

Reparative Journalism: Narrative Power as a Racial Justice Strategy

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Introduction

Media structures are not neutral; they encode historical patterns of exclusion. The policies governing who controls narrative power in America are inseparable from racial justice. No contemporary policy crisis can be fully understood without centering the media needs of Black communities. Like roads and utilities, journalism is a public good, not a luxury. And yet for over a century, Black communities have been systematically underserved, misrepresented, and actively harmed by the very institutions charged with informing democratic life. Journalism that serves all communities is critical to a functioning society. This article argues that reparative journalism, defined as intentional, structurally supported practices of narrative repair, is not charity. It is the minimum standard in the struggle to realize a functioning democracy.

Why This Moment Is Critical

The Black press has been a cornerstone of American democracy since the founding of Freedom's Journal (1827). From Ida B. Wells' anti-lynching campaigns in the 1890s to the Chicago Defender's coverage of the Great Migration, Black-owned media have historically provided life-saving journalism that mainstream outlets ignored. The FCC's 1978 Minority Tax Certificate Program Ownership Policy briefly expanded Black media ownership, but Congress ended the program in 1995 during the Newt Gingrich era. The passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act then led to massive consolidation that gutted the inroads Black ownership had made in broadcast stations. Today's crisis is the culmination of decades of structural disinvestment compounded by immediate threats, including the systematic dismantling of civil rights protections, coordinated attacks on DEI programs, and the January 2026 dissolution of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a historic reversal of the nation's 1967 commitment to public interest media under the Public Broadcasting Act.

The funding landscape reflects this contradiction. Even as philanthropic commitments to local news have surpassed \$500 million since 2023, the federal government has cut \$1.1 Billion from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, impacting more than 1,500 local stations. State-level journalism tax credits and fellowships have emerged in New York, Illinois, New Jersey, and California, but none include explicit racial equity set-asides. The result is a two-tiered media ecology in which well-resourced legacy institutions absorb philanthropic windfalls while BIPOC-led community outlets by and large remain structurally excluded. At the same time, funds like Borealis Philanthropy’s Racial Equity in Journalism Fund explicitly invest in news organizations led by and serving communities of color, aiming to disrupt harmful narratives and increase civic engagement.

The dismantling of DEI programs across federal agencies, corporations, and newsrooms has compounded these structural pressures, delivering a blow to Black journalists and Black-owned media. Beginning in early 2025, a wave of executive orders and political pressure prompted major media companies to dismantle diversity-focused infrastructure built in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder. NBC News eliminated its entire suite of verticals covering underrepresented communities, including NBC BLK, NBC Latino, NBC Asian America, and NBC Out, all in a single round of cuts. CBS disbanded its Race and Culture unit. Of the approximately 169 race, diversity, and equity journalism roles created between 2020 and 2024, a third had already been eliminated by mid-2025, according to Nieman Lab research. These were not peripheral positions: they were the beats dedicated to covering reparations, health disparities, systemic racism, and the cultural life of Black communities with depth and institutional knowledge.

As NABJ President Errin Haines observed then, these cuts mean communities do not just lose jobs, they lose stories. Layoff patterns at outlets including CBS, NBC, and the Los Angeles Times revealed a consistent racial skew: journalists of color, many of them recent hires brought on to meet diversity benchmarks inspired by the 1968 Kerner Commission Report, were the first to be dismissed.

Corporate DEI retreats have simultaneously stripped Black-owned media of advertising revenue and partnership support. When companies like Target ended their Racial Equity Action and Change initiatives, Black-owned outlets that had been selected to receive paid media and business development support lost that funding overnight, with no policy mechanism to replace it.



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The Maynard Institute for Journalism Education, a nonprofit central to pipeline development for journalists of color, projected zero income from diversity training in 2025, down from \$1.2 million earned between 2020 and 2022. The result is a simultaneous defunding from above and below: federal cuts to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting eliminate public media infrastructure, while corporate DEI rollbacks eliminate the private-sector investment that had partially filled the gap. Black-owned and Black-serving newsrooms are caught between these two retreating forces, with no floor beneath them.

The Weight of Media Harm on Black Communities

Media harm has devastating impacts on Black communities. From the structural to the personal, negative media portrayals result in negative real-world outcomes for Black people: economic, psychological, and physical. Powerful media institutions have played a critical role in building and maintaining racial hierarchies in our society. This reality was reflected in the apologies published by several newspapers following the 2020 uprisings.

The Los Angeles Times wrote in 2020 that “for at least its first 80 years,” the paper was “deeply rooted in white supremacy and committed to promoting the interests of the city’s industrialists and landowners.” The Baltimore Sun acknowledged in 2022 that throughout its history, the paper had “sharpened, preserved and furthered the structural racism that still subjugates Black Marylanders in our communities today.” Burke (2022).

Meanwhile, the Illinois African Descent-Citizens Reparations Commission released a 2026 report that provides an “assessment of how slavery and its vestiges enabled the racial harms and injustices Black Illinoisans experienced historically and continue to experience today.”

When it came to the press, the report found that the newspapers had a “direct role in sustaining slavery-era systems” in the state through the publishing of notices to sell enslaved people. It stated that “newspapers gave legitimacy to slavery and its enforcement” by publishing these notices that “signaled to the public that the capture and sale of Black people was not only acceptable but woven into everyday economic and civic life.”

The report also asserted the press acted as “a powerful institution supporting racial control, reinforcing the legal and social systems that criminalized Black presence and protected White dominance.”

Media of all types collectively offer a distorted, anti-Black representation of Black people as unintelligent, violent, promiscuous, and impoverished. This caricature shapes public perception across racial and institutional lines. As Tucker (2007) documented, the media seldom depict Black people as ‘competent, capable, and successful members of businesses and families who have attained some degree of material wealth’ (p. 69). Research analysis shows the impact is devastating. This representational gap is not incidental; it is structural.

The numbers confirm what Black communities have long known. People of color constitute approximately 40% of the U.S. population, yet Black journalists represent only 9% of investigative reporters nationally, and Indigenous journalists fewer than 1%. Local television newsrooms lag the racial composition of the communities they serve by roughly 12 percentage points. The 1968 Kerner Commission warned that mainstream media failed to report on Black communities with accuracy or depth and called for the hiring of more Black journalists. It found the media had “contributed to the black-white schism in this country” and that the white press “repeatedly, if unconsciously, reflects the biases, the paternalism, the indifference of white America.” Over 55 years later, the structural gap remains vast.

Chicago and the Power of Reparative Storytelling

The 1919 Chicago Race Riots offer one of the most powerful case studies in the politics of narrative.

The riots erupted after a young Black teenager, Eugene Williams, drowned after being stoned by a group of white men after he drifted into a white-segregated area of Lake Michigan. The white news media inflamed events, publishing unfounded rumors as fact, misreporting the number of white casualties and injuries, and often making matters worse in the streets.

The Chicago Commission on Race Relations investigated the causes of the deadly 1919 riot, which included an examination of the press. It found that the white press depicted Chicago’s Black residents primarily in stories about crime. The report stated that “constant identification of Negroes with certain definite crimes could have no other effect than to stamp the entire Negro group in the public mind as generally criminal.”

Prior to the race riot, Reporter Carl Sandburg had been publishing a series of articles about Black life in Chicago, a rare form of coverage for a white news institution at the time. He had plans for a series outlining “a program of constructive recommendations” to ease racial tensions in the city. We will never know whether that series would have helped to inform lawmakers and local leaders to address the conditions of inequality and discrimination leading to the tensions that exploded during that Summer. What we do know is that the media has the power and responsibility to communicate the truth, contextualize modern events, and shape public perception.

What if Carl Sandburg’s planned series had been published, instead of the incendiary headlines and sensationalized stories? What would have become possible that summer for Chicago residents? Maybe a public conversation on racial injustice would have led to efforts to address segregation of public spaces, unequal treatment in the workplace, and housing opportunities. Wider readership of Sandburg’s reporting, though far from perfect, depicting Black Chicago residents with a fuller sense of humanity, may have opened the door for progress. This is a small example of the power of what Media 2070 calls reparative journalism: the deliberate use of narrative power to repair harm and make possible what harm had foreclosed.

Defining Reparative Journalism

Reparative Journalism includes actions by journalists and journalism institutions to engage in practices of care and repair, from public acknowledgment and apologies for

past harms to writing and storytelling that correct the historical record and make reparations for harms perpetuated against a community, such as The Guardian UK's legacies of enslavement project.

It may not incite a riot, but the depictions of Black communities by the media lead to real-world harm every day. The media landscape underrepresents Black people overall, seldom depicting them in technical and other intellectual pursuits, thereby failing to fit Tucker's description of "competent, capable, and successful members of businesses and families who have attained some degree of material wealth" (Tucker, 2007, p. 69). This shapes individuals of all races' perceptions when interacting with Black people, with real consequences.

Mainstream media has been linked to lower self-esteem and negative identity formation among Black boys. The adultification of Black girls by news and entertainment media serves to explain the disproportionate rates of punishment in the juvenile justice system for African American girls as compared to white girls. The USC Center for Health Journalism recommends practices to mitigate this bias, such as interviewing girls with their parents present and allowing them to tell their own narratives.

Reparative Journalism in Practice: Evidence of Impact

Reparative journalism is not theoretical; it produces measurable, tangible redress. Three recent case studies demonstrate its potential at the intersection of reporting, policy, and community accountability.

In Memphis, the outlet MLK50 investigated predatory hospital billing practices targeting low-income Black patients at Methodist Le Bonheur Healthcare. The investigative series produced direct financial redress: nearly \$12 million in medical debt was eliminated, and institutional policy was reformed. This outcome is inseparable from Memphis's legacy of hospital segregation enforced until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a historical context that reparative journalism is uniquely positioned to name and address.

In Detroit, approximately 500 residents were trained and paid as civic reporters through Outlier Media's Detroit Documenters program, attending public meetings and creating public records. Their reporting uncovered \$6 million in tax foreclosure surplus funds owed to homeowners, a direct act of civic infrastructure in a city whose tax foreclosure crisis disproportionately stripped generational wealth from Black homeowners in neighborhoods shaped by redlining.

In Philadelphia, WURD Radio, a Black-owned station, partnered with healthcare institutions to identify residents at risk for colorectal cancer. Trusted community media reached patients that mainstream healthcare systems could not, a collaboration that directly saved lives. This case is particularly resonant given the deep roots of medical mistrust in Black communities, rooted in histories like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932–1972), which community media is uniquely positioned to bridge.

Toward a Policy Framework: Seven Recommendations

The evidence demands a policy response proportionate to the scale of the harm. Reparative policy is not charity; structural redress requires policy mandates, not optional philanthropic gestures. The following seven recommendations provide an actionable roadmap:

1. **Mandate Set-Asides for BIPOC-Led Outlets.** Public policy and philanthropic programs for journalism should require that the percentage of funding directed to BIPOC-led outlets reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of the communities those newsrooms serve, ensuring that investment in diverse media is proportional to the populations that depend on them. This will begin to address the historical underinvestment in those communities. Philanthropic collaboratives like Borealis Philanthropy's Racial Equity in Journalism Fund already demonstrate how targeting resources to BIPOC-led and serving outlets can strengthen a more equitable media ecosystem, but public policy has yet to match this level of intentionality.
2. **Expand Eligibility.** Allow fiscal sponsorship and non-501(c)(3) eligibility in journalism funding programs to capture community outlets currently excluded by administrative barriers designed for legacy institutions.
3. **Remove Matching Fund Requirements.** Eliminate matching fund requirements that systematically disadvantage under-resourced community media. Requiring organizations to raise equal amounts before receiving public dollars effectively bars the outlets most in need.
4. **Mandate Public Accountability Dashboards.** Require transparent tracking of media ownership demographics, funding flows, and newsroom racial composition, publicly accessible and updated annually, so that equity commitments can be measured and enforced.

5. **Appoint Community Media Liaisons:** Establish dedicated liaisons within city and state offices to support and advocate for community media needs, creating a direct line between BIPOC-led outlets and the public institutions making decisions about their communities.
6. **Municipal Advertising Equity:** Model Chicago and New York City's approach: allocate approximately 50% of city advertising budgets to community media. This mechanism requires no new tax revenue and can take effect solely through administrative action.
7. **Document the Legal Rationale for Racial Equity in Media:** Require city and state governments to systematically document the historical basis and ongoing harms justifying BIPOC-focused media policies, including a comprehensive record of policies that enabled racial exclusion in media ownership and journalism funding. As equity-centered policies face increasing legal challenges, this evidentiary record will be essential to defending them in court and sustaining them over time. This recommendation aligns directly with Recommendation 4's call for public accountability dashboards and should be treated as an equally urgent mandate.

Conclusion

For newsrooms looking for a place to start, the "Media 2070 "Pledge to Care for Black Communities and Journalists outlines eight steps to begin repairing anti-Blackness in their institutions. Dozens of outlets have already taken the pledge. Reparative journalism is necessary because the media have taken part in and supported state violence and harm against Black people, with help from the media. This has reinforced and upheld white supremacy, and repair and reconciliation are necessary to build strong, free, and democratic communities.

When Black communities control narrative power, policy changes. Resources are secured. Lives are saved. The case studies in Memphis, Detroit, and Philadelphia are not anomalies; they are proof of concept. Journalism must move from describing inequality to dismantling it. The Chicago Black Policy Review's 2026 theme, Advancing Justice and Inspiring Change, demands nothing less.



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