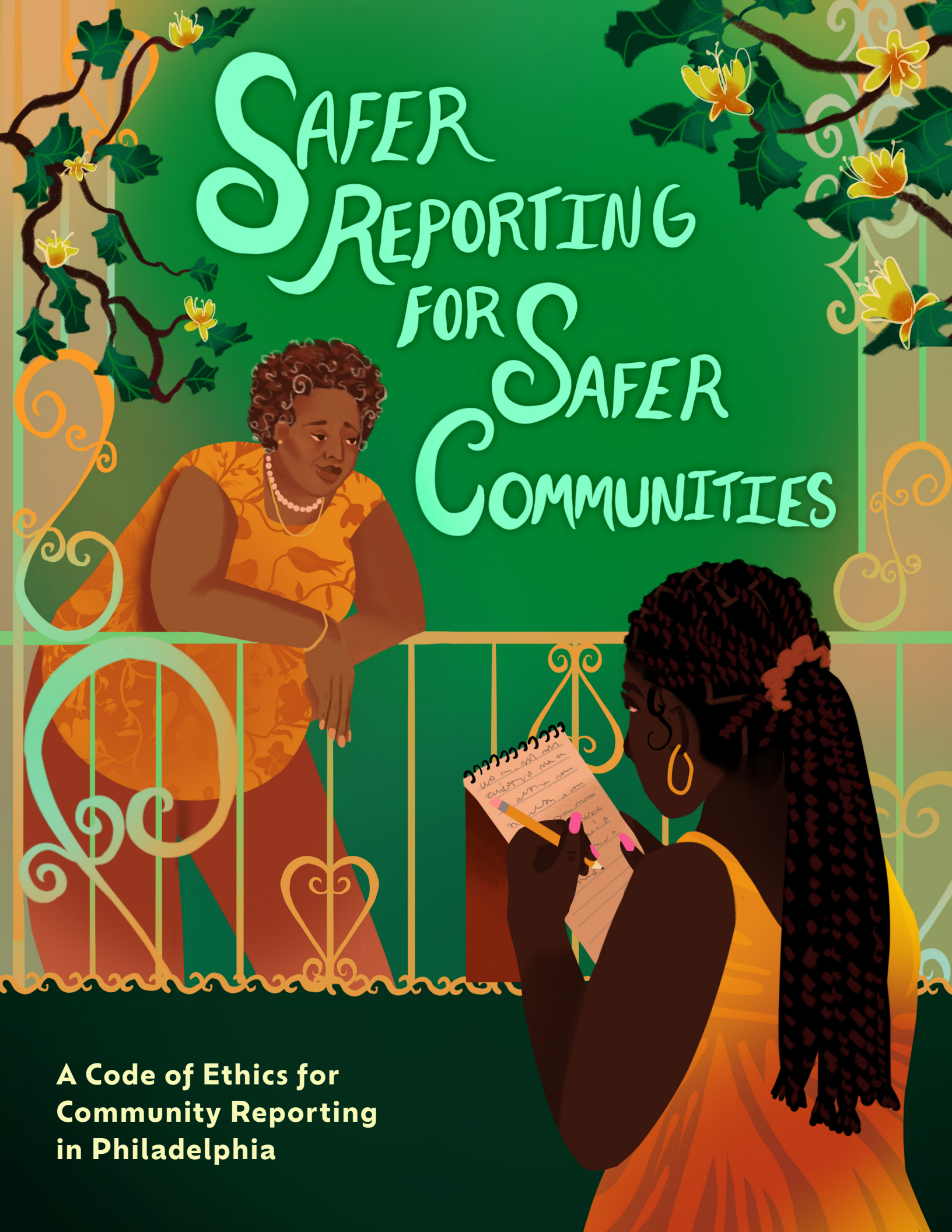


SAFER REPORTING FOR SAFER COMMUNITIES

**A Code of Ethics for
Community Reporting
in Philadelphia**



Safer Reporting for Safer Communities A Code of Ethics for Community Reporting in Philadelphia

This code of ethics was co-written and co-edited by Free Press' Public Safety Coverage Cohort and guest contributors. These voices include:

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Cover image: A journalist from the community interviews neighbors in a rowhouse block, taking part in community storytelling traditions that have existed in Philadelphia for generations.

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The Colored Girls Museum

Making Worlds Cooperative



This document is the fruit of nearly 18 months of collective labor — of dreaming, thinking, listening, learning, venting, writing, editing and practicing. Almost 18 months of playing out scenarios, wrestling with big questions, going back and forth, returning to our values, remembering the people who came before us. A year and a half of reflecting on the times when we had the fullest forms of freedom, healing from the times when we didn't, and finding the courage to name or illustrate how things should be.

We are grateful for every contributor and guest speaker, both those we can name and those we can't, who took the time to take part in this work. We are humbled by the generosity of spirit, time and intellect that each person brought to the table. So many times, even for storytellers, languages and images can fail us, and every time they did, this collective of co-authors tried again. And every effort took place under the stressors of national and global unrest, newsroom layoffs, funding shortages, ongoing epidemics and more crises than we can name here.



Since this is a Philadelphia-based project that dedicated 2024 to this work, the bulk of our contributors offered their writing and edits in an election year in a swing state. Still, these collaborators showed up when they could, virtually and in person, even when their jobs were at risk or gone, sometimes recovering from ailments, occasionally caring for babies and children in the process. The dream — and the multitask — has been real.

News media production that does justice to our communities is hard, tedious and often unforgiving — as is the practice of developing standards to hold that work. We hope with this writing that our contributors won't feel that it's thankless, as it often is. We see you. We value you. We know the capacity for change and renewal in our industry is real because of you.



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Introduction



Every day, we hear stories about bad things happening in Philadelphia.

But these stories of crime, disorder and violence — and their painful impacts — aren't simply matters of fact. There's been a long-running discourse around the ways status-quo crime coverage can dehumanize, stoke fears, fail to include solutions, and misrepresent people or events.

We've been among the chorus of voices calling for more community journalism — specifically, news projects and outlets with leadership from the communities they serve. We're not the only ones who can tell you: Standard practices and widely observed ethics within mainstream journalism often diverge from the storytelling traditions, social norms and ethical expectations that marginalized communities hold. There can even be clear differences in what's considered common sense.

These misalignments don't exist by happenstance. Mainstream journalism has never had practices and ethics that would encompass the values of a multicultural populace. Many standard practices within the journalism industry stem from the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. During that segregated era, mainstream white publishers professionalized their field through their standards, and — not surprisingly — the first journalism school in the country opened without Black students. For generations, journalists from marginalized communities have tried to reconcile these gaps — facing challenges to their integrity, credibility, trusted relationships and job retention in the process.

What would our journalism look like if we embraced the storytelling ways of impacted communities instead of marginalizing them? What would happen if we centered practices from Black and Brown storytellers and media ethicists?

Enter the Philadelphia Safer Journalism Project. We see the need for ethics that reflect the values of our communities, which have been excluded from conversations

about journalism practices. We do not seek to make a code that's impractical or perfect; we have created a code of ethics we can be accountable to.

This code of ethics grew out of a small cohort of Black and Brown storytellers who aim to foster more local community-led news about public safety. The cohort, which gathered

monthly to build this work together, includes Malav Kanuga, co-founder of Making Worlds Cooperative and Common Notions Press; Abd'Allah Lateef, deputy director of the Campaign for Fair Sentencing of Youth; Andre Simms, founder of DayOneNotDayTwo; Manuel Smith, vice president of digital of the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists; and Gabriela Watson-Burkett, founder of Inti Media.

What would our journalism look like if we embraced the storytelling ways of impacted communities instead of marginalizing them? What would happen if we centered practices from Black and Brown storytellers and media ethicists?



Over the course of a year, we aligned values and co-developed practices with community journalists, media ethicists and mutual-aid organizers who joined us as guest contributors.

Thanks to guest facilitator aAliy A. Muhammad, early on we sought to fold harm-reduction principles into media production. Muhammad's insights remain central to the foundation of our work. Because of them, we know that we can't prevent harm for every news consumer 100 percent of the time, but can strive to reduce harm every single day. We can do this as community care (the ways that people within a community care for one another). We can tap into the "lineages of care," as Muhammad put it, that have sustained our communities over time.

Reducing harm isn't simply a way to produce better work, or offer better experiences to readers, listeners and viewers. It's a way to keep storytellers safer too.

We offer a condensed version of our primary principles as well as this expanded version, which provides more context and more recommended practices. Here, we offer additional context for journalists who face risks for acknowledging and addressing the ethical gaps in community reporting. We want you all to have more safety too.



Reducing harm isn't simply a way to produce better work, or offer better experiences to readers, listeners and viewers. It's a way to keep storytellers safer too.

We hope that you will go deeper with us.

With that said, we know there is a lot here. Still, we're not done. This is an evolving collection of ethical practices that live at the intersection of community values and media production, and it will change and grow. Like any ethical code, not every principle will apply to every situation or news story.

Some of the principles here align with mainstream journalism. Some do not.

We stand on the shoulders of Black and Brown elders who told our stories in spite of limited resources, profound exclusion and myriad forms of oppression. We won't ask for permission to hold on to what they taught us. We won't apologize for the complexities here. We come from complex people whose lives, identities and struggles often show up as stereotypes, caricatures and flattened anecdotes in news stories. We want to create an ethical code that they and we deserve.

Additional Considerations



Well, embarking on this path can feel awkward — or at least uncomfortable and risky. But if you’ve made it this far and you’re still reading, you might be accustomed to the discomfort that comes from the arduous work of trying to get these delicate stories right in newsrooms that weren’t initially designed to embrace distressed communities.

And so we’re going to name something that you likely already know but bears repeating. This work isn’t just about writing better stories, making better pictures, cutting better segments, producing better shows and launching better investigations. This is also about being in right relationship with the communities we serve. No one person is responsible for that, and if you feel like you’ve been carrying this burden alone or without balance, we invite you to take a moment to exhale. This isn’t all on you.

In that spirit, relationships could be the determining factor in whether this ethical framework would fit your work at this time. A difficult truth that this work requires us to acknowledge: Community journalists have experienced harm and lost work for trying to incorporate more community-forward approaches and for resisting

Community journalists have experienced harm and lost work for trying to incorporate more community-forward approaches and for resisting white supremacy culture in mainstream newsrooms.



white supremacy culture in mainstream newsrooms. If you’re not in a newsroom where you can avoid objectivity and discuss histories of racism openly without experiencing pushback, backlash or isolation, this framework could bear risks for you. But meaningful change requires risk-taking.

Here are some questions to help gauge your readiness:

- ☐ Do you have a network of community members that you’re accountable to? Does your newsroom have community oversight in some way? Both are vital.
- ☐ Are the editors, producers or news directors who have the final editorial say aligned with you and this framework?
- ☐ Is there resistance in your newsroom to terms like systemic racism, white supremacy or colonialism?
- ☐ Have you considered your own social location (see *number VI* on p. 13), the areas of relative privilege you may hold and perspectives outside of your own experience?
- ☐ Do you have time for the diligence and care this requires?

- ☐ What is your relationship to the community you're covering? What is your newsroom's relationship?
- ☐ Reporters are constantly drawing ideas from community conversations and community reporting. What is your relationship to the people who've inspired you? Are you fully recognizing their labor? Are you fully crediting it? Do your methods of citation and attribution give preference to people with more professional status or downplay the power of ideas versus the written word?
- ☐ Are you able to openly share where this framework comes from? Would you feel uncomfortable or judged for being too "radical" if you did so?
- ☐ What is your framework for the delicate balance of active listening, sharing power and maintaining editorial control? Do you have one?
- ☐ Do you have a content strategy that considers the impacts of repeatedly sharing sensitive or triggering material? Does your strategy consider ways to mitigate potential harm for your audiences?
- ☐ Do you use social media platforms to share your storytelling? If so, do you have a content strategy that balances the pace of your storytelling and your posting frequency given the sheer volume of sensitive material that exists on social media feeds? How does your work fit or stand apart in that information ecosystem?
- ☐ How would you describe the voice or tone of your work? Would the communities you're reaching deem it appropriate for the events you're covering?

Safer Reporting for Safer Communities

A Code of Ethics for Community Reporting in Philadelphia



Active listening is necessary — it produces results that make it compelling and valuable for all parties in a conversation, including storytellers and sources. Listening to sources and communities deeply and with care should be the first step to your work.

- Track community events, ward meetings, visits to playgrounds and community spaces, and so on. Take notes on what community members share there.
- Storytellers should be open to off-the-record conversations or conversations that might not even be for a story. Approach these as ways to engage, build community and create pathways for connection and accountability.
- Be present in online spaces — including neighborhood groups on Facebook, Nextdoor, Reddit and TikTok.
- Passive listening isn't enough: You need to be active enough to receive insights and impacts. Ask questions if you're unclear, and distill the insights you're seeing and hearing.
- Active listening is an investment in empowered and respectful relationships between storytellers and people/sources. It pushes journalists away from being transactional and extractive, a tendency that can arise around deadlines.
- Do the work to recognize how spaces and their audiences can vary by age, race, culture, language, profession and so on. Hold how communication and storytelling can vary across lines of difference and space, and recognize that not all information or news would be shared in the same exact way.
- Community members determine if their needs are met and if their concerns are truly heard. Powerful institutions aren't qualified to make this call; nor are storytellers who didn't experience what community members experienced.
- Active listening includes maintaining ongoing relationships and providing consistent opportunities to give community members space for their voices.



Active listening is an investment in empowered and respectful relationships between storytellers and people/sources.



Ensure accuracy. Verification is a must.

- Fact checking should be performed by someone other than lead reporters, editors and producers before publication or broadcast.

- Check with the community to ensure the information and framing are accurate and fair to them.
 1. Reflect their words back to them and/or summarize what they said to ensure that you're understanding and recording their thoughts appropriately.
 2. Ask them if there's something they would like you to reflect on.
- Account for variation in language, which includes varieties of language like dialects or creoles. Consider how regions and social communities can influence shifts in meaning.
 1. Bring other news storytellers to the table to bolster accountability when there are language gaps.
 2. Understand that dismissing expertise on dialects and creoles is a form of language discrimination.
- This will be expanded on in the next principle, but binary thinking and polarizing assessments (see below) are unacceptable in a fact-checking process.



Move past binary thinking. Humans have many perspectives, and conflicts may have many sides. “He said/she said” can be reductive, untruthful and polarizing.

- Remember that binary thinking is a facet of white supremacy culture.
 1. Binary thinking is based implicitly on hierarchies and supremacies of value, right and wrong, and who matters more or most.
- Avoid any lens rooted in stereotype(s). Binary thinking and rebuttals to stereotypes are not news to the communities impacted. Instead of just debunking stereotypes, provide information that would be news to the communities themselves.
- Context is key and often adds more layers of meaning and understanding. Evaluate statements and findings for whether they've taken everything relevant in balance and whether the narrative is more complicated than what's been presented.
- Even if you are speaking to someone about a single issue, remember that, as Audre Lorde wrote, no one is living a single-issue life. The goal should be to embrace that truth, not minimize it.



“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

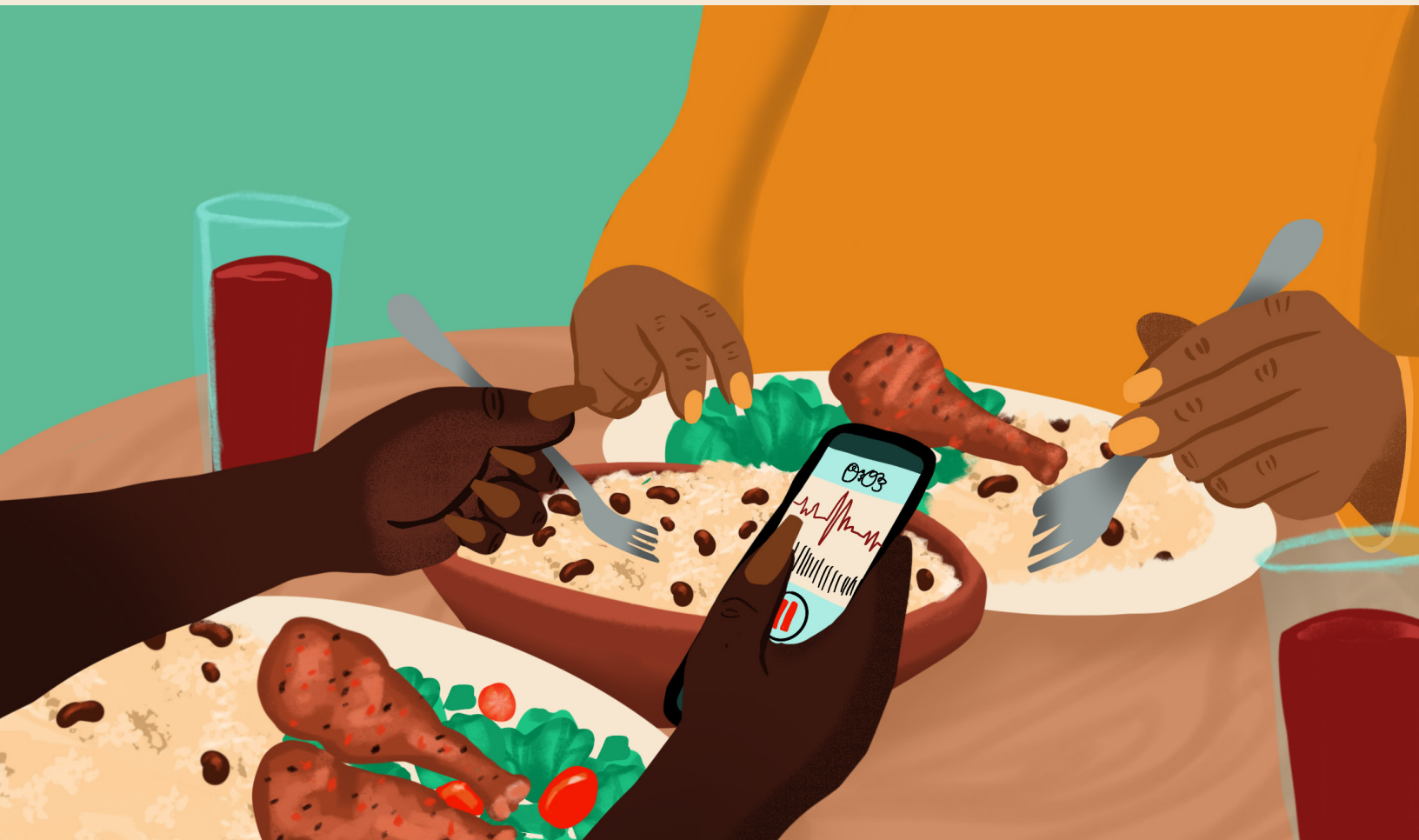
— Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*



The news should reflect the communities it serves, equitably and with an intersectional lens. This should be documented on an ongoing basis with accountability measures to avoid bias or erasure.

- Consider this quote from Columbia University Law Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term intersectionality: “Intersectionality is a lens through which you can see where power comes and collides, where it interlocks and intersects. It’s not simply that there’s a race problem here, a gender problem here, and a class or LGBTQ problem there. Many times that framework erases what happens to people who are subject to all of these things.”
- Never assume race, ethnicity, neighborhood, age, disability status, gender or faith. Check with the sources; then check the balance within the storytelling.
- Lived experience is valid experience.
- Every individual is the expert on their own experience.
- News storytellers should analyze and share how intersectional experiences may exacerbate impacts, and lead to some people within the same community experiencing more adversity than others.

A community member and a reporter carry out an interview over lunch.





All sources deserve respect and transparency. News storytellers should set expectations and share potential outcomes openly and honestly, keeping in mind that power dynamics exist in reporting and impact how stories are told.

- Explain to sources what the editing or production process looks like and who holds decision-making power.
- Respect can vary culturally and the dominant culture isn't qualified to determine what counts as respectful communication for everyone. News storytellers should learn these differences and should approach each source with the appropriate respect, humility and cultural competence.

Respect can vary culturally and the dominant culture isn't qualified to determine what counts as respectful communication for everyone. News storytellers should learn these differences and should approach each source with the appropriate respect, humility and cultural competence.



- Share openly where you're getting your information and research from, provided you have the ethical space to share that openly.
- Share openly your personal motivations for covering a given issue, if any.
- Remember that transparency and trust reflect the newsroom's relationship to the source and to the community, and to the sources' and community's relationship to journalism. Be prepared to experience different degrees of connection and information exchange because of these dynamics, and be prepared to bridge gaps in relationships on both the individual and group levels.



Storytellers should come from the communities they serve.

- Where possible, create and maintain pathways for community members who wish to tell their own stories themselves rather than exist purely as sources.
- Reframe what storytelling looks like. Respect and embrace forms of storytelling that depart from the dominant culture or worship of the written word.
- Considering social location is a must here. Understand that people from the same racial background might not be received in the same way due to differences in faith, class at birth, current income status, disability status, gender, professional experience, proximity to colonial institutions, sexuality and so on.
- Map out ways to empower impacted storytellers and put those plans into action.



All humans have biases, which means humans can't be purely objective. We can instead be rigorous, transparent and fair — and disclose our biases.

- Disclosures matter, even for the littlest things. Example: If someone on your team is a member of a group you're covering, disclose it, even if they won't touch the story.
- Share your methodology for how you did the work to explain how you arrived at the final product.
 1. From the outset, be open with your sources about your process. Tell each source that they will not be the only source for your story and explain why. Welcome conversation about sources' comfort level in relation to how you're conducting your reporting process. Welcome the opportunity for them to recommend sources as well.
 2. Keep sources up to date on the timeline and scope of the editorial process throughout. Ensure you're sharing updates as the scope, direction and themes of the story change. Name who makes decisions about timelines.
- Be transparent about what coverage you are and aren't taking on.
- Define your bias and report against it. "If your mother says she loves you, check it out" — a saying that young journalists often hear to encourage verification in every instance — still applies.
- What are you missing from your vantage point? Consider your social location and the perspectives you wouldn't have.
- If you're reporting on people impacted by oppressive systems, you don't have to interview the oppressors for balance. That's an accountability question.
- You don't have to interview conspiracy theorists for balance either.



The relationship to news consumers should be a caring one, like mutual aid, that meets people's information needs and includes resources to improve their lives and their reading/listening/viewing/sensory/felt experiences.

- Learn the community's needs and wants and remember that these are constantly evolving. Hold the community's information needs at all times.
- Share links and connections to other groups and organizations that provide care that your project doesn't.



Be mindful of savior complexes and the power dynamics that accompany work we consider a form of public service, including journalism.

- Commit to a standard of unconditionality:
We operate in a society that often makes marginalized people prove that they deserve to be seen, heard and cared for, but it's important to remember that people shouldn't have to prove themselves. Create a structure of accountability to check your biases and identify when you're defining worthiness based on identity, experience or whether you like a given person or group. (Check out this explanation of "politics of deservingness.")

- Don't allow dissent on the ground to cloud your clarity about where the needs for care are and where your journalistic focus should be.
- Be mindful of savior complexes and the power dynamics that accompany work we consider a form of public service, including journalism. Do the work to hold the histories of how communities have sustained themselves and cared for themselves. Find your place as a storyteller in that without embracing hierarchies.
- Every editorial role, not just reporters, should be mindful of these principles. This includes those who are not directly interacting with sources.
- You're not talking to the community from on high or speaking over community. You should communicate on an even footing with the community to source the news appropriately.
- Your storytelling should be accessible, which calls for accessible formats for the various communities that compose your audience. Engage with your audience to know what those accessibility needs and appropriate formats would be — whether that would be audio versions, content descriptions or translations, to name just a few examples.



A journalist interviews a hearing-impaired community member in a venue where masks are required. An ASL interpreter is present for support, but the reporter wears a transparent mask to allow for lip reading.



Storytellers must be accountable to the communities they serve, with these communities leading the conversation on what accountability looks like.

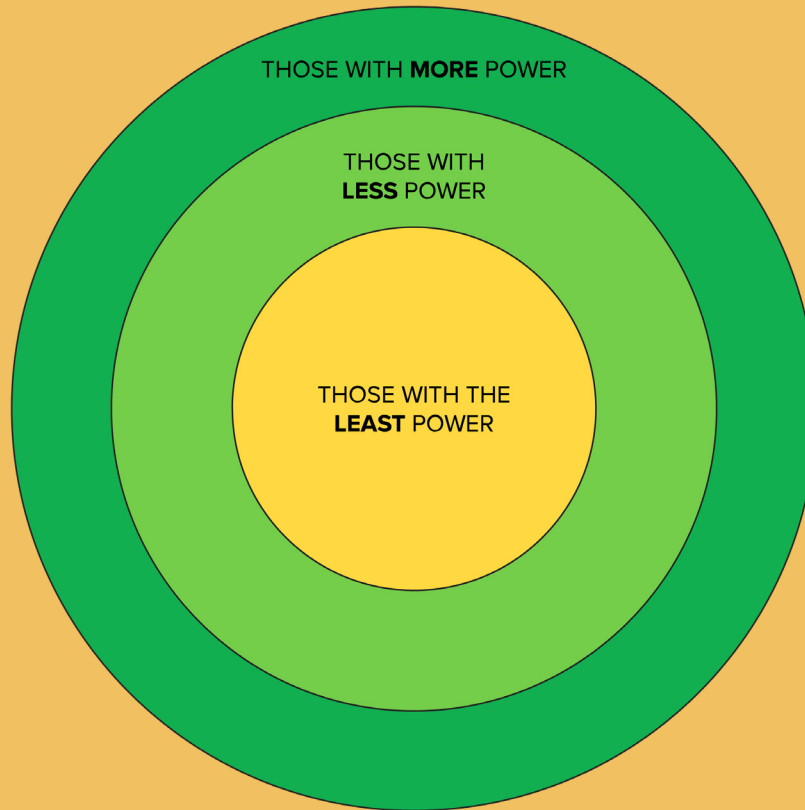
- Very defined feedback loops are necessary.
 1. After a story comes out, check in with sources about how the story made them feel, how they felt represented, and whether they believe oppressive systems impacted the storytelling.
 2. Ensure there are internal processes to monitor and respond to these feedback loops with care and consideration.
- Convene a community advisory board. Give it genuine power.
- Don't just issue corrections: Publish apologies that explain what you did wrong and what you're doing to repair it.
- When your work has negatively impacted someone in the community, give them space to voice how they were impacted and what they need for repair and empowerment. This does not replace your apology.
- Rededicate yourself to learning more community norms, traditions and practices if you've come up against a competency gap that causes harm.
- Employ translators as needed to ensure accuracy. Remember the phrase "a dialect is a language without an army and a navy," and seek guidance and translation when gaps appear there as well.
- Accountability happens inside relationships, so relationship building should be a must — and rebuilding relationships is necessary when harm happens.
- It's important to be clear on what agency means in a community. Remember that what empowers you might not be what empowers those seeking accountability from you.
 1. Remember that invalidation makes the harm worse.
- Accountability is hard. Ensure you have a support system so you can respond in a centered, honest way.

Accountability happens inside relationships, so relationship building should be a must — and rebuilding relationships is necessary when harm happens.





Build a stakeholder wheel. Include all of the stakeholders, but look for who doesn't have power and consider how you can center them.



[Click through to use our stakeholder wheel template](#)

- Define the stakes that the stakeholders hold. What is their jurisdiction and what can they speak to fairly?
- This can include impacted people, community members, neighborhood or community historians, community leaders, workers at community-health centers, social workers, care providers, researchers, public-health experts, epidemiologists, elected officials, law enforcement and so on. Again, you should center the voices that hold the least power and are experiencing the most impacts.
- Start your reporting by going to impacted people and community members first.
- Please lift up questions that come from impacted people and community members when engaging with stakeholders with more power.
- Following what's trending isn't a justification for failing to engage community members and stakeholders. Remember that there's a risk of sensationalizing trending topics from social media if you don't ground the conversation in the community's direct concerns and information needs.
- Remember that no community is a monolith — no single voice can represent the whole.

XI

Take the time to evaluate the structural systems of power and how they are showing up in the lives of the people in the story.

- Before you complete the story, your reporting should address the structural drivers and oppressive systems that undergird or exacerbate the violence or harm in this story.
 1. This should be done with care — of course you can't assume the drivers; this too is part of reporting and verification.
- Just as it's impossible to remove bias from how humans think, remember that all humans are capable of creating hierarchies of oppression. It's not that oppressed people aren't capable of oppression; on the contrary, oppressed people may create or reinforce oppressive dynamics, especially if they know nothing else. When you're covering a group of people, look for hierarchies that may be present — and as you interview sources, don't shy away from asking about power dynamics within a community.
- Drawing inspiration from solutions journalism, consider reporting approaches that focus on evidence-based solutions to social problems.
- When taking an investigative or analytic lens, consider how the data collection — in process and in critical reading — can trace oppressive systems and/or reflect them.

A job candidate shakes hands with an employer at a job fair. According to researchers at the University of Delaware and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, in distressed urban neighborhoods, "joblessness has a stronger effect on violent crime than poverty itself."



- Ask impacted people how structural and oppressive systems are affecting them.
- This is especially important in stories that include incidents of harm, as many cycles of harm and violence in our society trace back to systemic drivers.



Ask yourself if you have the knowledge competency to analyze complex structural impacts, and find ways to gain and share knowledge as you peel back the onion. Remember that the impacts may be out in the open but the structural origins may not.

- Ask yourself if you have the knowledge competency to analyze complex structural impacts, and find ways to gain and share knowledge as you peel back the onion. Remember that the impacts may be out in the open but the structural origins may not.
- Take time to decide whether you can analyze systemic drivers on deadline, and consider whether it's responsible to move forward with the story if the time isn't there.



There's a responsibility to balance public and individual perspectives with facts. Prioritize all the relevant facts, including the facts on interventions to violence.

- Communicate this responsibility with sources throughout the reporting process, an approach that's consistent with being transparent across the board. As part of your reporting, welcome conversations on how sources' perceptions and facts impact their lives.
- Remember that reactions can align with harmful stereotypes and harmful narratives that can impact whole communities. Remember that it's possible to capture difficult and tense reactions without reproducing those harmful stereotypes and narratives. It's not our role to perpetuate stereotypes.



Refrain from assigning morality. Narratives that label some people as good and others as bad don't reflect life's complexities.

- All the same, it is possible to center themes like redemption, grief, memorial, safety and accountability without adjudicating who is right or wrong.
- Don't forget to verify quotes under all circumstances.
 1. Perceptions of violence and crime don't always match evidence-based realities.
 2. In some cases, perspectives may carry factual claims. Verifying quotes is critical and will help gather more information for your reporting.
 3. In other cases, a harmful perspective could be hate speech or a values-laden moral claim about the worth of a given person or group. There may not be much to verify since the perspective may not be rooted in facts.

XIV

Approach every living being in the story with care, including people who have committed harm.

- Trauma-informed practices aren't optional. Don't forget to verify quotes under all circumstances.
 1. Check in consistently to make sure that your sources feel safe; their feelings may change.
 2. Give your sources opportunities to have a sense of control when sharing their stories and offer options to change their minds.
- Reflect back what's happening in the reporting during interviews and before publication or broadcast.
- Follow up when the story is out to offer closure.
- Give sources the opportunity to bring others for their comfort and welcome them to take their own notes or recordings.



A reporter adds a candle to a shrine in memory of a community member who passed tragically.



Reduce harm at all costs. Avoid dehumanization at all costs. Implement media harm reduction tactics.

- Always use human-first language.
- Speak to your sources about what language is actually humanizing to them; what language is oppressive, harmful or hurtful; and how you can shape your language to reduce harm.
- Include care resources and hotlines in stories when appropriate.
- Remember that there are cultural differences in storytelling, and it's not appropriate to impose your cultural preferences on your sources or on the story.
- Develop metrics to measure, with accountability, whether you're covering communities and community members equitably.
- Consider whether your storytelling could leave a traumatic imprint, what that imprint would be and how you could reduce or eliminate it.
- Embrace your humanity: Be prepared to share how your lived and professional experiences inform how you work and tell stories.
- Remember that journalists wear a lot of hats. While reporting the truth is the primary one, you might also take on the role of a counselor or someone who can hold space for another person in a traumatic moment. Keep in mind that you're not their medical-care provider, but remember that you can do harm by being robotic or cold in those moments. Be prepared to clarify the limitations of what you can offer as someone who's not part of their medical-care team.
- Be willing to do pre-interviews before recording to make space for sources to process what they would like to share. This is an opportunity to build trust, be transparent and find the right questions and framings.
- Remember that nuance takes time.



**Embrace your humanity:
Be prepared to share how
your lived and professional
experiences inform how you
work and tell stories.**



Ask questions of the people and groups who can answer them appropriately.

- For example, the police shouldn't answer public-health questions, and random people on the street shouldn't have to answer for structural problems.
 1. The stakeholder wheel can help with navigating this.
 2. Center community experiences and analysis in the situation. Bring community solutions forward.
- Welcome getting multiple opinions from people within the same field or category, especially if you're sensing bias or discrimination in the interview. No one person represents their entire field or community.

XVII

Expertise shouldn't be determined by colonial institutions, but instead by the best knowledge on a topic, regardless of a person's status. Expertise from within the community is crucial to getting the story right.

- Do not begin history with events that come from colonization; remember that history began well before this. Seek out Indigenous histories that predate and run concurrent to U.S. history. Do not conflate Indigenous groups, and center the land stewards where you are. Center colonized perspectives instead of colonizer perspectives on historical events.
- Talk to experts about how solutions have functioned in different contexts.
- Remember that universities, the legal system, political systems, police and law enforcement, prisons, museums, medical schools and many care centers are colonial institutions that have colonial histories and knowledge systems.
- Bear in mind that the knowledge we're taught in school can often feel unfamiliar or incomplete to Indigenous communities and communities that have lived in a place for generations.
- More often than not, there are longtime residents and engaged elders in a community who have seen the same problem before and have seen some version of an official or expert solution attempted — and seen it fail or succeed temporarily only to lapse again.
- When reporting on an issue, storytellers must avoid assuming that every issue is a new one. It may simply be a fresh instance of a chronic problem or gap.
- It's critical to identify formal or informal sources who can help explain what is systemic and why.



Do not begin history with events that come from colonization; remember that history began well before this.



A Lenape elder points out a tulip tree on a nature walk as a journalist behind her takes notes.

XVIII

Complicate the narrative: Show how issues exist across time and space, with nuance, solutions, history, context and root causes. Don't just expose an issue and leave the narrative there.

- There are many ways to tell a story and many ways to do journalism well.
- Diversity includes diversity of thought.

XIX

Publishing or broadcasting disturbing images of deceased people should require conversations with the people who loved them and what they would like to come from those images.

- Consider the most impacted people before making decisions about this. Understand that the political and psychological impacts can be vast.



- Remember and acknowledge that while people in community with those who have died might have specific reactions, there are still people who might consume the images for pleasure, however gruesome.
- Conversations and wishes from families, loved ones and cared-about people should be shared transparently within a newsroom or team so that all of the people working on the story can be on the same page.
- Discuss with families, loved ones and cared-about people where the images will go, the different mediums where they could appear — including social media — and factor their concerns into your decision-making around dissemination. This might require conversations and streamlined planning across departments.

At a ceremonial gathering following a disturbing incident in the community, a journalist follows guidance from a priest, who has signaled that it's OK to film her and the shekere present. Even when ceremonies don't include scenes that people would consider graphic, journalists should consult with family and faith leaders about what spaces, items or people are good to photograph or film — and which aren't.

- Remember that the roots of photography are exploitative and extractive. Ask yourself: Is there a chance for exploitation here? Am I extracting? Read the room and check in with people present at the scene.



Take the time to evaluate what visual stereotypes could show up in the storytelling.

- This includes things that are literally happening but could be read another way.
 1. For example, some cultural fashions are interpreted as political statements, especially during times of conflict, but why did the person wear it? Were they honoring an elder? Were they attending an event in their community with a dress code? Were they simply feeling cold?
- Consider the emotional story that's being told.
- Analyze how angles, light, shadow, lines, changes in complexion, the spatial environment, etc., can all change the visual story.
- Consider how bias can show up in your image captioning through who you're identifying, your language choices, etc.



There is a difference between narrative and fact. Court charges might be a matter of fact; someone's character is a matter of interpretation. Consider truthful, healing narratives; reject harmful narratives.



“Harm happens in a context. Often where there’s a breakdown in the social contract, unaddressed trauma has occurred and destabilizing harm has impacted people’s lives.”

— Abd’Allah Lateef

Our Manifesto



Together, we can transform the impacts of the stories, news and narratives that shape our understandings of the world. We call people in the media and in our communities into a process of learning and unlearning to dismantle the harmful practices that damage and misinform us.

We know that changing our orientation toward the news will encourage us to learn how our communities live together as an ecosystem, what challenges we face, which solutions we need — and how we can grow together interdependently. We must pivot from paradigms that don't serve us and move toward a humanistic journalism that sees our whole communities and our whole selves. Collectively, we will build this infrastructure, these relationships, this culture, this new tradition. Collectively, we will heal.



Black and Brown journalists and storytellers joining together

Language We Use

Coloniality

Journalism, as we know it in the United States, is a colonial practice. Its lineage comes from European settlers who crossed the Atlantic and brought their media-making traditions with them. Through research, we can trace many current norms in status-quo crime coverage, from skewed perspectives on Black and Indigenous people to the symbiotic relationship between law enforcement and the press to colonization. We speak about coloniality, the ongoing values, mores, systems and power structures in a colonized society, because if we don't address it, we are doomed to repeat the same harmful patterns.

Media Harm Reduction

This framework seeks to bridge the worlds of media production and harm reduction. Through the leadership and insights of journalist and harm reductionist aAliy A. Muhammad, the Philadelphia Safer Journalism Project has been co-developing recommendations for media harm reduction in partnership with a cohort of Black and Brown storytellers. Thanks to this process, we know that harm is inevitable, but that striving every day for safer journalism is always possible. We draw inspiration from "[Philadelphia Principles — Radical Harm Reduction and the World We Want](#)," which the group Mad Ecologies published in 2023.

Politics of Deservingness

Newsworthiness and who deserves care in journalism often reflect social and cultural values, and thus can reflect bias and hierarchy. Our communities have invited us to move away from politics of deservingness, our notions of who carries worth and value in our society. (See a more [in-depth explanation here](#).) They have done this to help us better align with journalistic values that our industries consider paramount but often stray from, like maintaining fairness, operating as a public service to all, and working to "[comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable](#)." Journalism suffers from elite capture, and undoing our politics of deservingness is an important step toward making journalism the public good it can be.

Reparative History

News accounts often offer authority without any memory of what communities have experienced in years and generations prior. Community members have long called for news that's better informed by history. We don't just care about the history of Lenapehoking, which includes land that we now call Philadelphia, and the histories of the communities who dwell here. We uplift the lessons and memories from elders and ancestors who have done this work before us. We know that because of them and their wisdom, we can reframe and correct accounts that news outlets have gotten wrong, identify opportunities for repair, learn about ways they've already changed our industries and cultures for the better, reach collective understandings where we share power and seek with greater acuity the liberatory futures of our dreams.

Safer Journalism

We center safety in our work, as do many of our partners. We admire the journalists and media makers in our sector who have already made the shift from crime coverage to public-safety coverage. We practice what we call safer journalism, a form of journalism that we co-developed with a cohort of Black and Brown storytellers and more than a dozen guest contributors of diverse backgrounds. Safer journalism shifts the relationship between communities and newsmakers to increase accuracy, nuance and accountability, and to help keep communities safer.

About the Philadelphia Safer Journalism Project

We can't count all the stories that are living inside of us. The communities that we call home in Philadelphia are rich with life and possibilities, something that we don't always see reflected in the news.

Crime coverage is one of the oldest and most popular forms of news coverage, second only to weather updates when it comes to news consumption. Research shows that crime coverage can exacerbate and desensitize us to violence, distort perceptions about crime in local communities, and skew how people from distressed communities envision their futures and outcomes.

While status-quo journalism often aspires to be unbiased, we have to recognize that the impacts are certainly not neutral. Crime coverage brings particular harm to people of color, and in Philadelphia, roughly 85 percent of people lost to homicide are Black. We live with the ways these narratives stoke further harm, devalue the lives of the people we've lost, fail to explore systemic solutions, allow stereotypes to run rampant and impact policy in the process. This is not a mere debate to us; this is so much deeper than being right or getting it right. We need new ways to report on public safety because of the life-and-death impacts we know exist.

We are taking part in a generations-long conversation on the ways our news systems harm marginalized Philadelphians. Our experiences align with impacted groups across the country, and with Black and Indigenous folks around the world. Over and over we've heard that we can't repair relationships between news outlets and our communities until we fully address and transform status-quo crime coverage. The Philadelphia Safer Journalism Project focuses on how we can change together and produce richer stories on the communities we know.

Since 2019, we have been collaborating with community members, therapists, researchers, legal experts, journalists, artists and media makers to improve how these stories show up in the news. We are a project of Free Press and Media 2070. We welcome all perspectives, but we center groups that have historically been excluded from ownership, production, media ethics and editorial policymaking.

