THE PITTSBURGH PROBLEM
Race, media and everyday life in the Steel City

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Executive Summary

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania has a reputation as one of the most livable cities in the nation. This piece, however, argues that reporters of color working within the Pittsburgh media ecosystem have a much lesser quality of life both inside and outside of the newsroom. Previous studies related to diversity and inclusion within Pittsburgh’s media ecosystem highlighted two issues. First, Pittsburgh news media over-represents African Americans as criminals. Additionally, newsrooms in the area are woefully underrepresented in terms of diversity. Based on a series of 20 interviews with journalists who are currently or have worked within the Pittsburgh news media — including 16 who identify as individuals of color — this goes beyond numbers, and gains insights on issues of diversity and inclusion directly from newsroom workers, and documents a number of concerns journalists of color have about their working conditions within the Pittsburgh media ecosystem. Within the newsroom, journalists noted the following problems as it pertained to their work experience:

- Journalists interviewed expressed the belief that newsrooms in Pittsburgh could do a much better job of coverage and engaging the area’s African American community. Despite this, ideas pitched by journalists related to coverage of communities of color often fell on deaf ears.
- Newsrooms in Pittsburgh did not foster an environment in which journalists of color could openly express concerns about coverage, the lack of diversity or other issues. Journalists feared they would face backlash over their opinions, or simply get ignored. This leads many individuals to stay quiet on issues of diversity and inclusion.
- Journalists of color do not feel they received the same level of mentorship or advancement opportunities as their white colleagues.
- Many journalists — notably African Americans — also expressed concerns with their quality of life outside of the newsroom. Several journalists said they found they city unwelcoming to people of color, which only augmented their stress-levels as it pertained to their work within the newsroom. These quality of life issues mirror concerns noted in larger studies focused on the quality of life of
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African Americans in the Pittsburgh area. As one recent study noted, black people in Pittsburgh could have a better quality of life in almost any other city in the nation.

Why is this significant? If newsrooms truly seek to increase diversity within newsrooms, and improve coverage of communities of color, newsrooms must do more than simply hire more people of color. They must find ways to make journalists of color feel they can thrive within their newsroom environments, and directly challenge institutional systems of racism within their organizations. Nevertheless, diversity and inclusion efforts could still remain a challenge, if the larger community remains unwelcoming to people of color. For that reason, developing ways to locate and train individuals of color with roots within the Pittsburgh region may be the best way to ensure journalists of color are retained, and that news about communities of color remains a focus point within the larger news media ecosystem.

Introduction

For many journalists in Pittsburgh, it was one of the darkest days in their business. On October 27, 2018, a white supremacist from the suburbs, Robert Bowers, drove into the city’s Squirrel Hill neighborhood, a historic enclave for members of the Steel City’s Jewish community. Armed with an AR-15 assault rifle and several handguns, Bowers murdered 11 people inside of one of the neighborhood’s synagogues. In a city that prides itself on being one of the most livable in the nation, several of its residents had their lives taken from them in a hate crime.

The murders galvanized Pittsburgh’s media into covering the story from as many angles as possible. They explained how Bowers carried out his heinous act; they asked who Bowers was, and how he was drawn to white supremacy; and, after covering the funerals, they asked how Pittsburgh would overcome such a tragedy. The work earned the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette a Pulitzer Prize. For some journalists, the manner in which the community came together following the shooting affirmed their pride in the Steel
City. “After a long, emotional several days for my city, my family, my friends, my coworkers and myself, I decided to walk to work, take a few deep breaths and remember why Pittsburgh is the greatest place on Earth,” one local journalist posted on his Facebook page.

But for many residents of color in Pittsburgh, the city’s response to the tragedy raised questions about the climate for marginalized populations. In a piece for the hyperlocal news site Public Source, local artist Tereneh Idia wondered if the city would have had the same outpouring of compassion if African Americans had been targeted. “This is the city where its football team has decided to ignore players’ right to protest police violence but readily emblazons ‘Stronger than Hate’ on their cleats to honor the synagogue victims,” she said in the article. “Yes, the entire community should grieve over this tragedy. But why is there such a double standard? If all lives matter, why aren’t Black lives mourned this way?”

The Tree of Life Synagogue, where 11 people were murdered | Golden Sky Media
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It was a fair question. A few years earlier, the Pittsburgh region had endured a mass shooting that ranked among the worst in the area’s history in sheer fatalities. On March 6, 2016, five people, including a woman with an unborn child, were killed after gunmen opened fire on a cookout in the borough of Wilkinsburg, which directly borders Pittsburgh. All of the victims were African American. The shooting, which did not attract the same level of press coverage, did not result in a package of articles that earned a Pulitzer. The shooting’s aftermath, however, did attract race-based controversy involving a member of the local news media: Longtime WTAE news anchor Wendy Bell said on her company Facebook page that she already had an idea of who the shooters were, even though no information about the suspects had been released. “They are young black men, likely in their teens or early 20s,” Bell said. “They have multiple siblings from multiple fathers and their mothers work multiple jobs.” The comments made by Bell – who was eventually fired for them – drew a strong rebuke from the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation (PBMF), a local affiliate of the National Association of Black Journalists. In its response, PBMF argued that the Bell incident was “emblematic of an institutional problem across the news media in Pittsburgh, a media that employs few individuals of color, has become less racially diverse and continues to over-represent African-Americans as criminals and derelicts as opposed to engaging in more balanced and nuanced discussions of their everyday lives.”

The purpose of this work is to interrogate issues related to diversity and inclusion as they pertain to the Steel City’s media ecosystem, largely from the perspective of journalists of color who have worked inside Pittsburgh newsrooms. This piece will argue, based on data obtained from 20 interviews with journalists, 16 of whom are African American, that Pittsburgh fails to fairly represent communities of color inside newsrooms, and fails to give adequate agency to the journalists of color who work in those newsrooms. Moreover, while Pittsburgh enjoys a reputation as a livable city, several people interviewed argued that the overall racial climate for people of color in the area is anything but hospitable. As a result, many journalists of color are without respite, struggling with racial discrimination in both their professional and personal lives. This issue, the modern-day double-consciousness of having to thrive as a person of color inside and outside of the newsroom, is arguably the most underestimated challenge facing efforts related to improve newsroom diversity.

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Methodology

This study, which seeks to understand how journalists of color view the Pittsburgh media’s responsibility to provide fair and equitable coverage of communities of color, relied mostly upon a series of 20 interviews with current and former journalists. Of the 20 interviewed, 16 were journalists of color. As a means of gathering this population, several calls for participation were sent to members of Pittsburgh Black Media Federation. Additional participants were found based upon recommendations from participants. As a means of allowing the participants to speak freely, all journalists were given the option of speaking anonymously. It should be noted that the author of this piece served as a board member of PBMF from 2015 to 2017.
1. Race and the Media

It has now been more than 50 years since the release of the Kerner Commission report. The landmark study, which focused on the causes of urban unrest within communities of color in the 1960s, included a chapter that addressed mainstream news coverage of the uprisings. Judging the news coverage of communities of color to be “shockingly backwards,” the commission argued that the legacy news media presented communities of color “through white men’s eyes,” and with a “white perspective.”. In order to change that narrative, the commission urged the mainstream news media to diversify its ranks, and find ways to monitor its news coverage for examples of racial bias.

As of 2019, the most recent census from the American Society of Newspaper Editors notes that diversity in newsrooms still does not reflect the actual diversity within the United States. Just over 22 percent of workers within the newsrooms who participated in the survey were identified as individuals of color. This lack proportionality with the nation’s overall level of diversity — 2018 Census estimates place the nation’s white, non-Hispanic population at 60 percent. Moreover, only 293 of 1,700 newsrooms asked to participate submitted data to ASNE. At 17 percent, this represented the lowest participation rate in the 40 year history of the diversity census.

Additionally, despite increases in newsroom diversity, a steady stream of research into news content has shown that the mainstream legacy news media persistently represents communities of color in a negative fashion. People of color are overrepresented as criminals. People of color who are the victims of disasters, or who suffer from drug addiction are given less favorable news coverage than similarly impacted whites. These stereotypes, in turn, have a negative impact on the perception whites have toward people of color in everyday life.

So what is the solution to the problem of poor news coverage of communities of color? The Kerner Commission argued that mainstream legacy newsrooms needed to diversify their ranks with more journalists of color in 1968. In subsequent years, as documented
in the work of scholar Gwenyth Mellinger, media diversity organizations like the National Association of Black Journalists repeated this suggestion, noting especially the lack of people of color within the ranks of leadership. This year, in fact, NABJ placed CNN on a “special monitoring list” and launched “research and analysis” of the news organization after it found that no African Americans serve as executive producers or vice presidents anywhere in its news division.
1. The Pittsburgh Landscape

Recent studies and incidents that have garnered national attention suggest Pittsburgh’s newsrooms still have significant deficiencies related to race. In 2011, two studies commissioned by the Heinz Endowments found that men of color were dramatically over-represented as either criminals or athletes in Pittsburgh media. In broadcast news stories, men of color were depicted as criminals or athletes more than 90 percent of the time. In print, this was the case more than 80 percent of the time. The Pittsburgh news media has also been the site of several major incidents that have attracted national media coverage in the last five years. This not only includes the Wendy Bell incident, but two more, separate incidents involving the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

The Post-Gazette also made national news for an unsigned editorial board piece, published in 2018, titled “Racism as Reason,” which began, “Calling someone a racist is the new McCarthyism.” Also in 2018, a local alternative news outlet, The Pittsburgh City Paper, was forced to apologize after it featured a photo of a Nazi sympathizer in a story that honored women tattoo artists. And—as will also be discussed below—two television stations drew criticism after they ran unsubstantiated stories denigrating the victim of an officer-involved shooting.

Newsrooms in Pittsburgh also lack racial diversity. A 2016 survey of local newsrooms conducted by the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation found that people of color only represent nine percent of newsroom workers in the Pittsburgh region. The city of Pittsburgh itself is 35 percent of color, while Allegheny County, where Pittsburgh is located, is 20 percent of color. Among supervisors, journalists of color only made up 13 percent of the newsroom population. The survey also revealed that no newsrooms at that time had any individuals of color assigned to cover criminal justice, education or urban affairs—beats on which racial discrimination is often a topic of interest. Just as its parent organization, the NABJ, had concluded, the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation

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found that more diversity was needed in Pittsburgh newsrooms if news coverage of communities of color was to change.

Is diversity the solution?

This argument, however, assumes that when individuals of color enter newsrooms, they are given the agency to effect changes in how communities of color are represented. This concept is problematic, based on decades of general studies of how newsrooms determine news coverage. Decades of analysis of newsrooms has consistently revealed that various forms of social control limit the amount of agency most reporters have in transforming the status quo that determines news coverage. These factors include classic notions of what is deemed newsworthy, the tendency of newsroom to overemphasize conflict in coverage, self-policing by journalists concerned about job security and promotion opportunities, coverage practices that tend to give greater voice to official sources. Data analytics have also played a significant role in shaping what gets covered in the digital age.

When race becomes a factor, the idea that people of color in newsrooms can effect change becomes even more problematic. The mere presence of people of color within a workplace does not ensure they will be given the level of agency required to effect change.

In many cases, journalists of color do not work in environments where they can freely express their concerns. Various studies suggest that people of color face acts of racial discrimination – both overt and covert – in the workplace on a regular basis. These everyday actions, often known as microaggressions, cause great anxiety and stress among people of color, and often lead people of color to adhere to the status quo within a workplace, and ignore acts of racism or bias, often because they wish to avoid conflict, or fear that their concerns will be seen as an overreaction.
The Pittsburgh Problem

Issues of worker agency and retention, however, have not been heavily dealt with in literature when it comes to keeping newsrooms diverse. There are several works in the field of journalism, notably by scholar Pamela Newkirk and NABJ biographer Wayne Dawkins, and biographies that have observed the struggles faced by journalists working within legacy newsrooms. A former CBS employee, for example, recently went public about racial and gender discrimination in its newsroom. This work, however, has typically focused on the experiences of one or a few journalists within a single institution. More work needs to be conducted on how journalists of color are treated within an entire media ecosystem. Issues of retention may have as much to do with the conditions of the journalism ecosystem as they do with individual newsrooms. This study of journalists who have worked or are working in Pittsburgh newsrooms, is an attempt to fill this void in literature.
2. How Journalists Perceive News About Communities of Color

As previously noted, several studies have indicated that legacy media within the Pittsburgh media ecosystem do a poor job of covering communities of color in a fair and representative manner. This has resulted in a great deal of mistrust between communities of color and local newsrooms. Thus, it should come as no surprise that local residents distrust local media coverage of marginalized communities.

This lack of trust has been documented in other studies, from as far back as the Kerner Commission report, and more recently, in the work of scholar Andrea Wenzel, who conducted research focused on communities of color in Chicago and Philadelphia. These concerns, however, were also echoed by the journalists interviewed for this project, notably the news reporters of color. Most of the journalists interviewed expressed their own concerns about the lack of adequate and fair coverage of communities of color in the Pittsburgh region. When asked for their opinions on whether or not their respective newsrooms do a fair job of covering communities of color, 17 of the 20 journalists interviewed for this study—and 15 of 16 journalists of color—said their respective newsrooms failed to do an adequate job of coverage.

“We flatly ignored the Hispanic (community),” said Pat, who previously worked for one of Pittsburgh’s newspapers. “An East Coast city that ignores Hispanics? That’s hard to conceive of anywhere else on the East Coast. Our coverage of the black community? We were spotty, honestly.”

Several journalists offered critiques of coverage that focused on events that garnered regional and national attention. One of those events was the racially polarizing killing of 17-year-old Antown Rose.

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1 Interview with “Pat, – “11/01/18”
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On June 19, 2018, Rose was shot and killed by an East Pittsburgh police officer following a traffic stop. Rose, who fled the vehicle during the stop, was shot three times by officer Michael Rosfeld. Rose was unarmed at the time of the shooting. As details were still emerging, reporters from two newsrooms, KDKA and WPXI, ran stories from anonymous sources that alleged Rose had fired shots from the car in a separate incident prior to the shooting. Shortly after the release of the stories, Amie Downs, a communications director with the Allegheny County Police Department, sent out a statement that the reports were false. Later, the district attorney’s office announced that video evidence showed that Rose had not fired a weapon from the car. Neither station retracted its story.

The episode left one producer, distraught. The decision had been made while they were not at work, and they said they wished they had been consulted about the decision. Since then, the station’s relationship with the black community has been decimated, in that journalist’s opinion. In the months since the incident, the newsroom has received numerous hostile about the decision to run the story. “We were already hated by the black community,” they lamented.²

Several staffers at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette also expressed frustration over its newsroom’s decision to publish a racially problematic opinion column. In September 2015, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette ran a piece by columnist Jack Kelly titled “Remnants of Slavery.” In the piece, Kelly argued that African Americans no longer suffer from the legacy of slavery, and that “most blacks [in America] are better off than if their ancestors had remained in Africa.” The piece created an uproar inside the Post-Gazette’s newsroom, notably among its African American journalists. While the column was an opinion piece, they simply could not understand why the paper would publish such an offensive, historically inaccurate article. “It was really poorly written,” said one newsroom worker. “So not only was it trash, it was poorly written. Where’s the responsibility on any level?”³

² Interview with Anonymous
³ Interview with Anonymous
In response to criticism, the Post-Gazette at first agreed to meet with PBMF to discuss the column. The meeting was called off at the last minute by the Post-Gazette, after PBMF refused a request to not publicize that the meeting was taking place. For several journalists interviewed, the entire affair caused irreparable harm to their perception of the newsroom.

A more common complaint was that dedicated beat reporting on communities of color was negligible. Newsrooms, their staffers of color said, rarely attempted to build relationships with members of those communities. As a result, community members have come to distrust the media.

“I think in certain neighborhoods, especially in black neighborhoods in Pittsburgh, there was a natural skepticism of the media. There was a perception that we were just there to do the crime story of the day, or the drug arrest story of the day,” said one journalist, Pat.

Another reporter, Cameron, a Western Pennsylvania native, would routinely receive news tips from community residents. Over time, however, Cameron, too, saw a strain in her connection to communities of color. This was a two-way problem when it came to the lack of coverage: Legacy newsrooms were not seeking out stories to cover in communities of color. Communities of color, in turn, didn’t bother to speak with reporters, believing the effort was not worth their time. “I know there was just a level of frustration with the fact that people would reach out . . . and not get the coverage they would get at the [African-American newspaper, the New Pittsburgh] Courier,” Cameron said.⁴

Not everyone agreed that the coverage was poor. One journalist, Blair, who worked for multiple newsrooms in the Pittsburgh area, felt that the industry as a whole did a good job of representing communities of color. Blair had worked at newspapers within the Pittsburgh region, and also grew up in the Pittsburgh region. “In general, I think the

⁴Interview with “Cameron,” 11/01/18

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coverage is decent,” Blair, who is African American, said. “But again, I have nothing to compare it to,” Blair said.⁵

Casey, who is not of color, offered an economic perspective: He felt his newsroom could do a better job of covering communities of color. But he attributed the failure to decision-making that disproportionately favored analytic data about readership. News consumers in Pittsburgh, the data showed, were more apt to look for stories about crime or sports. As such, decision makers were simply following a model that made their operations profitable. “To stay viable, I think they just started catering toward the ‘what do people want to read’ side of the spectrum, which means your abdicating your gatekeeper role, your watchdog role,” Casey said.⁶

Pittsburgh has seen its fair share of problems as part of the nationwide financial turmoil in the news industry. In 2016, The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review, one of the city’s two daily newspapers, announced it would end its print publication, becoming a digital-only operation. As part of the announcement, the Tribune-Review also laid off 106 workers. The Post-Gazette announced last week that it would cut its print editions to three a week.

For many journalists of color, issues related to coverage were directly tied to not only lack of diversity within most newsrooms,—notably in leadership—but to a lack of agency. Many minority reporters feel their voices are simply not heard in the newsroom. Rudy, who worked in a print newsroom, often pitched stories focused the African American community. These pitches, however, rarely led to actual stories. Rather than complain, Rudy just stopped suggesting story ideas. “It got to a point where I’m like, “I guess I kind of accept it. It is what it is, and I’m just going to pick up my assignments and keep going,” Rudy said. “So I guess you can say I gave up, threw my hands up in the air and said, you know, forget it.”⁷

⁵ Interview with “Blair,” 01/21/19
⁶ Interview with “Casey,” 09/13/17
⁷ Interview with “Rudy,” 08/01/17

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This gets at another issue: Some journalists of color felt their opinions on race and news coverage were poorly received by leadership.

4. Within Diverse Newsrooms

Initially, one reporter for a print publication, Lee, felt supported in efforts to transform narratives about communities of color. Noting that there were no people of color on a specific beat, Lee requested to be assigned to the area. With the support of a supervisor, who was also a woman, she was able to make the switch. “I saw a hole where I didn’t see much coverage... I shifted my focus to that.”

Lee, however, continued to express

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8 Interview with “Lee” 11/02/18

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Concerns about the coverage, notably of working-class African American communities. Lee told editors the paper was complacent in their coverage, and needed a fresh perspective on communities of color. Lee’s continued critiques, however, created tension with newsroom leadership.

“When I would try to bring it up, it was, ‘Oh you’re just being that angry black woman ... who is trying to make everyone uncomfortable, as opposed to being that person who is trying to better our coverage and widen our scope in how we see things,” she said. “There just seemed to be, across the board, a sense of complacency. ‘This is the way we’ve always done it. So, it must be right. And you’re new here. So you just don’t know anything.’”

Another reporter, Riley, recalled one case in which a colleague in the newsroom was about to publish a story that implied, without evidence, that a black man was guilty of a crime. “I was livid. I had to walk away after the meeting was over,” Riley said. “I saw complete contempt to the African American community.” After a heated discussion, the newsroom killed the story. But Riley’s persistence has had little effect on her newsroom’s daily coverage of the black community. “Things have gotten worse,” she said. “In the [past], there was more of a sense of ‘let me listen, ‘let me hear’ ... [Now] we have a crop of young people who don’t have the same sense of history, who don’t care about that sense of history, who have a different sense of who people are.”

Another reporter, Taylor, felt colleagues did the best they could covering communities of color, and did it better job than his organization’s competitors. Taylor also believed many problems in coverage were related to a lack of staff and lack of communication on the part of community members, since they didn’t often relay information to newsrooms. But Taylor acknowledged issues that needed to be addressed. He was especially disturbed by the flurry of racist comments posted under articles on social media, and the failure of his employer to remove them. Taylor did not feel his colleagues would have been receptive to his criticism based on the way other colleagues of color

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9 Interview with “Lee” 11/02/18
10 Interview with “Riley,” 08/08/17

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had been treated after they had voiced concerns. “I want to say something, I want to speak up, but I don’t want to be perceived as being angry, or, ‘you’re that angry black reporter.’ So you’re walking on eggshells,” Taylor said.

Taylor observed, however, whites routinely expressing their concerns to their superiors, often in a hostile manner. Taylor referred to this dynamic as “white privilege.” “I think people need to be in an environment where they feel comfortable expressing who they are without having to worry about any type of consequences,” Taylor said.11

Lack of job satisfaction

Problems related to race were not limited to concerns over lack of coverage or misrepresentation: Several of the journalists of color interviewed expressed some dissatisfaction with their everyday lives in their newsrooms. For some, the entire workday was an unpleasant experience, as they struggled to connect with coworkers. In other cases, journalists felt they were treated differently and unfairly compared to their white counterparts. Others felt that they were not given the same opportunities for advancement as whites. And for many, both issues were defining features of their interactions within the newsroom.

One veteran reporter, Shelby, felt isolated in the newsroom, describing a climate of condescension, rather than overt hostility. Shelby said she had been forced to submit clips and a resume in order to switch to another beat, despite already working within the newsroom for more than a year, and having extensive experience as a reporter elsewhere. White journalists, on the other hand, were not asked to take such steps for internal positions. “I felt like the token at that paper. I felt like I was buried and my work was buried in one section of the paper,” Shelby said. “I was rarely on the front page of the paper, and I felt like when I tried to do more, I was smacked back to that [less prestigious section].”12

11 Interview with “Taylor,” 11/02/18
12 Interview with “Shelby,” 09/22/17

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Another veteran of the news industry, Harley, immediately felt uncomfortable on arriving in her newsroom. In a previous newsroom outside of Pittsburgh, Harley felt accepted both socially and professionally, and was comfortable expressing her opinions. This was not the case Pittsburgh. She came to dread going into work, faced with the newspaper’s coverage of the black community and the prospect of continuing ostracism. “In Pittsburgh, I felt very much in a box,” Harley said. “I felt like I was fighting my bosses and [fellow] staff at the same time, and I was exhausted.”

No connection to peers

Other respondents noted that journalists of color often failed to get the same level of mentorship, and were not recognized for their work to the same extent as white colleagues.

“It’s almost like you had to be really exceptional [if you were black] ... some people didn’t get the same kind of encouragement,” said Shane, a newsroom veteran. “It’s not [that] talent is not recognized, but there did seem to be a difference between the type of encouragement and mentoring you might get between white and black staffers.”

Another journalist, Stacy, simply felt she had little connection to her colleagues, other than the few people of color who were her co-workers. “In the newsroom, it’s just very cliquish,” Stacy said. “You have people who are hanging out, and I’ve just been kind of like, no, I don’t really connect with you all, so I’m not going to use up my outside time in this place to hang.”

No opportunity for advancement

Broadcast journalists also lamented what they saw as a hidden quota system pertaining to on-air talent in Pittsburgh. While each broadcast station had people of color on staff, broadcast journalists interviewed noted that stations never go beyond two or three people of color for on-air talent.

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13 Interview with “Harley,” 10/05/18
14 Interview with “Stacy,” 09/25/18

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“I’ve seen some young people of color, male and female, that got a job as a producer at a station, but their love was [on-camera] TV, said one veteran of a broadcast newsroom. “I talked to them, and some other people talked to them as a group: ‘Get on air,’ [we told them.] We were hoping, of course, that they would get on air here, but that didn’t happen. They got on air, but in the other markets.”

This is not to say, however, that all of the journalists of color interviewed disliked their jobs.

Another journalist, Harper, noted that after years of rolling with the punches, it became necessary to start demanding opportunities. For Harper, this strategy paid off: being more aggressive in demanding opportunities eventually resulted in a better job within the newsroom. Harper was aware, however, that this was the exception to the rule. Many others who challenged the system did not enjoy the same results.

“(I) didn’t have to really worry about things that other people have to worry about,” Harper said. “But that doesn’t mean that I was unaware of what was happening with them, and very sympathetic and certainly understanding of the fact that you’ve got to leave when you can’t do what you want to do professionally.”

This leads us to an issue related to diversity and inclusion that goes beyond the newsroom.

It’s the Pittsburgh problem.

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15 Interview with “Harper,” 11/10/18

Columbia Journalism School
5. The Pittsburgh Problem

In many publications, Pittsburgh has been ranked as one of the most livable cities in the United States. It was highlighted for its unity following the Tree of Life tragedy, with the phrase “Stronger than Hate” becoming associated with the city. A promotional video from Visit Pittsburgh celebrated its residents’ friendliness. Pittsburgh’s media has celebrated the city for its affordability, its cuisine, the length of time its residents stay in the area and even how it celebrates Easter. Most of the white journalists interviewed for this study agreed. While acknowledging its issues with racism, they said the city by and large is a wonderful place to live and raise a family. “I’ve lived a lot of places, and this is probably my favorite other than home,” one journalist, Casey, who is white, said.

This notion of “livability,” however, has long been a point of contention for the city’s African American residents. Pittsburgh-based activist and musician Jasiri X wrote a hip-hop song critiquing this label. This is the song’s chorus: “Welcome to America’s Most Livable City/ Please ignore the invisibles with me/ See Pittsburgh rebuilt its economy /But we still lead the Nation in black poverty.”

The “livability” superlative has also been questioned by Damon Young, a Pittsburgh native and co-founder of black interest blog VerySmartBrothas. In a recent article, Young argued that the city blatantly disregards the poor conditions in which its residents of color live while their white neighbors tout its livability. He calls it the “big Pittsburgh lie.”

“Blacks leave and other minority populations don’t even bother coming, because the city isn’t welcoming,” Young wrote in the article. “The city tolerates us fine if we’re pushed into Homewood or the Hill, or if light sprinkles of us occasionally find ourselves in Shadyside or at the Byham. But anything more than that, well, maybe it’s time to plow through another protestor.”

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16 Interview with “Casey,” 09/13/17
Evidence clearly suggests the city is not equal for communities of color. A study released in September of this year by the city of Pittsburgh’s Gender Equity Commission revealed a stark contrast between the quality of life enjoyed by whites in Pittsburgh and its African American population. The study analyzed 26 issues related to income, health, education, violence and other “livability” factors and found that white men and women enjoyed average or above average outcomes as compared to other cities in at least 21 areas. By comparison, the number of average or higher outcomes for black men was only ten.

The number for average or above outcomes for black women? Just four.

“Livable”

In an interview with Public Source, Junia Howell, a co-researcher with the project and assistant professor of sociology at the University of Pittsburgh, minced no words when discussing what the study says about the quality of life enjoyed by most African American residents of the city. “What this means is that if Black residents got up today and left and moved to the majority of any other cities in the U.S. ... their life expectancy would go up, their income would go up, their educational opportunities for their children would go up, as well as their employment [rate].”

This study merely reiterated what many other efforts revealed over the years about disparities between whites and blacks in Pittsburgh. One study conducted by the Center for Community Progress, a community renewal nonprofit, found that, since 2000, white household incomes in the city have increased by 70 percent, while black household incomes increased only ten percent during that same span. A 2017 study conducted by the city itself noted that while overall incomes for white residents increased by about $1,000 that year, incomes dropped for black residents by more than $4,000. The disparity between black and white household incomes in Pittsburgh was already massive – $55,671 versus $22,010, respectively. This same study gave Pittsburgh an overall equity rating of 55 out of 100, meaning “that inequalities by race, gender, and income are prevalent in Pittsburgh, with some populations likely to have less access to
resources and worse health, economic, and social outcomes,” it concluded. The introduction from Mayor William Peduto accompanying the report bears the motto “America’s Most Livable City” under the letterhead.

Professionals of color are particularly dissatisfied with life and opportunities in the city. According to a 2016 study co-authored by Vibrant Pittsburgh, a local nonprofit dedicated to diversifying Pittsburgh’s workforce, many workers of color feel unsatisfied by their work situations. Moreover, the study found that workers of color felt that Pittsburgh as a whole was not fully embracing of diversity.

These problems get at a larger challenge facing journalists of color within Pittsburgh newsrooms—one that has less to do with coverage, career opportunities, or mistreatment by co-workers. For some journalists, notably those who were not from Pittsburgh, the climate of the city itself was a hindrance to feeling connected with their newsroom.

Some journalists arrived with high expectations of Pittsburgh. This was true of both Harley, the veteran journalist who had found Pittsburgh media culture especially hostile, and Lee, who shared a newsroom with Harley and met resistance when she criticized its coverage of communities of color. But in addition to the issues within their shared newsroom, they felt isolated as young people of color in Pittsburgh. While they were able to make friends, notably through the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation, they didn’t feel that Pittsburgh was a hospitable environment for young professionals of color. Unlike other cities, there just weren’t many places for people of color to socialize with other people of color.

“If you’re not from Pittsburgh, it’s hard to get to know people,” said Shane, a newsroom veteran who has witnessed the departure of many journalists of color over her more than a decade within the industry. “You have to be more willing to make your own fun.”

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17 Interview with “Shane,” 08/03/17
Young, in a recent interview, also noted the struggles many people of color face in Pittsburgh. “You don’t have any spaces in your life where it is just chill spaces,” Young said. “You are living in every moment. If you can’t find those things here in Pittsburgh, you are going to go to a place where those things aren’t as hard to find.”

Experience with local residents in Pittsburgh turned off Taylor, the reporter who was leery of speaking up about racist comments on his newsroom’s social media posts. Taylor noted that, on one occasion, while covering a story in the Pittsburgh suburbs, a police officer showed up after a local resident complained that a black person was wandering around the neighborhood. Taylor was also disturbed, as previously noted, by comments posted underneath stories, and by another aspect of the newsroom’s social media presence: All journalists were required to have their own Facebook pages. Taylor was dismayed when he noticed one day that they had fewer likes than almost every white journalist, including those that had been at the station for a shorter period of time. Taylor was given tips on how to increase his number of likes. But Taylor felt that nothing he did would make up the difference, given the mindset of the audience. “What can you do except for realize maybe black [journalists] aren’t as well-followed in Pittsburgh? It was just one of those situations where I was like, I don’t know if I want to be in an environment where people aren’t really noticing the work that I do,” Taylor said.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{18}\) Interview with “Taylor,” 11/02/18

Columbia Journalism School
“Grit”

Not all reporters of color leave Pittsburgh, and some interviewees have remained in the area for years. But in most cases, their decision to stay was related to establishing roots in the area. Some grew up in Pittsburgh, or attended college in the city. They had purchased homes, had stable incomes or had made enough friends to make everyday life bearable. They still, however, understood why many of their colleagues opted to leave the area, and often thought of doing the same themselves.

Cameron, a journalist from the area, acknowledged that, for journalists of color from outside of the area, the transition to living in Pittsburgh could be very difficult.
“It’s not that we’re unfriendly, but we’re definitely caught in our habits, in our ways and maybe people don’t … think about bringing people into their circle,” Cameron said.

Riley, who had worked to keep a story told from a racist angle out of her newspaper, wasn’t always happy in Pittsburgh. But she felt an obligation to stay on and fight on behalf of both communities of color and journalists of color. In doing so, the reporter decided she would need to develop more grit to deal with the everyday challenges of life in Pittsburgh.

“I’m blocking for these young people,” Riley said. “If we leave, there’s none of us there to do that. We falter more because when we make a mistake, it’s all black people. And the opportunity to bring another black person in does not happen.”

The notion of overcoming challenges related to racism with “grit” has been popular within academic research in education, and is one that has sparked a great deal of controversy. Students who have grit, literature suggests, have soft skills that allow them to overcome obstacles. They know how to network, how to find resources to help them deal with stress and are less likely to give up when they face roadblocks. Many of the individuals interviewed who have persevered within Pittsburgh newsrooms – including those who left – suggested that they had to find ways to cope with everyday challenges.

A major resource noted by many in helping them deal with racial challenges was the Pittsburgh Black Media Federation. The organization, which predates the founding of the National Association of Black Journalists, was cited as a place of refuge for many of the journalists interviewed for the project. As one of the only communication professors of color in the entire city, PBMF provided a refuge where I could both discuss my research and socialize with other people of color. Indeed, even journalists who have left Pittsburgh have said that the friendships they developed in the city were the greatest part of their experience with the PBMF. This was certainly the case for the author of this study. But for many of them, PBMF was not enough to temper their desire to leave the city.

19 Interview with “Cameron,” 11/01/18

Columbia Journalism School
“I think I grew up in Pittsburgh,” said Lee, who moved away after two years in the city. “I came in a very wide-eyed, naïve, young reporter with these grand dreams and ideas about the change that I was going to help make, and helping give voice to the voiceless, and all these other things. By the time I left, I just felt bitter,” Lee said. 20

20 Interview with “Lee,” 11/02/18
6. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that Pittsburgh media has done a woefully poor job of creating inclusive workplaces overall. Interviews demonstrated how rank-and-file journalists feel barred from giving their opinions about coverage, for fear that their contributions will at best be ignored or, worse, result in retribution from colleagues. Moreover, many interviewees felt they had limited opportunities for promotion, and were isolated from their peers. As one put it, they journalists feel they felt like a mere token, largely invisible within their newsrooms, not because they do not exist, but, to quote Ralph Ellison, “simply because people refuse to see me.”

Diversity is not a panacea, but it is essential

Interviewees said almost universally that increased diversity is necessary for change, especially within the ranks of leadership. Several journalists noted that conditions within newsrooms for journalists of color changed dramatically depending on whether or not leadership of color was present. One veteran journalist, for instance, noted that conditions at the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette worsened following the departure of Lorraine Branham. Branham, who rose to dean of Syracuse’s Newhouse school, recently passed away. Interviewees also did not find excuses for not hiring people of color convincing. As the above interview respondent put it, if the “next ten hires” for each newsroom were people of color, the diversity problem would not exist – at least initially. Diversity, however, is only one factor in changing newsroom culture. Newsrooms must deal directly with systemic, institutionalized issues that prevent them from creating spaces where journalists of color can thrive.

Even news organizations that are actively trying to change their approach to engaging communities of color—such as Public Source—acknowledge that there remains plenty of room for improvement, such as in diversity hiring. Across Pittsburgh, newsrooms could arguably do a much better job of recruiting journalists of color. Newsrooms
could also do a better job of creating truly inclusive spaces where workers feel empowered.
Increasing diversity in management would significantly improve this situation. And there are other simple steps, like recruiting at NABJ conferences, targeting journalists from historically black colleges and universities, and working closely with college professors, that could help immediately. And newsrooms must deal with implicit bias among staff members.

In another Tow Center study, a scholar assessed the success of cultural competency training at WHYY in Philadelphia, an NPR affiliate. As defined by WHYY, cultural competency within the context of a newsroom requires “understanding the nuances of the communities we cover, building relationships that further our knowledge and ability to accurately cover these communities, and recognizing and doing something about our own skewed lenses and how they impact the narratives we present.” As part of the effort, WHYY, reviewed practices related to engagement and tracked how often members of marginalized communities and assessed ways to increase the number of stories about marginalized populations produced by marginalized populations. While the conclusions related to success were mixed, it nonetheless provided a template for how newsrooms can better address issues related to race within their workplaces.

A far trickier issue to overcome is what this report has called the “Pittsburgh problem.” The city, due to a multitude of factors, is not a place where people color can thrive. Compared to whites, they have significantly less wealth, fewer social spaces and feel less respected in their workplaces. One underappreciated impediment to recruiting and retaining diverse talent is that many people of color have no desire to live in areas where they believe they will not be able to thrive—even if that place has a large population of color. If a newsroom is in an area that people of color do not find appealing, many potential journalists will not be inclined to seek employment in such areas. If they do arrive, fail to plant roots, and perceive the area to live down to low expectations, they likely will not stay long.

“Grit” should also not be seen as a solution to a problem. While grit is certainly a beneficial skill for professionals of color, and while journalists of color are indeed
needed in newsrooms across the nation, it is unfair to expect them to deal with racial hostility for the sake of the community. Suggesting that grit is a solution for dealing with racial hostility is akin to telling journalists of color they should simply deal with racial microaggressions. If newsrooms operate in a manner where people of color are given little agency, this notion of “gritting it out” for the community becomes less feasible, if not downright absurd.

Pittsburgh is not hopeless, and other cities are not perfect

If people of color are to be retained in newsrooms, simply improving news coverage or improve conditions within newsrooms may not always be enough. That is why one solution to the problem may be heavily investing in training and retaining homegrown talent of color who have roots within the Pittsburgh region—whether by virtue of growing up in the region, having extended family in the region, or being educated in the region. Individuals who have deeper roots in a community will have a greater passion for its well-being, may have a built-in tolerance for its particular acts of racial animosity, and will more likely be willing to stay within the community for an extended period of time. Such journalists also have an easier time building trust among communities of color, since they are part of the community.

Pittsburgh has at least one potential vehicle for training journalists of color – the PBMF’s Frank Bolden Urban Journalism Workshop, a week-long residential program, that and boasts fellows who have worked within the Pittsburgh media, and Pulitzer winner Keith Alexander, who worked on the Washington Post’s investigation of police killings.

Another solution could come from alternative sources of media, or partnerships between newsrooms and community organizations. Pittsburgh is still home to the New Pittsburgh Courier, a legacy African American newspaper. The Courier, however, had only one full-time reporter, as reported in the PBMF Diversity Census. Thus, a space may exist for the creation of an alternative news source.

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There may also exist possibilities for community/newsroom collaborations that would expand positive news coverage of communities of color by existing local newsrooms. While not ideal, if certain newsrooms are unable or unwilling to provide resources to communities of color, alternative sources could potentially provide such coverage, or partner with less capable newsrooms in producing news that fairly represents communities of color.

Such efforts have had some success across the state in Philadelphia: Point Park University’s Center for Media Innovation, led by former journalist Andy Conte, is currently testing a program designed to encourage such collaborations. It should not be assumed, however, that all partners—either communities or newsrooms—would be receptive to such collaborations. This and other interventions must be tailored to the needs and realities of Pittsburgh; what works in one location will not necessarily work elsewhere. For this reason, more work on understanding the Pittsburgh media ecosystem, and how local residents consume news and information is necessary.

By the same token, while this piece focused on Pittsburgh, the issues outlined here should not be seen as exclusive to the Steel City. The vast majority of the nation’s thousands of newsrooms are located within communities that are even less diverse than Pittsburgh. The ASNE survey cannot be the only measurement for diversity and inclusion in news within these areas. Scholars must begin the process of assessing news coverage and recruitment and retention issues within smaller communities in the nation, notably the many communities that, while still majority-white, have significant populations of color within their borders.
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