press freedom in Indian Country by surveying managers, producers and consumers of tribal media.

Do stories about tribal affairs go unreported due to censorship?



22% of tribal media employees: Always or most of the time stories are unreported due to censorship

41% of tribal media consumers: Don't know if stories are unreported due to censorship

Is your tribal media required to seek prior approval of stories from government officials before publishing?

TRIBAL MEDIA EMPLOYEES



TRIBAL MEDIA CONSUMERS

32% of tribal media employees: Always or most of the time prior approval is required

53% of tribal media consumers: Don't know if prior approval is required

Do tribal citizens have adequate access to information about tribal affairs?

TRIBAL MEDIA EMPLOYEES



TRIBAL MEDIA CONSUMERS

58% of tribal media employees: Always or most of the time tribal citizens have access to information about tribal affairs

40% of tribal media consumers: Always or most of the time tribal citizens have access to information about tribal affairs

threat: If I ran another story like that, my department's budget might need to be "re-examined."

Her message was clear: Publishing stories that embarrassed the Cherokee Nation's leaders could lead to cuts in the Cherokee Phoenix's funding — or worse.

The Phoenix should be protected by the Independent Press Act, a Cherokee Nation law enacted to provide a firewall for editorial independence to an organization owned and funded by the tribal government. The law did not protect department funding, and the contentious call with the official made that clear. Undue political influence can and does affect reporting at tribal media outlets.

The role of tribal media

The Cherokee Nation is one of the largest tribal nations in North America. The nation's ability to communicate with its citizens is a tremendous challenge because there is not one channel or platform that will reach all of its nearly 350,000 citizens, most of whom live outside of the tribe's jurisdictional boundaries in northeastern Oklahoma. An independent multimedia news outlet is essential to providing accurate information to a disparate and sometimes loosely connected audience.

Tribal media outlets are often the only consistent pro-

viders of current events to their audience. Mainstream media often do not cover tribal affairs and, when they do, the accuracy of the context and substance of their reporting is wildly inconsistent and often shaded with bias.

The Native American Journalists Association recently conducted an anonymous survey among tribal officials and tribal media producers and consumers. The survey, a part of the organization's Red Press Initiative, questioned respondents about the value of tribal media and the challenges they face in communities across Indian Country. These communities rely heavily on tribal media reporting as a source of accurate news about tribal affairs.

Responses from tribal media staff — about 85 people — reflected concerns about many aspects of basic journalistic practice. When asked to rank the greatest threat to tribal media, more than half of respondents identified budgetary constraints and lack of financial resources.

The survey showed that nearly one-fourth of the tribal media staff who responded indicated that stories about tribal affairs or officials went unreported due to censorship all or most of the time. Nearly a third of the same respondents said that prior approval of stories by government officials was required all or most of the time.

Nearly half of tribal media staff responded that they were subjected to intimidation and harassment when covering tribal affairs. Of those, nearly 80 percent said the source of the harassment all or most of the time was tribal-elected or senior officials.

The survey also recorded responses from consumers — the readers, listeners and viewers of tribal media. Nearly 40 percent said tribal media only sometimes or never reflected the range of opinions and concerns of tribal citizens. Another 40 percent responded that tribal citizens only sometimes or never have adequate information about tribal affairs.

### **Tribal prosperity requires accountability**

Where does that leave investigative journalism in Indian Country? If journalists working in tribal media are unable to perform the basic functions of journalism due to fear of harassment or worse, is public accountability of tribal government lost?

Some, but not all, tribes have entered an era of prosperity based on revenues from gaming and other enterprises. These gains have been burgeoning for decades as tribes have built opportunities for their citizens and their communities through new development and business enterprises.

In Oklahoma, there are 39 federally recognized tribes. These tribes employed nearly 50,000 workers and create nearly 100,000 direct and indirect jobs. They spent nearly \$4.6 billion in wages and benefits and were estimated to have a \$13 billion impact on the state, according to 2017 data published in the Tulsa World.

The state of Washington has 29 federally recognized

tribes. In 2017 they employed nearly 31,000 workers and created at least 55,000 direct and indirect jobs. They spent nearly \$1.5 billion in employee compensation and were estimated to have a \$5.3 billion direct, indirect and induced economic benefit, according to the Economic & Community Benefits of Tribes in Washington report in 2019.

These are just two examples of the economic impacts felt by states, but the more important impact is measured by investment within tribal communities. Tribal governments are funding new health clinics, language programs, community buildings, smoking cessation programs, technological infrastructure, community gardens, youth programs,

entrepreneurial and small business support, educational scholarships, diet and healthy-food programs, law enforcement agencies and the building of new roads and bridges. Many Indigenous families and communities across Indian Country are seeing the results of this investment.

While this prosperity should be hailed as a success for tribal economies, it also poses a greater risk for inadvertent mismanagement or outright corruption. As tribal revenues grow, so does the temptation for anyone seeking to usurp or retain control of the coffers. The need for journalistic independence and investigative freedom in Indian Country has never been greater. Tribes have invested heavily in their governments, communities and enterprises. Tribal media, however, have been almost always left — or cut — out.

Robust, independent tribal media operations are vital to maintain a watchful eye and provide a fair platform for the voice of the people. To achieve this, tribal governments must invest in tribal media operations

and fund them at levels necessary to reach their audience while employing trained and talented Indigenous journalists. Tribes must also enact legislation that places editorial firewalls between the political and journalistic goals of the tribe.

With stable budgetary investment, trained professional staff, and firm editorial protections and independence, tribal media can fulfill an essential role in dynamic tribal economies that furthers self-determination. This commitment will foster culturally accurate storytelling, provide an unbiased platform for community voices and support a watchdog of tribal operations and coffers. ♦



*Bryan Pollard is a John S. Knight fellow at Stanford University, where he examines the challenges to press freedom in Indian Country. He is the former president of the Native American Journalists Association and former executive editor of the Cherokee Phoenix. Pollard serves on the board of directors for High Country News. He is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation.*

# A catalyst for change



CNN contributed \$5,000 to support the Journalist of Color Fellowship. “In a world where the truth matters more than ever, never has our profession had this urgent a need for exceptional investigative journalists,” said Ramon Escobar, vice president of talent recruitment and development for CNN Worldwide.

**T**wo important events happened in summer 2016: The Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting launched, and my second son was born.

Both were catalysts for the IRE Journalist of Color Investigating Reporting Fellowship.

The yearlong fellowship, which provides investigative training and support, is now in its second year thanks to the work of many. The program was born out of the realization that we needed to do more to amplify journalists of color.

As a former IRE trainer, I know the nonprofit works hard to support our members of color and other marginalized groups. But there was a point during my IRE career when I personally felt I needed to go further.

That day was in August 2016. A group of IRE members had just launched the Ida B. Wells Society, a news trade or-

ganization aimed at “increasing the ranks, retention and profile of reporters and editors of color in the field of investigative reporting.” At the time, as a trainer, I felt I had failed to support our members if another organization had to be created to serve their needs.

Months later, I was able to have supper with one of the society’s founders, Tophers Sanders, and he graciously enlightened me. When I asked how IRE could help, he talked about the mirror concept: It’s hard for young journalists of color to envision themselves as investigative reporters or editors if everyone they see in those jobs is white.

What a reflection — four celebrated black journalists launching an organization devoted to investigative journalists of color.

Sanders’ words made sense. As a mother raising two brown sons, I read how important it was for my children to



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## *A look inside IRE's first Journalist of Color Fellowship*

By **Megan Luther**, InvestigateTV



Bracey Harris described her fellowship experience and called on 2019 IRE Conference attendees to donate in support of the program.



All funds donated to IRE during the 2019 IRE Conference in Houston supported the Journalist of Color Investigative Reporting Fellowship. More than \$8,000 was raised during the event.

see themselves in their teachers, doctors and other mentors. This notion drove my desire to help establish a JOC fellowship at IRE.

### **Building a foundation**

One of the biggest influencers was Martin G. Reynolds, co-executive director of The Maynard Institute, an organization that promotes diversity in the news media. He's a great resource and has helped other organizations, including Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting, develop JOC fellowships.

Initially, I thought IRE's fellow could move to Columbia, Missouri, and work out of the organization's office at the Missouri School of Journalism. Reynolds kindly pointed out that many JOCs have ties to the communities where

they work, and it would be best if they stayed in their newsrooms. In late 2017, I took a job with InvestigateTV and passed my notes to IRE's staff. It was the newly hired director of partnerships, Chris Vachon, and other employees who truly made the fellowship happen.

In September 2018, IRE began taking applications for the program. Bracey Harris, an education reporter at The Clarion-Ledger in Jackson, Mississippi, became IRE's first Journalist of Color Investigative Reporting Fellow.

She applied wanting guidance on a project that was haunting her. Harris pointed to a quote in the Twitter bio of Diana K. Sugg, an enterprise editor at The Baltimore Sun: "What story is haunting you? Follow your ghosts."

Harris' ghost visited during a 2018 reporting trip to a poor-performing segregated school with rough facilities. She started reflecting on landmark court decisions that

should've prevented this kind of classroom experience.

"I knew I didn't want to unpack this alone, and the fellowship seemed like a life jacket that would help keep me steady," Harris said.

She spent the next year traveling to both IRE and NICAR conferences and attending IRE's Data Journalism Bootcamp. The fellowship included funding for all three trainings.

But the program involves much more than attending IRE events. Throughout the year, the fellow works with a network of mentors. Sarah Cohen, Daarel Burnette II and I met with Harris almost monthly to check in.

"I wanted to reach back and help another generation," said Burnette, a school finance and budget reporter at Education Week.

The year of mentoring was eye-opening for Cohen, the Knight Chair of Data Journalism at Arizona State University. "I forget what it's like to be on your own trying to work on a project," she said.

In addition to the investigative story, Harris and her editor still needed to feed the daily beast. The mentorship network helped fill the gaps.

"It's incredibly valuable to have that independent support network to help you build up your confidence and know that you are going in the right direction," Harris said.

In August, Harris took a job with The Hechinger Report, where she continues to cover Mississippi education. Her

fellowship project was co-published by Hechinger and The Clarion-Ledger in February ([bit.ly/HarrisFellowship](https://bit.ly/HarrisFellowship)).

### Growing the fellowship

The first fellowship was funded by four IRE members: Meghan Hoyer, Mike Gruss, Mike Tahani and me.

Hoyer and husband, Gruss, had previously donated to support data-centered IRE training. "It was really inspiring to hear how the rest of the IRE community got behind this," Gruss said.

Last year, IRE dedicated all funds raised at the annual IRE Conference in Houston to the fellowship. Gray Television (disclosure: my employer), ABC News, ESPN and CNN have also made generous contributions.

Ramon Escobar, CNN's vice president of talent recruitment and development, said the lack of diversity in investigative journalism is a particularly acute problem that can only be solved by the industry itself.

"Put your money where your mouth is," Escobar said. "And if you don't have money, put your time where your mouth is."

Thanks to the continued support of IRE members and news organizations, IRE is funding three fellows in 2020.

This fellowship is one of many efforts by the journalism industry to create newsrooms that better reflect our com-



2019 Journalist of Color Investigative Reporting Fellow Bracey Harris addresses attendees at the annual conference in Houston, Texas.



munity, but there's still more to do.

More than three-quarters (77 percent) of newsroom employees are non-Hispanic white, according to 2012-2016 data analyzed by the Pew Research Center. That's less diverse than all U.S. occupations and industries combined,

where 65 percent are non-Hispanic white.

There's been a lot of focus on hiring JOCs, but are we creating supportive newsrooms where people want to stay?

Chris Ramirez's experience has stuck with me for years. We met at a UNITY Conference — a former coalition of minority journalism groups — and got to talking about the Dakotas. I lived in South. He worked in North.

In 1997, Ramirez was the only non-white journalist in his newsroom when he interviewed a wheat farmer about his crops. On the phone, Ramirez mentioned that he needed to get a photo, and the farmer agreed.

Ramirez drove 90 minutes to his farm and knocked on the door. The farmer only opened it a crack. "He refused to talk any further to me once he saw I wasn't white," Ramirez said. "He told me 'If it's all the same to you, I just don't talk to colored people.'"

Today there are many journalists of color who are working in small, all-white newsrooms located in homogeneous communities who need our support.

If you want to learn how to be a better ally, I'd recommend reading Ijeoma Oluo's book "So You Want to Talk About Race." It's a much-needed reality check for those of us who are white. There are also plenty of practical tips scattered throughout this Journal issue.

After all, it's not just management's job to diversify our newsrooms; it's everyone's responsibility. ♦



*Megan Luther is an investigative producer with InvestigateTV, Gray Television's national investigative team. Previously, she was IRE's senior training director. Megan is a mother of two.*

## HOW TO DONATE

News organizations and individuals are encouraged to support the fellowship.

Individuals may donate securely online at [ire.org/GiveNow](https://ire.org/GiveNow). Type "JOC fellowship" in the "specify a fund" field. You can also mail a check with "JOC fellowship" in the note field to IRE: 141 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211.

Interested news organizations may contact Chris Vachon, IRE director of partnerships, at [chris@ire.org](mailto:chris@ire.org).

## Meet the 2020 Fellows



**Sameea Kamal**, a news desk editor, has been at the Los Angeles Times since November. She will investigate sexual assault on college and university campuses.



**Josh McGhee**, an investigative reporter, has been at The Chicago Reporter since October 2018. He will work on a project investigating hate crimes and the judicial system in Cook County, Illinois.



**Monica Velez**, an education reporter, joined the Fresno Bee in December. Velez will dig into how the Fresno Unified School District failed to adequately desegregate six decades ago and how that affects students of color today.

# Know thy records

## Lessons from requesting records in newsrooms small and large

**F**OIA is a bit of an art and a science. It takes practice, patience and persistence to navigate state and federal laws to get the records you need.

In my five years as a journalist, I've worked in newsrooms small (the Argus Leader in Sioux Falls, South Dakota) and large (The New York Times). I've also learned from journalists across the country as a former training director for IRE.

Here are nine lessons I've learned about navigating the federal Freedom of Information Act.

### **Lesson 1: Research before you request**

Determine which agency maintains the records, what they're called and how they're stored. Dig around on the agency website or call the agency's records custodian to gather this information.

Check the agency's virtual FOIA reading room for similar requests. This can provide you with a roadmap of potential pitfalls you can hopefully avoid in your request. You'll also be able to see if the records or databases you are seeking have already been released or posted online.

If you're requesting data, review the agency's records retention schedules and data dictionaries so you know what data is collected, how far back it goes and how it's stored.

### **Lesson 2: Go to the right department**

Before filing your FOIA, figure out which specific department in the agency handles the records. Sending your request to the wrong department can result in a longer wait. The FOIA officer might forward your response to the correct department or recommend that you resubmit your request to a specific sub-agency.

### **Lesson 3: Research processing times**

FOIA offices usually place requests in one of three tracks: simple, complex and expedited. Call the agency's FOIA officers or look on its website and Chief Officer FOIA reports to get a clearer picture of how long it takes to process each type.

For example, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development says on its FOIA page that the current processing time for routine requests is

30 days. It goes up to 45 days for complex requests.

### **Lesson 4: Argue for expedited processing**

It's not enough to simply state that you're a member of the media wanting to inform the public. Each agency lays out the compelling arguments it will accept for expedited processing. In your argument, use the agency's language and include specific events as support.

### **Lesson 5: You don't need to cram your request into a single page**

This isn't a cover letter for a job. Use as many bullet points or paragraphs as necessary to explain what you want. Think of your request as a set of directions for the FOIA officer who will go digging for the information.

### **Lesson 6: Get the goods? Don't immediately run to your editor**

If you succeed in getting the records and are certain other outlets haven't requested the same information, do some basic analysis before going to your editor. Agencies will often produce records on a rolling basis, and it could take a few responses before you can see the full story. You don't want to promise something that isn't there.

### **Lesson 7: Get to know FOIA officers and records custodians**

Filing a FOIA is just like any other form of reporting: Building relationships can go a long way. Call the FOIA officers regularly to check on your request. Ask them how you can make your requests more effective and efficient.

Federal agencies also have public FOIA liaisons who help requesters. Build a spreadsheet containing the contact information of all the public liaisons who work in the federal agencies you cover.

### **Lesson 8: Use the Office of Government Information Services**

Contact the Office of Government Information Services when you're having trouble with federal agencies. OGIS serves as an FOIA ombudsman and works to independently resolve disputes between requesters and agencies.

I recently ran into a problem getting documents from the State Department. The agency's public liaison stopped taking and returning my calls, so I filed a complaint with OGIS. Within the week, OGIS was able to help restart communication with the department and get me the documents.

### **Lesson 9: Know the exemptions**

Know the federal FOIA exemptions and understand how they are applied ([bit.ly/foia-exemption](http://bit.ly/foia-exemption)). This will also help you understand if documents are being unjustly withheld or redacted. For instance, always challenge b(7), the infamous law enforcement exemption. ♦



By  
**Mark Walker,**  
The New York  
Times

*Mark Walker is a Freedom of Information Act researcher for The New York Times' Washington Bureau. He previously worked at IRE as a training director and at the Argus Leader in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, as a watchdog reporter.*



# Diversity matters

It's time to build a pipeline for investigative journalists of color

**F**ew things in our business trouble me more than when newsroom leaders say they can't find qualified investigative journalists of color to fill jobs.

We are here. You don't have to look hard to find solid reporters and editors, and amazing data journalists. A good start might be to check out this Journal issue.

I developed a love of investigative journalism, particularly local investigative journalism, when I was fresh out of graduate school at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

I talked my way into my first newspaper job at the Champaign News-Gazette with a broadcasting degree and just one newspaper clip to show. The editor at the time, John Foreman, took a chance on me. I was his only black reporter — and the only one who had a true interest in investigative journalism. He helped me hone my skills, as did the editors at the next two papers I worked at: Diane McFarlin, then the executive editor of The Gainesville Sun, and Mark Barnhill, then the city editor of the Daily News of Los Angeles.

I was the only black news reporter on the city staff of either paper, and I used this to my advantage. In Gainesville, Florida, I covered city hall and developed great sources to uncover stories about local corruption. In Los Angeles, I was the education reporter, and my investigative stories led to the resignation of the superintendent of the second-largest school district in the country.

Los Angeles is where I won my first investigative journalism award, solidifying my decision to pursue investigative journalism. Nothing gave me greater pleasure than finding investigative stories on the beat and landing them on the front page before the Los Angeles Times.

I continued to follow my passion at The Kansas City Star with Mike McGraw as my mentor on the I-team, and for the past two decades at The Washington Post. I'm continuing that work now at NPR.

In each instance, I'd like to think my skills



By  
**Cheryl W. Thompson,**  
NPR

*Cheryl W. Thompson is an investigative correspondent for NPR. She teaches investigative reporting at The George Washington University and is president of the IRE board of directors.*

landed me the job. But I'm not naïve enough to think my race — and my gender — didn't play a role.

Diversity matters now more than ever in investigative journalism. For one thing, it makes for more balanced news coverage. Different groups bring different and valuable perspectives.

While working on a recent investigative piece for NPR, I had to knock on the doors of subjects who didn't necessarily want to be found and convince them to talk to me. I have no doubt that a few of them wouldn't have given me the time of day had I not looked like them.

It's time to stop going to the same well and start building a pipeline. We must make a concerted effort to train and recruit journalists of color. IRE does this by offering fellowships and mentoring programs. I have volunteered as a mentor for years. That's how I met Kameel Stanley, Marissa Evans and Bracey Harris, three African American journalists who do investigative reporting. They're doing well because an editor believed in them, and I and other investigative reporters were there to support and encourage them.

As IRE's first African American board president in its 44-year history, I've worked hard to beef up diversity in our membership ranks. We've been successful and will continue those efforts. Of the 21 appointed board committee members this year, 12 are journalists of color.

We can't be afraid to talk about diversity. If we can't discuss it, we can't move forward. But it's not enough to just talk about it. That conversation has been going on for years. We need to act.

If you want journalists of color who are adept at investigative reporting, you must give them opportunities. I recently chatted with an editor who acknowledged that her newsroom needed to do a better job of positioning black and brown journalists for reporting and editing investigative jobs. She asked me how she could do that. My response? Start grooming and training them. Let them work on big stories. It's not difficult. It just takes a commitment. Don't hire one investigative journalist of color and think your job is done. It's an ongoing process.

I've been lucky. I've had terrific editors who believed in me and my work. And I've tried not to disappoint. Follow in the footsteps of Foreman, McFarlin and Barnhill. Believe in us. Support us. Give us the same chance you give others. If you do that, I promise you won't have a problem recruiting or retaining us. ♦

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