

Repairing trust: How newspapers responded to diversity, equity and inclusion discourse
in the summer of 2020

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Dedication

*To journalists working to make the field fair and inclusive. And to Chris, Tyus and
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Abstract

After George Floyd's murder by a Minneapolis police officer on May 25, 2020, the transnational conversation about racism and anti-blackness caused the newspaper industry to consider its past behavior with respect to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). This thesis uses a textual analysis of DEI statements published by top U.S. newspapers, which include metajournalistic discourse about race, and case studies of two U.S. newspapers to analyze how U.S. newspapers responded to calls for improved DEI in the summer of 2020. Newspapers often attempted to defend their past behavior even as they communicated a desire to build trust with marginalized audiences. Although the amount of metajournalistic discourse about a newspaper's DEI initiatives was not predictive of DEI actions, public discussions of a newspaper's failings might serve as a precursor to real, concrete change.

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Introduction

Discourse about newspapers' diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts became commonplace in newsrooms and news coverage during the summer of 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. His death led several top U.S. newspapers to reflect on their own coverage of police violence and race, and their own hiring practices (Folkenfilk, 2020; Farhi & Ellison, 2020). In response, many U.S. newspapers produced public-facing texts to address their own interaction with DEI, and the ways in which they had failed and hoped to improve. They also began hiring or promoting people, often people of color, into management positions designed to address DEI.

The issue to which they were responding was not new. Mainstream newspapers have, for decades, been faced with critiques on how they treat racial and ethnic minorities, both those they cover and those who work in their newsrooms (Mellinger, 2013; Kerner, 1968; Hutton, 1993; Chideya, 2018; Dedman & Doig, 2005). Historically, U.S. newsrooms have been spaces dominated by white males (Mellinger, 2013; Dedman & Doig, 2005). Those newsrooms' adherence to the status quo, and to promoting white male structures can be seen in their coverage and hiring practices (Frankel, 1999; Delaney, 2018; Bedingfield & Forde, 2021; Mellinger, 2013). That history also reveals the cyclical nature of diversity initiatives in U.S. newsrooms. First a national crisis happens; a reckoning about racism and media depictions of race follows; lastly, calls for improvement are announced (Mellinger, 2013; Hutton, 1993; Chideya, 2018; Dedman & Doig, 2005).

In 1978, the American Society for Newspaper Editors (ASNE) first made promises to improve racial diversity within its newsrooms. The organization created a program called Goal 2000, which sought to make U.S. newsrooms reflect the racial makeup of the country by the year 2000, calling it “an affirmative action initiative to achieve racially proportional employment in daily newspaper newsrooms by the end of the twentieth century” (Mellinger, 2013, p. 2). Twenty years later, ASNE realized its members would not reach this goal, and many newsrooms and reporters tired of the long-held focus on diversity initiatives (Mellinger, 2013; Chideya, 2018).

Time and again these initiatives to improve diversity in newsrooms follow the apparently Sisyphean path of racial progress in the United States; it is a history replete with backlash from those in power (Muhammad, 2019). An example of that backlash in the newspaper industry came in the 1980s, when Max Frankel, executive editor at the *New York Times* from 1986 to 1994, created a policy which said every white male hire should be matched by hiring a reporter of a minority group (Delaney, 2018). His editors reacted by refusing to hire anyone at all (Delaney, 2018). Frankel’s memoir details his commitment to attempting to improve the racial diversity of the *New York Times*, but also betrays the very institutional thinking that creates barriers for reporters of color. As part of his explanation for the *New York Times*’ lack of Black reporters, Frankel blamed those reporters, rather than his editors or the organization’s hiring practices, saying, “Blacks do not attend college in the same proportion as whites, and even fewer have shown any interest in working on college newspapers, an important training ground for print reporters” (Frankel, 1999, p. 468). While Frankel identified a lack of diversity,

particularly a lack of Black reporters, in his newsroom, he failed to see his newspaper's responsibility.

During the summer of 2020, several U.S. newsrooms made promises to improve DEI after a white police officer, Derek Chauvin, murdered George Floyd, a Black man, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Floyd's murder, witnessed by many and captured on video, led to transnational protests and uprisings against racism and police brutality. Activists and employees in several industries seized the moment to protest Floyd's death, while also highlighting problems related to racial diversity within those industries. In the newspaper industry that meant reporters at the top-circulated newspapers in the country, like the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Wall Street Journal*, confronted their own management about what they felt were problems with hiring practices and coverage of people of color (Farhi & Ellison, 2020). Several of those newsrooms responded by issuing statements about how they would improve, producing metajournalistic discourse. The contents of these texts acted in much the same way scholars have found metajournalistic discourse manifesting in the past, by making meaning out of journalism practice and attempting to legitimize journalistic organizations to audiences (Carlson, 2016; Carlson & Usher, 2016; Berkowitz, 2000).

The texts addressed problems related to diversity, equity and inclusion that had diminished trust between newsrooms and the communities they served. Existing literature that analyzes declining trust in news examined how newsrooms work to improve the credibility of their journalism in the eyes of audiences (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Tsfat &

Cappella, 2003; Fawzi et al., 2021; Toff et al., 2021). Research also explores the way newspapers' treatment of people of color has hampered their ability to fairly cover communities of color and earn their trust (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2005; Wenzel et al., 2018; Robinson, 2017). The present study will add to that literature by understanding the way newspapers expressed their intent to repair such breaches of trust after internal and external pressure during the summer of 2020.

This research draws on two rich and unique data sets – a collection of texts produced by newspapers after George Floyd's murder, as well as interviews done with newsroom leaders who were instrumental in the papers' DEI initiatives after the summer of 2020. In this research, I argue that newspapers used DEI statements to legitimize themselves both internally and externally. Declining trust in news, in part spurred by a history of racism, has damaged newspaper legitimacy in the eyes of marginalized audiences, and these statements attempted to address these issues. This research focuses on two case studies which draw on interviews with managers from the *Star-Tribune* in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and *The Boston Globe* in Boston, Massachusetts, as well as historical context and related contemporary texts to illuminate how their newsrooms engaged in metajournalistic discourse, trust and their own problematic history internally after the summer of 2020 to address their DEI issues. This research shows the gap that sometimes exists between what newspapers say they will do and what they actually do, and the ways in which performative metajournalistic discourse can diverge from the real work being done behind the scenes.

Literature Review

Metajournalistic discourse in DEI statements

The summer of 2020 saw an eruption of metajournalistic discourse about race. Metajournalistic discourse is conceptualized as “public expressions of evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their reception” (Carlson, 2016, p. 353). It allows journalists and non-journalists to define the practice of journalism, set boundaries, and offer “judgments about journalism’s legitimacy” (Carlson, 2016, p. 350). The DEI statements analyzed in this research contain metajournalistic discourse.

Journalism has long been thought of as an objective replication of the world, though it is more adequately described as a mediated form of communication (Meltzer, 2009; Zelizer, 1993). Carlson (2016) argues that journalism is not a fixed practice because its meaning depends on contexts, like when and where it exists, and social relationships. As such, discourse about journalism is necessary to understand it. Although people inside and outside the journalism industry can engage in metajournalistic discourse, this thesis focuses on metajournalistic discourse conducted by internal actors – the newspapers themselves and their employees. Metajournalistic discourse can be done through journalistic media, such as news articles, editorials and audio or visual pieces, as well as non-journalistic media, such as marketing and press releases (Carlson, 2016). This paper analyzes both journalistic and non-journalistic pieces which aim to explain the selected newspapers’ DEI efforts.

The intent of metajournalistic discourse can be to legitimize journalistic practices to both those within the journalistic community and the general public. When deployed by people or institutions within journalism, it's often used as a method of self-defense (Berkowitz, 2000; Mathews et al., 2022; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019). A study of media coverage about the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, in 1997 found discourse about journalism, which examined journalism's role in her death, served the dual purposes of meaning-making within the journalistic community and defining journalism for those outside the field (Berkowitz, 2000). In another study, metajournalistic discourse in the form of advice from journalists who had left the industry offered a recentering of power structures within an industry in which those former journalists had previously felt powerless (Mathews et al., 2022). Right-wing outlets have engaged in metajournalistic discourse to assign a negative value to mainstream journalism while legitimizing themselves or claiming victimhood (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

During the summer of 2020, journalists of color spoke publicly about their experiences with racism in their newsrooms, news outlets published stories that addressed those concerns, and some issued statements about their commitment to DEI (Farhi & Ellison, 2020; Folkenfilk, 2020). Several mainstream news outlets hired managers whose focus would be on addressing their past failings with regards to racial DEI, and published pieces featuring metajournalistic discourse related to those appointments. Based on this, we can ask the following research question:

RQ1: How did newsrooms and newsroom employees use metajournalistic discourse to legitimize and explain journalism practice through texts they produced about DEI in their newsrooms?

Trust in news

The dynamics of the relationships between newsrooms and the communities they serve are essential for understanding the underlying contexts and intentions of the 2020 DEI statements because newspapers' statements about their internal diversity initiatives were directed toward those communities as well as other stakeholders. One important mediating factor of that relationship is trust (Fletcher & Park, 2017; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003; Fawzi et al., 2021; Toff et al., 2021). Trust is the willingness to ascribe a set of beliefs and expectations to another entity, whether it be a person, organization or institution. Hauser and Benoit-Barne (2002) argued that deliberative democracies require trust among those participating in public discourse. Sztopka (1999) defined trust as tied to the future because a person chooses whether to trust an institution or another person based on an assumption about future interactions with the trusted entity. He argued that trust becomes most relevant in situations of helplessness, when one's ability to affect a certain result is low or non-existent.

Zucker's (1986) work on trust provides a framework that identifies different types of trust: characteristic-based trust, process-based trust and institution-based trust. Characteristic-based trust is trust that relies on social characteristics; process-based trust is trust that relates to how past actions can set future expectations; and institution-based

trust relates to the way one can expect institutions to behave. Zhang et al. (2017) used characteristic-based and process-based trust to study trust in media, arguing that institution-based trust didn't fit a study of media trust because media are separate entities, rather than one monolithic institution. However, one could argue that institution-based trust does apply given that media outlets, while autonomous, form formal structures of communication which cause media members to behave collectively like an institution. In discussing trust in news, Vanacker and Belmas (2009) used a similar framework to that described by Sztompka, tying the concept of trust to the future – an evaluation on how an actor will behave in the future. This thesis explores newsroom DEI efforts through the lens of process-based trust because a newspaper's statement about DEI represents an indication of how they will behave in the future and can be evaluated based on their past behavior.

Trust in journalism has seen a sharp decline during the past several decades (Funk et al., 2020; Brennan & Stubbs, 2020). As the media landscape has changed, consumers don't always feel mainstream journalism serves their interests or properly informs them. A 2020 Gallup poll found that while its respondents believed journalism was critical to democracy, they also saw journalism as biased, and many respondents blamed the internet and misinformation on the internet for a less trustworthy news environment (Brennan & Stubbs, 2020).

Some explanations of extreme distrust include media consumption habits, political ideology, distrust in institutions and perceptions of brand identity (Fletcher &

Park, 2017; Jones, 2004; Lee 2010; Toff et al., 2021). Two studies published 14 years apart both found “media skepticism is positively associated with non-mainstream news exposure,” though they couldn’t determine causation (Fletcher & Park, 2017). Jones (2004) found low levels of trust in news to be related to low trust in government, rather than specific gripes about news content itself. Jones also found that distrust in media is “unusually high” among conservative Republicans who listen to talk radio. Lee (2010) found people’s trust decreased in years when stories that reflected negatively on their party of choice dominated the news. For example, “Democrats’ and Liberals’ favorable attitudes toward news media dropped from 1996 to 1998, whereas Republicans’ attitudes improved,” which Lee (2010) suggests might be related to coverage of Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky (Lee, 2010, p. 15).

Toff et al. (2021) found that “trust often revolves around ill-defined impressions of brand identities and is rarely rooted in details concerning news organisations’ [sic] reporting practices or editorial standards – qualities that journalists often emphasise [sic] about their work.” Through qualitative interviews with respondents from four different countries, they found that audiences use heuristics to understand what characterizes certain brands, as well as context that draws on social influences, their own pre-existing partisan dispositions, and mediated interactions. While journalists they interviewed thought deeply about their own editorial practices and their connections to the communities they served, the audience members interviewed focused more on perceptions of media outlets.

Other research has found that journalists think about, and are keenly aware of, the relationship between their work and trust from the communities they cover. While Toff et al. (2021) found that audiences don't connect trust and engagement, Zahay et al. (2020) found that journalists do. Zahay et al. (2020) found that traditionally oriented journalists believed that a strict and detached reporting of facts would improve trust in their work. The authors suggested that engagement with audiences would provide higher levels of trust in news. In interviews with "engagement-oriented" journalists, they found those journalists to believe trust to be a product of empathy, understanding and human relations. Based on this literature, we can expect to find indicators of attempts to improve trust within newspapers' DEI statements and initiatives.

Trust within marginalized communities

Distrust in news is also high among communities that are marginalized by news coverage, such as racial or ethnic minorities who find that news outlets don't fairly and accurately cover their neighborhoods, their friends, their families and all the people who share their common experiences. Among communities of color, trust in news has been routinely damaged by historical patterns of representation that marginalize those communities (Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2005; Wenzel et al., 2018; Robinson, 2017). Decades of evidence show news organizations fail communities of color (Dixon & Linz, 2000; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2005; Squires & Jackson, 2010; Mellinger, 2003; Robinson, 2017; Wenzel et al., 2018). Although news outlets have been warned about the consequences of their marginalization of communities of color (Hall, 1980; Perloff,

2000), this problem endures (Kilgo, 2021). Just like other manifestations of racism in the United States, news outlets marginalizing coverage of people of color often harms Black, Latino/a and Indigenous people at a higher rate than other racial and ethnic minorities.

A body of research about engaged journalism has emerged that seeks to understand the tenuous relationships that mainstream news outlets have with people of color in the communities they serve (e.g. Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2005; Wenzel et al., 2018; Robinson, 2017). Matei and Ball-Rokeach (2005) found that residents of South Los Angeles are accustomed to being marginalized by local and national media outlets. South Los Angeles is populated predominantly by Black and Latino/a people, and it's often depicted in media as dangerous and gang-infested (Wenzel, 2018; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2005). While media portrayals can construct a reality for those without first-hand experience of a place, these fear-inducing depictions often ring false to residents of the neighborhood (Wenzel et al., 2018). Wenzel et al. (2018) sought to illuminate the roots of such distrust in news and interviewed Black and Latino/a people in South Los Angeles. Residents reported feeling frustrated that media portrayals never showed positive stories about their neighborhood, and researchers connected that to their cynicism about the trustworthiness of media.

Participants spoke of the harm media could do. As one man explained, 'It's a lot of weight coming from negative exposure to media It can have a heavy negative mental or psychological effect on you'. Several spoke of how the negative coverage stigmatized residents to outsiders: 'It makes us look like mostly

criminals live around South L.A’, said a 20-year-old Latino participant. (Wenzel et al., 2018, p. 658).

One participant felt that reporters didn’t seek out upstanding members of the community to interview. Others felt that reporters covering South Los Angeles were outsiders who did not truly understand the neighborhood (Wenzel et al., 2018).

Robinson (2017) illustrates expectations of trust among Black communities through her research that details protests that followed the death of a Black 19-year-old in Madison, Wisconsin. Her work illustrates the disconnect between white reporters and communities of color in a paper published in 2016 about reaction to and coverage of a charter school for African American boys. She found that Black community leaders and activists thought white reporters covering the story had an obligation to build trust in their communities rather than expect it. Several of those community members also advocated for local outlets to hire more Black reporters. One participant expressed skepticism in white reporters’ ability to empathize with Black people (Robinson, 2017).

Marginalization of racial minorities, which contributes to distrust, is especially prevalent in coverage of policing and protests (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019; Barlow, 1998; Wenzel et al., 2018). When this literature is considered alongside mainstream newspapers’ historical failures in serving minority communities and people of color, it shows that progress they made toward truly inclusive, fair and holistic coverage fell short. While most news organizations no longer explicitly supported racism and racial

terror, they still promoted the status quo in their coverage. Several of the DEI statements made by newspapers in the summer of 2020 addressed some of these inequities.

Minority communities have been historically overpoliced and criminalized in America (Phelps, Robertson & Powell, 2021; Brunson, 2007; Muhammad, 2019). After the death of George Floyd, reporters and audiences demanded news outlets think about the ways in which they covered communities, particularly issues affecting negatively impacting those communities. News outlets are often guilty of limiting their coverage of people of color, particularly Black, Hispanic and Indigenous people, to issues like policing, crime and protests (Wenzel et al., 2018).

Coverage of policing is complicated by the sometimes-symbiotic relationship between police and reporters. This relationship can cause news outlets to rely too heavily on police narratives (Lawrence, 2000; Kerner, 1968). News outlets have also historically struggled to cover protests fairly and accurately in a phenomenon scholars describe as the protest paradigm, which says that press accounts of protests that challenge the status quo tend to delegitimize the protesters and minimize their demands (Chan & Lee, 1984). News media has a long history of demonizing protesters in coverage that is heavily influenced by elite messaging (McLeod, 2007; Gitlin, 1980; Chan & Lee, 1984), more strongly delegitimizing protests related to both anti-Black racism and Indigenous issues, using framing that emphasizes riots, chaos, and conflict (Kilgo & Harlow, 2019). On the other hand, when U.S. outlets covered the Arab Spring and Tea Party protests, they worked to avoid delegitimizing protesters (Weaver & Scacco, 2013; Harlow & Johnson,

2011). There is also evidence that media outlets tend to legitimize foreign protests more than domestic protests (Oliver & Myers, 1999; Kilgo et al., 2018; Harlow, 2019).

As detailed above, trust in news has been declining and levels of trust are particularly low among marginalized communities. Given what we know about the news media's failures at covering marginalized communities, and how those failures harmed trust between members of those groups and media outlets, we can ask the following research questions:

RQ2: What factors of trust in news media are addressed in the DEI statements made by US news outlets after the murder of George Floyd?

RQ3: How did newsroom DEI leaders at the *Boston Globe* and *Star Tribune* examine and address trust as it related to their DEI practices following George Floyd's murder?

Race in U.S. newsrooms

The history of racism and marginalization that has existed in U.S. newsrooms is relevant to the study of DEI statements that were produced in the summer of 2020, and to understanding internal newsroom dynamics after Floyd's murder. Examining the history helps set expectations for what might be found in the data analyzed in this thesis.

Analysis of newsroom demographics and the coverage those newsrooms produce has repeatedly shown that mainstream newsrooms historically tend to be white male spaces (Mellinger, 2013; Dedman & Doig, 2005). This isn't a new realization, nor has it

always been seen as a problem by newsroom managers and publishers. In fact, in 1948, James O. Eastland, a segregationist senator, addressed the American Society of Newspaper Editors and praised them for the form of segregation they practiced, as shown by the low percentage of Black journalists in their newsrooms (Mellinger, 2013):

You are guilty of racial discrimination in the newspaper business. There are thousands of Negro reporters in this country, yet the newspapers do not draw 10 per cent of their reporters from that race. Ten per cent of your executives are not Negroes. You are not to be condemned. It is your civil right to associate with, employ and work with whomever you please. Liberty is dead in this country when you are deprived of that right. (as cited in Mellinger, 2013).

Eastland's words might have rankled some of the newspaper editors who heard them, particularly those at northern papers who fancied themselves progressive on issues of racial segregation. But, despite urgent warnings about media characterizations of racial minorities, it would be decades before they did anything about it. In the case of Black Americans, accurate portrayals of their communities and lives were mostly seen in Black press outlets, which have existed since the early 19th century (Hutton, 1993).

ASNE's failed 1978 effort to address racial diversity was the organization's first public statement that indicated an interest in changing the makeup of their newsrooms (Mellinger, 2013). Evidence of the newspaper industry's stagnation in improving its diversity numbers can be seen in a Knight Foundation study published in 2005 which found that the percentage of non-white reporters at 146 of the 200 largest newspapers in

America had reached its peak in a year between 1990 and 2004 (Dedman and Doig, 2005). In the year the study published, 2005, all 146 of those papers had a lower percentage of racial minority reporters than at their peak.

ASNE's yearly census data between 1996 and 2018 shows a similar lack of progress. Between 1996 and 2006 the minority representation in newsrooms which participated in ASNE's survey increased only 2.75%, from 11.02% to just 13.87%. ASNE noted newspapers were contracting their staffs and reducing their numbers of employees overall, but an overall reduction in staff should not have significantly impacted demographic percentages. Their numbers took a relative leap after 2015. In their 2016 report, the percentage of employees representing racial minorities grew to 17% and in 2018 to 22.6%. This, however, could have been impacted by ASNE's methodology – the organization cautioned that “while encouraging, this figure cannot be generalized to interpret the landscape of the U.S. journalism industry because the responses are not drawn from a random sample. The survey has historically relied on a convenience sample from organizations that volunteer to participate” (NLA, 2018). ASNE suspended its yearly survey in 2020 due to a lack of cooperation (Scire, 2020).

In some industries, a lack of racial diversity among employees bears little importance outside of that organization's internal dynamics and its workforce. In newsrooms, however, it can impact the stated public-serving goals of news organizations. One such example was detailed in a case study of media coverage in Madison, Wisconsin, of “the proposal of a charter school to educate African-American boys”

(Robinson & Culver, 2016, pp. 375-6). Every reporter covering the story was white and some admitted to feeling awkward talking to sources who were Black. On the other hand, some research indicates the presence of minority journalists has limited effects.

Journalists of color sometimes avoid subjects related to minority communities to fit in better in majority-white newsrooms (Nishikawa et al., 2009). Sui et al. (2018) found that organizations with diverse newsrooms don't necessarily dedicate more coverage to race-related issues unless the communities they serve include many racial minorities.

Promoting racist structures

Mainstream U.S. newspapers have a long history of upholding racist structures, refusing to identify racism, supporting the disenfranchisement of Black citizens, and defending racial terror (Hall, 1980; Kilgo, 2021; Perloff, 2000; Bedingfield & Forde, 2021). One example of this came during the Jim Crow era when newspapers covered lynchings of Black people without denouncing them, often describing them as unfortunate necessities (Bedingfield & Forde, 2021; Perloff, 2000). Grisly details of the torture inflicted upon lynching victims were often sensationalized to attract readers (Perloff, 2000). Perloff detailed newspaper coverage that assumed the guilt of lynching victims and coverage that implied those victims deserved their fate – even the *New York Times*, which Perloff said was earlier than many mainstream or white newspapers in opposing lynching, made racist assumptions about people who were lynched. Those assumptions intended to create an impression that lynching might be a deserved punishment (Perloff, 2000).

The problem of news media promoting popular and damaging stereotypes about Black people and other racial minorities persisted through the 20th century. The Hutchins Commission report on the Freedom of the Press in 1947 identified the problem of news media depicting racial minorities incorrectly, saying,

Even if nothing is said about the Chinese in the dialogue of a film, yet if the Chinese appear in a succession of pictures as sinister drug addicts and militarists, an image of China is built which needs to be balanced by another. If the Negro appears in the stories published in magazines of national circulation only as a servant, if children figure constantly in radio dramas as impertinent and ungovernable brats – the image of the Negro and the American child is distorted. The plugging of special color and ‘hate’ words in radio and press dispatches, in advertising copy, in news stories – such words as ‘ruthless,’ ‘confused,’ ‘bureaucratic’ -- performs inevitably the same image-making function. (Hutchins, 1947, p. 26).

The commission’s report aligned with Hall’s (1992) theoretical framework that suggests representation, depictions and ideas about people, through discourse, become part of our cultural reality (Hall, 1992). This literature shows that portrayals of minority communities matter not only for those communities themselves, but for what impression is left on white audiences about communities with which they might not have direct contact.

In the summer of 1967, after uprisings in urban centers, particularly those with large Black populations, President Lyndon Johnson appointed the Kerner Commission to examine why that summer was so volatile. The Kerner Commission dedicated an entire chapter to the failures of media outlets in their portrayals of Black communities and inequality (Kerner, 1968). News outlets' unfair treatment of those subjects were part of what had caused riots in the summer of 1967, the report said, because they had caused a national ignorance about racial inequalities (Kerner, 1968):

We have found a significant imbalance between what actually happened in our cities and what the newspaper, radio and television coverage of the riots told us happened. The commission, in studying last summer's disturbances, visited many cities and interviewed participants and observers. We found that the disorders, as serious as they were, were less destructive, less widespread, and less of a black-white confrontation than most people believed. (Kerner, 1968, p. 201).

The report said news outlets were obtaining information from government officials, rather than primary sources, and those government officials gave incorrect information (Kerner, 1968). This overreliance on elite sources is a problem that lingers today (McCarthy, 2021).

Rather than accept this critique and examine their own practices, some mainstream newspapers defended themselves or gave little attention to the report's media critiques, instead focusing on the report's warnings about racism (Rice Lamb & Byerly, 2019). Some conservative papers even mocked the report for suggesting white racism

was to blame (Rice Lamb & Byerly, 2019). Four years later, the Congressional Black Caucus addressed media diversity in a scathing statement that included this line: “One hundred and eight years after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, it is still impossible to find in the media anything approaching an adequate picture of black culture, black people, and black lifestyles.” (Rice Lamb & Byerly, 2019; Congressional Black Caucus, 1972).

From the racist way newspapers covered lynchings to their overreliance on sourcing from officials, like police, which had their own racist biases, this literature review has detailed a long history of racism in newsrooms and their failure to address problems when alerted to them. Newspapers have a long history of upholding racist structures. There is more contemporary evidence of newspapers promoting racist structures as well (Brown, 2022; Chideya, 2018; Kilgo & Harlow, 2019), which makes it important for this analysis to understand how the newspapers analyzed in this thesis position themselves within this history. Therefore, I ask the following research questions:

RQ4: How did the promises for change made in DEI statements and internally within the *Boston Globe* and *Star Tribune* address or acknowledge the history of racism within U.S. newsrooms?

RQ5: What is the relationship between written DEI statements and announcements, and actualized DEI actions at the *Boston Globe* and *Star Tribune*?

RQ6: What, if any, indications of lasting change do DEI managers see within the *Boston Globe's* and *Star Tribune's* DEI efforts?

Method

This project decodes messages sent by mainstream newspapers in statements published about organizational DEI efforts, and compares projections to performance, using a two-pronged approach: textual analysis of 12 DEI statements; and two case studies using statements and interviews with newsroom managers involved in the newspapers' DEI efforts from two U.S. newsrooms.

Textual Analysis

I retrieved data from 12 texts created by newspapers about their DEI efforts, which were then analyzed qualitatively using Altheide's (1987) concept of ethnographic content analysis (ECA). ECA is used to analyze datasets from samples chosen for theoretical reasons. The method requires paying close attention to how texts were constructed in addition to their content. This type of analysis emphasizes validity in messaging, and unlike traditional content and textual analyses, does not adhere to rigid study designs and protocols. ECA involves "reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, data coding, data analysis, and interpretation" (Altheide, 1987, p. 68). A key element of ECA is that "meanings emerge through repeated encounters with the texts" (Berkowitz, 2000). ECA also accounts for reflexivity during the analytical process. Here, it is relevant to note that I, the author of this thesis, am a newspaper reporter who is an Asian woman, and have worked in the newspaper industry for more than a decade. I selected the texts in this sample based on a

series of criteria. The final sample included press releases and news stories published by several newspapers which drove a national conversation about newsroom diversity.

I included statements from eight of the 10 most widely circulated newspapers in the U.S. as of 2018 According to Cision Media Research: *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, the *Star-Tribune*, the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Boston Globe*. The two left out were the *New York Post* and *Newsday*, from whom no public DEI statements were found. While *The Courier-Journal* is not a top-circulating newspaper, I included the *Courier-Journal* in Louisville because a black woman named Breonna Taylor was killed by Louisville police two months before Floyd's death. Her death sparked protests about police behavior and racism as well. These statements and reports were in direct response to protests against racism and the police murder of George Floyd, and organizational DEI efforts. In total this included five news stories, three press releases, two editorials, and two additional statements.

- Five news stories were included. Three articles from *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post* and *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* detailed DEI management hires (Masanuga, 2020; Farhi, 2020; Smith, 2020). I included an additional news story written by a *USA Today* staffer about the paper's DEI history and effort (Bomey, 2020). Another story detailed findings from an internal diversity audit at the *New York Times* (Robertson, 2021).

- Three press releases were part of the sample: a Dow Jones press release about its subsidiary, the *The Wall Street Journal*, hiring a DEI manager, a *Washington Post* press release announcing newsroom positions designed to address DEI, and a press release issued by Nielson and Boston Globe Media about a brand study spurred by DEI concerns (WashPostPR, 2020; Dow Jones, 2020; Neilson, 2021).
- Two editorials were part of the sample, one written by the owner of *the Los Angeles Times* (Soon-Shiong, 2020), and the other written by the editor of *The Courier-Journal* in Louisville, KY. (Green, 2020).
- Additional statements were included from the *Boston Globe* and *The Chicago Tribune*. *The Chicago Tribune* produced a short statement about diversity that was included in this sample (Tribune Publishing, 2020). A public statement from *Boston Globe* that announced DEI policy changes included the “fresh start initiative” which allows readers to request that crime stories in which their names are mentioned be deleted from the paper’s archives. Importantly, leaked internal emails from *Boston Globe* editor Brian McGrory were not included in this textual analysis, but were part of the case study analysis.

Using ECA for guidance, I conducted preliminary reads of each text while thinking about the concepts outlined in my literature review of the form and function of metajournalistic discourse, how trust interacts with journalism and marginalized communities, and the newspaper industry’s history of racism. This initial immersion into

the texts has been described as a “long preliminary soak” which precedes deeper engagement with the material (Hall, 1975, p. 15). This allowed me to consider what pieces of the texts were most relevant to the theoretical considerations presented in this thesis, as is typical of textual analysis (Fürsich, 2009). After reading the texts twice without attempting to code, I began coding the texts in a qualitative fashion, using concept coding, which assigns “meso or macro levels of meaning to data or to data analytic work in progress,” to identify major ideas presented within each interview (Saldaña, 2016, p. 119). I then used an eclectic coding method, which combines multiple coding methods, in this case concept coding and descriptive coding, to identify portions of the texts which illuminate the questions that arose from the theoretical framework used in this paper (Saldaña, 2016).

Case studies

The second part of this paper further analyzes DEI implementation practices through two case studies: one of the *Star Tribune* in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the other on the *Boston Globe*. I used interviews with essential DEI-focused managers and examined the larger context of their words. Interview data for this case study analysis come from a project in progress (Ganguli, Brown & Toff, 2021; Brown, 2022). For the cases I chose two newsrooms where all of the participants chose to speak on the record with their quotes attributed to them. The interviews with the participants from the *Star-Tribune* were conducted by Brown, and I conducted the interviews with the people who worked at the *Boston Globe*.

Snowball sampling was used for both case studies. I began my interviews with employees of the *Boston Globe*. In March, I interviewed Greg Lee, the *Globe's* senior assistant managing editor for talent and community, a newly created position he took in the fall of 2020. Lee then suggested I talk with Jeneé Osterheldt, a culture columnist for the *Globe* who was also given the title of associate editor in 2021, and who Lee said was instrumental in the *Globe's* DEI efforts. Brown began her interviews in March 2021 as well, with Kyndell Harkness, who was promoted in September 2020 to be the *Star Tribune's* assistant managing editor of diversity/community, a newly created position. Harkness had worked at the *Star Tribune* for 20 years, most recently as photo editor. Upon Harkness's recommendation, Brown spoke with Tom Horgen, the *Star Tribune's* senior manager of audience strategy, in April 2021, and Myron Medcalf, a columnist at the *Star Tribune*, in May of 2021. Four of the five participants were Black, and one identified as biracial.

To supplement what I learned in the interviews, I incorporated the statements I analyzed in the textual analysis for this thesis as well as supplemental documents that helped me understand the broader context in which these newspapers' DEI efforts were situated. For the *Boston Globe*, the supplemental documents included past discussions of the paper's history of racism and inequality, as well as an internal email written by the paper's top editor which was leaked to a Boston media blog (Kurtz, 1998; Kennedy, 2020), and other discourse about their "Fresh Start" initiative (Allen, 2021; Miller & Folkenfilk, 2021). For the *Star Tribune*, the supplemental documents included a

“diversity solutions document” made by *Star Tribune* staffers, which included a list of demands made to Star Tribune leadership to further DEI goals (DeLong, 2020).

Examining the *Star Tribune* and *Boston Globe* allowed for important theoretical contributions to the study of metajournalistic discourse, particularly about race in journalism. In part because of its centrality to the inciting incident for this wave of newsroom promises to improve DEI practices, Floyd’s murder, the *Star Tribune* engaged in extensive public-facing metajournalistic discourse. Floyd’s death happened in the *Star Tribune*’s backyard, as did the protests and unrest that followed Floyd’s death. The newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize for its coverage. This case study can help us understand what happens in a newsroom so central to national discussions about race, and how metajournalistic discourse manifests in such a fraught situation. It can also help examine whether such metajournalistic discourse can truly be a precursor to real change. The *Boston Globe*, on the other hand, engaged in very little public-facing metajournalistic discourse, which allows me to examine what happens when an organization does not do the performative work of announcing what will change within the newsroom in terms of DEI. Positioned together, both case studies will allow for a comparative analysis which tests the limits and benefits of metajournalistic discourse.

The interviews were conducted using online video conferencing software. Each interview was recorded and saved in a secure folder for analysis. A video format, rather than an audio format, allowed for the interviewers to respond to non-verbal cues and allowed me to gain a better understanding of the participants’ tones as they discussed

these sensitive topics. This prevented misunderstandings and helped ease tension at times during the interview. Conducting the interviews remotely allowed for safety during the Covid-19 pandemic, and greater flexibility with scheduling the interviews, which each lasted about one hour.

The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for flexibility depending on each participant's expertise. Participants were asked a series of demographic questions to start. Then they were asked about their roles within the organization. We sought to understand just how much the newspapers empowered these journalists and managers to make real change when they saw problems, and what responsibilities they were given. Through questions about their roles, we attempted to gauge what the chain of command looked like at their newspapers, and whether there was a difference in how they saw their roles as compared to how their superiors saw their roles. Furthermore, we wanted to know what had changed in the short time these managers were in their roles. In the next set of questions, we sought to understand the paper's past and present in terms of DEI efforts through the eyes of the people they had enlisted to address DEI. We asked them to describe those efforts and share their understanding of where their newspapers stood in terms of DEI. To gain a broader understanding of DEI in the newspaper industry, we asked for their thoughts about DEI at places where they had worked in the past. We sought to understand how they viewed the communities they covered and how they viewed the treatment of people of color in their newsrooms. We also asked what they anticipated the future of their DEI efforts would look like, and what was the most progressive idea they hoped to implement.

Finally, we specifically addressed the news event that spurred many U.S. newspapers into action on DEI in the summer of 2020: George Floyd's murder. We asked the participants for their impression of the coverage of the protests that followed Floyd's death. This section offered plentiful data from the participants from the *Star Tribune* because Floyd was killed in Minneapolis and the ensuing unrest was more intense and longer lasting than in many cities. However, less data could be collected from the *Boston Globe* participants on this subject, in part because Lee began working at the *Boston Globe* after those protests had subsided.

The interviews were transcribed using the transcription service *Rev*. I reviewed the transcripts for accuracy, comparing them with video of each interview, before employing a qualitative coding scheme to the transcripts. By reviewing each transcript along with its corresponding video, I was able to understand tone and intent better than would have been possible by simply reading transcripts. An initial round of concept coding was used to identify major ideas presented within each interview (Saldaña, 2016, p. 119). Next, an eclectic coding method, which incorporated emotional, evaluative and value cues within the interviews, was used and was inclusive of all the concepts derived from the initial round of coding. Finally, the interviews were examined for themes relating to my research questions.

Findings & Discussion

DEI statements

The DEI statements in this sample went to great lengths to legitimize the newspapers that produced them, even when they discussed a need for change. They did this by defending their history, their newsroom practices, and emphasizing the credentials of the people they had put in place to fix their DEI issues. The outlets communicated motivated trust-building by acknowledging harms and apologizing in an effort to retain readers and subscribers. While some of the statements acknowledged the history of racism in U.S. newsrooms, they also referred to “this moment” in U.S. history as one that demanded special attention to DEI, a type of framing which minimized their historic failures and a need for better DEI practices which has existed as long as the U.S. journalism industry. Each research question is listed and explored in the sections below to provide more nuance to these claims.

Legitimizing newsrooms and their practices

RQ1 explored how newsrooms and newsroom employees legitimized and explained journalism practice through texts they produced about DEI in their newsrooms. Three prominent strategies were used in the texts sampled to legitimize the newspaper’s history and its practices, sometimes absolving current leadership of wrongdoing in the process: 1) defending the newspaper’s past, 2) emphasizing the positive qualities of the people they hired to fix their DEI issues, and 3) offering concrete promises for what

would change in the future. In some texts, the legitimizing behavior meant that even while offering honest examples of racism within the newspaper's past, there was language within the text to absolve or excuse the newspaper's leadership.

Even when the newspapers identified problems in their history, they often paired those admissions with defenses of their own behavior. For example, the *Courier-Journal* framed this as a look at the contradictions present in its history. In his editorial, the editor of the *Courier-Journal* apologized for the paper's missteps in covering the death of Breonna Taylor, but it also suggested this happened due to circumstance, rather than due to systemic failure, an excuse with which they sought to absolve their mistake: "We did not find ways around the obfuscation from Louisville police, and we should have — even in the face of the fast-developing COVID-19 pandemic that consumed our staff and required around-the-clock coverage at the time as the number of positive cases and deaths began to soar." The *New York Times*' text about inclusion was mostly critical and discussed the pain felt by people of color in the newsroom, but it still included these lines:

We should acknowledge briefly what is working. In our most recent annual survey, 95 percent of Times employees said they feel pride in working here. And a majority of employees, no matter their background, report fulfilling careers and positive experiences.

This paragraph served as a defense of the New York Times and its legitimacy within the world of journalism. The phrase "no matter their background" serves to remind the reader

that although people of color feel excluded in their newsroom, they still have pride in the institution, thus softening the critique on the newsroom's dynamics.

Another method used in these texts for legitimizing newsroom practices was to legitimize the DEI managers who were hired into roles after the summer of 2020. This served the dual purpose of elevating the person in the role and elevating the newspaper, which had decided to empower this person. *The Wall Street Journal* included language about how well its past DEI efforts had gone in a press release that announced Brent Jones had been given a DEI management position. The press release devoted considerable attention to programs implemented or aided by Jones, including a partnership with Morgan State University in Baltimore:

In describing that partnership, the dean of the School of Global Journalism and Communication, DeWayne Wickham, wrote: "As a founding member and former president of the National Association of Black Journalists, I have a deep appreciation for the need to move beyond talk, to action, when it comes to newsroom diversity. In initiating a partnership with Morgan's School of Global Journalism and Communication, *The Wall Street Journal* speaks with a voice that rises above the din of those media companies whose talk about diversity doesn't match their action."

Although this passage was about a program created by Jones, it serves the dual purpose of legitimizing both Jones and the *Wall Street Journal*. The *Washington Post* emphasized

Thompson's credentials and longevity within the newsroom. The *Star Tribune* quoted executives praising Harkness's ability and desire to help in the newsroom.

A third legitimizing strategy observed in this analysis was a review of concrete actions, or the promise that they would follow through. Nearly every document I analyzed included details of programs or plans to implement changes or improvements to the newspaper's DEI initiatives, with those descriptions varying in the amount of detail and specificity they included. The *Chicago Tribune*'s brief statement was the vaguest. The newspaper's statement, which had no byline nor any attribution, said the company would take "deliberate steps toward improving inclusion and representation in our audiences and in our workforce" but the text did not describe what those deliberate steps were. In some documents, the hiring of a DEI manager was the concrete action taken by the newspaper; the *Los Angeles Times* listed it as the "first" change, but didn't specify what others would follow. The text analyzed from the *Boston Globe* newsroom was a document that was entirely about a concrete plan the paper said was designed to improve how the *Boston Globe* treated marginalized communities – it gave readers the opportunity to contest publication of stories involving crimes that have negatively impacted their lives.

One less common legitimizing strategy was used in the editorial written by the owner of the *Los Angeles Times*, Patrick Soon-Shiong, who entered the newspaper industry in 2018 when he bought the paper. Soon-Shiong, who is of Asian descent, discussed his experiences with racism in South Africa to indicate his empathy for the

damage racism can do, and legitimize his own standing in the fight for better DEI practices.

The fact that these newspapers used metajournalistic discourse as a way to defend the practice and institution of journalism, was expected based on the literature reviewed about metajournalistic discourse. The findings in this thesis align with prior research that found that newspaper employees, many of whom have experienced decades of shrinking budgets and attacks on their industry's credibility, express defensiveness about their organization's practices even when they seek change (Ganguli, Brown & Toff, 2021). That defensiveness manifested in these texts.

Motivated trust-building

RQ2 examined what factor of trust were most present in DEI statements. The DEI statements analyzed in this research included language that indicated an attempt to regain trust from the people and communities that had been failed by the newspapers in the past. While the word "trust" was not often present in these documents, newspapers used other ways to indicate a desire to create trusting relationships with readers, who were often described in terms of the monetary value they could bring to the paper through an emphasis on their status as subscribers or potential subscribers. This included marginalized communities who were ill-served by the newspapers' past practices.

The press release from Nielson and the *Boston Globe* mentioned a "long term effort to strengthen relationships and reader engagement," while also placing an emphasis on "strategies for the organization and its advertising partners to develop more engaging

content and attract new audiences.” The *Courier-Journal* editorial, written by Rick Green, the editor of the paper, mentioned a “Readers Advisory Committee” and even solicited participants in the piece saying “(I am still adding to this group, so email me if you want to join us.)” This represented a clear attempt to align the reader with the newspaper, by implying a shared goal. Even the *Chicago Tribune*, which released the least detailed statement in this sample, gave a nod to engaging readers saying, “We will engage new audiences by providing journalism and products that will serve our increasingly diverse communities.” While engagement and trust are different concepts, as detailed in the literature review in this thesis, journalistic outlets often think about engagement as being critical to trust (Zahay et al., 2020; Toff et al., 2021). Furthermore, the communities to whom these newspapers were attempting to improve engagement were often communities that distrusted their coverage. Therefore, I argue that the newspapers’ explicit attempts to build shared interests and engagement with communities are a proxy for building trust.

Several statements addressed the newspapers’ relationships with marginalized communities, though not always explicitly. Jennings, of the *Los Angeles Times*, was quoted in the piece about her promotion as saying, “The success of the industry depends on us actually talking about and telling the stories of communities that look like the readers of the future. I’m just really excited about being able to be part of that.” The *Star Tribune*’s announcement of Harkness’s promotion mentioned a need for transparency specifically so that readers would better understand who covered their communities. Although people of color were not mentioned in the clause about transparency for

readers, those words were presented as part of the same sentence that mentioned a need to push for hiring a more diverse staff. This indicates that the two ideas are related in the mind of the author. The *Washington Post's* announcement of Thompson's promotion quotes her as saying the newsroom should "look like America and the communities we cover." Again, although people of color were not specifically mentioned, the need to "look like America" was often a linguistic stand-in for a desire to improve diversity in these texts. Also noteworthy: the statements only implicitly referenced people of color without explicitly doing so. This could be an indication that even as they acknowledge demographics that are becoming more racially diverse, they are reluctant to fully break away from a white-centered history. Overall, the implicit focus of these statements is clear: they focus on properly serving the community. I argue that this focus on properly serving the community relates to building trust within those communities so that they will remain or become readers who help the newspaper survive.

Forgetting history, missing inclusion

RQ4 examined the language about change in DEI statements and can be partially answered through the textual analysis in this section. The texts overwhelmingly noted a need to respond to "this moment" and change past behaviors because of what was happening in the summer of 2020. Most of the pieces focused exclusively on the so-called "racial reckoning," which followed protests against police brutality and systemic racism after Floyd was murdered. In the *Courier-Journal*, whose text called that summer "a seminal moment in the history of our country," much of the piece spent time

discussing Breonna Taylor’s killing, and her death’s impact on the people of Louisville. The opening clause of the *Star Tribune*’s announcement that they had appointed Kyndell Harkness as their assistant managing editor of diversity and community also places the decision temporally “at a time when newsrooms and other businesses are responding to a national reckoning on issues such as racism and equity.” While this served as necessary context for why changes were being made then, the texts often discounted or paid less attention to the historical context which necessitated a racial reckoning in the newspaper industry, and to past racial reckonings that failed in making necessary changes.

Although the analyzed documents included text explaining these newspapers’ desire for improvement in DEI efforts by referring to what was happening in the summer of 2020, they differed in whether they then followed that by providing greater historical context about what past wrongs they hoped to correct. *The Wall Street Journal*, for example, offered no context for why they hired an editor of culture, training and outreach to help them “rethink diversity on staff and in coverage,” though it did praise its own past DEI efforts. Some of the documents analyzed attempted to acknowledge past wrongs but failed to provide nuance. *USA Today*’s piece on their DEI plans, for example, quoted Maribel Perez Wadsworth, Gannett’s president of news and publisher of *USA Today*, as saying “the goal of the company’s coverage is to not ‘just cover the news’ but to ‘hopefully right some wrongs,’” but no discussion followed of what those past wrongs were outside of diversity numbers.

The newspapers which offered more substantive critiques of their past behavior spoke of staffers of color being undervalued, underpaid and marginalized in the newsrooms. Some spoke of their outlets' historic failings. For example, Soon-Shiong, the first person of color to own the paper, wrote in an editorial: "over its history, *The Times* has also mirrored, and in some cases propagated, the biases and prejudices of the world it covers, reflecting and shaping attitudes that have contributed to social and economic inequity." The *Courier-Journal* editor chastised the paper's own coverage of Taylor's killing for not finding "ways around the obfuscation from Louisville police."

Every statement analyzed for this research mentioned diversity and inclusion as goals for the newsroom it represented, but most of the documents analyzed did not delve fully into what the outlet meant by inclusion. In explaining their focus on diversity numbers, several outlets expressed a belief that their coverage had suffered in the past because of a predominantly white, male newsroom. Soon-Shiong said this explicitly in his editorial after detailing some of the newspaper's past failings in covering racial and ethnic minorities:

In part that is because the paper's staff has never truly reflected the region. The paper employed no Black staff journalists until the mid-1960s. Latinos have never been represented on the staff in anything like their numbers in the community. The Metro staff didn't have its first Asian American staff member until the late 1970s.

Inclusion often received brief mentions. For example, the *Chicago Tribune* mentioned “inclusion” twice in the statement, but it is never defined, nor is there any concrete information about how inclusion might be achieved. The *Washington Post* quoted then-executive editor Martin Barron as saying Thompson’s vision “is to have *The Post* become the most diverse and inclusive newsroom in the country — a place that is recognized for fostering talent, where all people feel supported and challenged, and where our journalism fully benefits from the perspectives of staffers who come from a wide variety of backgrounds and life experiences.” While this did more work than most documents in explaining what is meant by inclusion, most of the piece announcing Thompson’s hiring also focused on diversity numbers.

One outlier in this area was the *New York Times*, which wrote extensively about the lack of an inclusive environment for people of color within its newsroom. Its report described the *New York Times* as a difficult place to thrive particularly “for people of color, many of whom described unsettling and sometimes painful day-to-day workplace experiences,” and outlined a plan to change this environment, which included training for employees, providing additional resources to support employees and formalizing expectations of behavior.

Their own past histories of racism and the concept of inclusion were two elements with which newspapers struggled to properly address in the DEI statements analyzed in this research. In this sample, newspapers did a better job of addressing their own past wrongs than of defining inclusion and how to achieve it. Still, the inconsistency with

which a past history of upholding racist structures was addressed indicates that this is an area that remains uncomfortable for many newsroom managers, particularly those with longstanding relationships with the newspaper industry. It is noteworthy that one example of extensive attention paid to a paper's past failures came from a newcomer to the industry – Patrick Soon Shiong, who bought the *Los Angeles Times* in 2018 and spent his career previously in biotech research (Masunaga, 2020). The overall lack of emphasis on inclusion leaves the impression that while they said they wanted to improve both diversity and inclusion, creating an inclusive workplace was more elusive. Many of the statements left the impression that the newsrooms represented are not prioritizing inclusion, nor did they have a plan to improve inclusion in their newsrooms. Even if diversity numbers improve, a lack of true inclusion can hamper the staying power of a diverse workforce.

DEI in the Newsrooms

Two case studies of DEI perspectives and efforts at the *Boston Globe* and the *Star Tribune* help answer four of the research questions I posed:

RQ3: How did newsroom DEI leaders at the *Boston Globe* and *Star Tribune* examine and address trust as it related to their DEI practices after George Floyd was murdered?

RQ4: How did the promises for change made in DEI statements and internally within the *Boston Globe* and *Star Tribune* address or acknowledge the history of racism within U.S. newsrooms?

RQ5: What is the relationship between written DEI statements and announcements, and actualized DEI actions at the *Boston Globe* and *Star Tribune*?

RQ6: What, if any, indications of lasting change do DEI managers see within the *Boston Globe's* and *Star Tribune's* DEI efforts?

Interviews with DEI leaders in the two newsrooms, as well as supporting texts that helped illuminate newsroom dynamics, show that while public-facing texts treated the summer of 2020 as a unique moment that called for change, people of color in both newsrooms had long understood that DEI practices needed improvement in those spaces, and that the newspapers' relationships with marginalized communities were untrusting, fraught relationships. Those journalists of color capitalized on the journalism world's sudden interest in the issue to attempt real change. Through this analysis a portrait emerged of one organization, the *Star Tribune*, whose DEI efforts were started in earnest in 2020, and another organization, the *Boston Globe*, whose DEI efforts seemed to be in a later phase once the supposed reckoning came in the summer of 2020. This led to a level of optimism by the *Globe's* DEI managers, and faith that their DEI efforts had staying power.

Summer of 2020

During the summer of 2020, three newsroom managers at the *Star Tribune*, Kyndell Harkness, then a photo editor, Allie Shah, a deputy metro editor and Tom Horgen, then a digital editor of content strategy, met with two of the paper's top editors. Harkness, Horgen and Shah had spent time over the previous several weeks talking with

journalists of color in the newsroom, Harkness said. They discussed what they'd heard from those journalists and worked to determine what elements of improving their DEI efforts were the responsibility of management, and which parts were the responsibilities of individual reporters.

One thing became clear to them as these conversations progressed. There had to be someone in charge. "There has to be structure," Harkness said in April of 2021. "It can't just be up to whatever department head there is. There has to be, like, everybody's doing the same thing in terms of creating a hiring team and what that looks like, and who's on that hiring team." Those discussions ultimately led to the paper creating a position called assistant managing editor for diversity and culture, and promoting Harkness into that role. The *Star Tribune* published an article to announce Harkness's promotion and explain what they hoped for the role to be and what DEI efforts were underway at the newspaper. Their DEI work started against a backdrop of upheaval after George Floyd's murder and a pandemic which had disrupted regular newsroom practices.

Around the same time, Greg Lee said he began having conversations with Brian McGrory, the *Boston Globe's* executive editor, about McGrory's desire to hire more senior editors who were Black. Lee, who is Black, had worked at the *Boston Globe* before as an editor in the sports department and was now working at a website that specialized in sports journalism. In one of their conversations, he said, he told McGrory that he would be willing to return for a role outside of sports. Together, Lee said, they crafted a position for him in which he would lead recruitment and retention efforts as a

senior assistant managing editor. “There's been a problem with retention, especially people of color,” Lee said in an interview. “And also community outreach, in terms of bringing our journalism to community areas and spaces that *The Globe* hasn't been familiar with or consistent with over the years.” *The Globe* did not announce Lee’s hiring, nor did its newsroom engage in much public discussion about its DEI efforts. Internally, though, those conversations were already happening and changing in meaningful ways.

Developing trust, acknowledging past wrongs

RQ3 and RQ4 examined how newsroom leaders addressed trust and DEI changes in their newsrooms. The DEI leaders interviewed for this thesis had clear and long held understandings of the fact that trust between people of color and their newspapers had eroded or never existed, and they sought buy-in from their newsrooms’ leadership to improve those relationships. This included people of color in the communities the newspapers covered, and it included people of color who worked in the newsroom. “I cannot tell you how many Black people I've interviewed, non-white people I've interviewed, who said, ‘I wasn't going to call you back because I don't trust the *Star Tribune*,’” said Myron Medcalf, a columnist at the *Star Tribune*, who covered crime for the *Star Tribune* early in his career. To improve trust, these DEI leaders sought to diversify what voices were being used in stories, what types of stories were being told and how people of color were presented in stories. They also acknowledged that the pain felt by people of color in their newsrooms would not easily be diminished. By mid-2020,

just a few weeks after conversations about racism in newsrooms became public, the *Boston Globe* had identified a clear plan for addressing these issues, while the *Star Tribune*'s plans were less defined.

Both newsrooms showed concern about what voices were being heard in their coverage. Elite sourcing, or the practice of using the voices of elites in a certain sphere for information in a story, is a common problem in journalism, and one that has diminished the voices of people of color in the past (McLeod, 2007; Gitlin, 1980; Chan & Lee, 1984; McCarthy, 2021). It came into sharp relief after Floyd died when Minneapolis police released a statement referring to him as a man who died in police custody after a “medical incident” (Mannix, 2020). “So much damage can be done by one story, to a family or a community if it is only one-sourced and if that source is only the police,” Harkness said. “That's where distrust of us comes into play.” During the interview, Harkness spoke of the newspapers' plans to create a crime team which would be trained to think about the diversity of the voices they used in their coverage. The idea was also present in the staff's letter of demands from July 2020: “Too often, people of color are used when it's a story about people of color, but professionals of color are also experts in subject matters beyond the intersection of race.” As of early 2021, though, the plans to address this were still being finalized. This should not be mistaken for a critique of Harkness's efficacy – she assumed her position as the *Star Tribune*'s editor for diversity and community in October. Rather, it is noteworthy because it again shows that the *Globe* was prepared to act earlier than the *Star Tribune* was.

The *Globe's* efforts to diversify sourcing were more formalized than the *Star-Tribune's* by the latter half of 2021. In his internal email to staff, McGrory outlined a plan for improving sourcing diversity which included a “staff-wide work audit for racial representation” that would require journalists to review their own work to see how often they wrote about, quoted, photographed or recorded people of color, and how those people were presented. “They've done a great job over the last year, but they know there's more work to be done,” Lee said in March of 2021. There's more inroads we have to have,” Lee said. “And the one of the biggest things I told them since I've been back is it takes time to build that trust. You can't just go in there and do two or three stories and expect them to think that they're going to be your best friend and subscribe to the paper. It's a long process.” Newspapers who published or released statements about their DEI practices after Floyd's death often identified diversifying its staff as a way to better cover communities of color. That aligned with the thoughts of DEI leaders. “I want to see newsrooms, including *The Globe*, look like the cities that they serve,” Osterheldt said. “I want to see a commitment to actually serving that community and being in the community with the community.” Engagement within a community is one way that newspapers work to regain trust.

While the DEI statements made public by the *Star Tribune* and the *Boston Globe* did not fully address inclusion, a history of a non-inclusive work environment in the industry, not just at their current stops, had left scars on many journalists of color, which damaged trust. All of the interview participants cited in this thesis were people of color and had deep knowledge of the types of traumas inflicted upon journalists of color in

predominantly white newsrooms. “Maybe you haven't thought how violent it feels if you are a Black or brown or LGBTQ+ person in a space that is mostly white and cisgender and you can't even see another person who looks like you until you walk past 30 that don't,” said Osterheldt, who began working at the *Boston Globe* in 2018. “And I don't think leadership has often thought about what kind of emotional violence that poses.” In his previous stint with the *Globe*, Lee recalls staffers of color feeling passed over for opportunities by white people with similar qualifications and being told they needed “more seasoning.” Retention is part of his job, which he noted had been harder for *the Globe* with people of color. “The people who've been there for five, six, seven, eight years, 10 years may have been damaged, and to them, maybe the trust has been withered, and it will take a lot for a company to make amends,” Lee said. He did acknowledge, though, that during his 10-year absence from the paper, the conversations had between journalists and management seemed to have improved trust within the organization. His evidence? The internal conversations largely remained private, which Lee said was a contrast from other newsrooms including the *Star Tribune*.

This data shows a common theme of damaged trust in the institution from people of color within newsrooms as well as people of color outside newsrooms. For this reason, the work of improving inclusion within the newsroom has often fallen to people of color in DEI leadership roles, as Lee and Osterheldt have done. *Star Tribune* reporters requested an apology in their list of demands: “A newsroom wide email apologizing would start to repair trust with people of color at the *Star Tribune* and demonstrate to the community a deeper understanding of why there needs to be a change in the way we do

things.” Harkness used the word “trust” when describing why newsroom management felt she was the right choice for the position they promoted her into, saying the paper’s editor at the time, Rene Sanchez, called her a trusted person in the newsroom. “People tell me secrets all the time about, ‘Don't say anything, but this is what's happening,’” Harkness said. “Even in this job, it's sort of more pronounced, because I have people -- I'm the mediator. I'm on the end of both sides of a conversation that's about to happen.” While many of the statements that emerged from the newspapers analyzed in this thesis did not properly address inclusion, it’s clear from this data that in these two newsrooms, the people doing the DEI work on a regular basis were thinking meaningfully about it.

Divergent timetables

RQ5 posed a comparison between statements/announcements and actualized actions. The *Star Tribune* had not seen sustained progress on DEI efforts in the past, which meant the formalization of DEI initiatives after Floyd’s death were new to the paper. “I think spotty would be what I would say the DEI stuff was,” Harkness said in an interview conducted in early 2021. “Somebody in the room had an idea, or there was an issue that came up, they would tackle it for that moment and then you go back to running the trains as you always ran them.” Harkness’s recollection of past DEI initiatives aligns with the history of DEI initiatives at U.S. newspapers, which rarely had lasting power (Mellinger, 2013). Horgen recalled that the occasional DEI initiatives of years past were often led by reporters of color. “There was various points where myself and other BIPOC staff would band together, maybe confront management, confront the company with,

looking back, not a super organized list of demands or list of solutions, but more just stating the facts of the numbers, the representation numbers,” Horgen said. On July 29, 2020, Star Tribune reporters made several specific demands of its organization, giving a nod to past DEI efforts, while maintaining they weren’t enough (DeLong, 2020).

“Generations of journalists of color before us have been fighting for change in this newsroom for decades,” the letter read. “But this is the moment when we are making it clear: We want to disrupt our newsroom’s systemic centering of whiteness and maleness by making structural changes.”

The *Boston Globe* has a history of spotty DEI efforts, too, as well as prominent public-facing incidents of racism in the newsroom. In 1998, a columnist at the Washington Post wrote extensively about public, race-based conversation that was happening in and around the *Globe* newsroom that decade, declaring, “the *Boston Globe* keeps playing out its psychodramas in public” (Kurtz, 1998). One example came when the *Globe* gave a retention raise to a black woman, Renée Graham, in 1991, one of her white colleagues, angry that she had received a raise, faxed a letter to the *Globe*’s competitor, the *Boston Herald*, leaking that information (Associated Press, 1991). A group of 40 reporters of color at *The Globe* wrote their own letter calling the action racist (Associated Press, 1991). Graham still works at *the Globe*. That incident shows that 30 years ago, there was substantial conversation at *the Globe* about DEI issues and, people of color were represented in the newsroom. However, newspaper DEI efforts regressed in the early aughts (Mellinger, 2013; Dedman and Doig, 2005). “I read a story where in the ’80s there was like, I read something like over 20 Black journalists,” Osterheldt said.

“And I was shocked because I can't even fathom seeing 20 black journalists in our newsroom. I have never, and this is not a *Globe* thing. I mean, my entire career.” Lee, whose first stint with the *Boston Globe* lasted from 2004 to 2012 recalls being part of diversity councils during that span but said they “really had no teeth.”

In the eyes of the DEI leaders from the *Boston Globe* who participated in this research, the *Boston Globe* was already working to implement formal DEI initiatives before the summer of 2020, and the discussion about racism that followed Floyd's death only energized those conversations. This contrasts with the impression left by the *Globe's* public facing reports about its response to the reckoning that followed Floyd's death. Those documents did not provide detailed accounts of the *Globe's* DEI plans, but they did indicate that the focus on DEI was prompted by the transnational conversation about racism that followed Floyd's death. “I was offended by all of journalism and their decision to suddenly respect black life after seeing a man being lynched for eight minutes,” Osterheldt said. “Why did it take that for you to listen to- like I said, the inclusion council had been doing this work a year before that happened. And to be clear, I don't want to be, like, ‘And we were doing the work a year before.’ People before I got to *the Globe* had done that, where we are like the 10th inclusion council.” Lee returned to the *Boston Globe* in November 2020 and felt that the agency of the people trying to implement DEI initiatives had changed. “The biggest difference is that it's a big mandate from the top, the CEO and ownership,” Lee said. “They are behind us 100 percent in the newsroom side. Brian, the editor, is 100 percent behind us, so if you don't have buy-in or making this a priority from ownership, then it will fail.”

In July of 2020, McGrory sent an email to the staff, which was leaked to a local media blog, about the newspaper's plans to improve DEI. The text of the email indicated that it was part of an ongoing conversation, not the start of one, and mentioned work done by the inclusion council. It also detailed specific actions the paper was taking in order to improve DEI in its newsroom and make its coverage fairer to people of color. For example, the email referenced a "criminal justice team to look at the underlying racism in law enforcement" which had been founded two weeks prior. The email was an internal document not meant for public consumption, and it was the only such document that was leaked. "At that point, we had had several meetings in addition to the meetings that existed before the murder of George Floyd," Osterheldt said. "So I think that's important context that a lot of [expletive] don't know." To Osterheldt, a critical component of the *Globe's* DEI efforts was that it was not mediated in the public eye through metajournalistic discourse. It is true that an email written by the paper's editor was leaked to a local outlet, but the internal discourse about DEI issues at the paper never became public. Further, Osterheldt said in the interview that the leaked email was one of many others that did not become public. By contrast, the *Star Tribune's* staff did make their demands public by publishing them, distributing them to local news outlets and speaking about them (Miller, 2020).

Although both the *Star Tribune* and *Boston Globe* have a history of addressing DEI issues in the past, my data presented a picture that the *Globe* was farther along in implementing concrete DEI initiatives when the journalism industry began its metajournalistic moment about race and racism within newsrooms. It is worth

considering what impact the nationwide influx of metajournalistic discourse about race had on the pieces of public-facing statements produced by each outlet. While the *Star Tribune* published an article which details much of the newspaper's internal roiling about DEI, the *Globe* never did. That means that while the *Star-Tribune* engaged in metajournalistic discourse to discuss DEI, the *Globe* did not. Rather, the two DEI texts the *Globe* published were essentially two notices of intent to make specific changes in its operation. It is fair to wonder if the lack of public facing discourse about the *Globe*'s DEI plans this summer is a nod to the work they had already done and an effort to not position the work as brand new in the face of Floyd's murder. Perhaps, too, the *Globe*'s history of publicly facing racism in its newsroom helped foster its current environment.

There was a lag between the onset of urgent public discourse about racism and the creation of a newsroom where journalists feel like the work of improving DEI within a newsroom can be done internally rather than through public appeals. Consider the history of the *Globe*. In the 1990s, a decade with plentiful metajournalistic discourse emanating from the newspaper, *Globe* staffers didn't feel heard by their management, nor did they feel that they could trust their newsroom leaders to do what needed to be done. In contrast, the *Globe*'s relative public silence after George Floyd's murder on internal discussions about DEI was a point of pride for the DEI leaders who participated in this thesis. This is not to say that this condition will continue. For any organization there exists the threat that a backlash to DEI efforts will lead to a DEI backslide.

Optimism about lasting change

RQ6 investigated indications for lasting change in the newsrooms explored in these case studies. My analysis took into account the cyclical nature of DEI efforts in U.S. newsrooms (Mellinger, 2013; Dedman & Doig, 2005). While this data set cannot draw conclusions about whether the changes made by the *Star Tribune* and *Boston Globe* will persist, I analyzed DEI managers views of lasting change. DEI leaders in both newsrooms said they saw lasting change as a significant goal of their DEI efforts and felt optimistic that would happen. They used three common explanations for why they felt optimistic their DEI efforts would last: 1) buy-in from management, 2) buy-in from white journalists, and 3) concrete rules for DEI practices.

Buy-in from top-level management and white journalists were two factors that led DEI managers to feel optimistic about the lasting impact of their work and were directly tied to the conversations that started after Floyd's death. Harkness said white journalists at the *Star Tribune* have spoken up about DEI issues. "It's nice that the burden is not on the journalists of color in the room all the time to say, 'This headline is problematic.'" When asked what changed in the summer of 2020, Osterheldt, who insisted the *Globe's* DEI efforts were nothing new, said what changed was that the work was being done by more and a wider range of people. "There were people who thought that they were not complicit, who now understand the ways in which they are," she said. "I think there were initiatives that we talked about for years, even before I got there, that got resources that they never could get to get off the ground." Lee also emphasized the impact of McGrory's backing of DEI efforts, as well as the newspaper's ownership's interest.

Set rules and roles for DEI initiatives are also an important step. Harkness spoke of wanting to make sure that when she was gone, someone would still be taking on the responsibilities she has developed for her position because those responsibilities were so ingrained into the way the newsroom operated. Horgen added, “There has to be extreme intention around the standardization of hiring practices, retention strategies. And when I say standardization, I mean standardized in a way that we bring intentional equity to those practices and those strategies.” Horgen noted that those standardizations didn’t exist at the time of his interview in May of 2020, but that there was work being done to implement them. That kind of standardization was part of the public list of demands by the newsroom, a list that Horgen and Harkness had a hand in creating. Some of its demands called for standardized criteria for promotions, specific numbers on hiring a diverse staff, and tangible career development goals.

Much like the *Star Tribune*, the longevity of the *Boston Globe*’s DEI efforts is unknown, but having already implemented concrete plans by the early part of 2021 again showed ways in which the *Globe*’s DEI efforts were ahead of the *Star Tribune*’s. The texts from the *Globe* that included metajournalistic discourse were both examples of such plans. One was an announcement of a “fresh start” program, which allowed people to appeal the publication of crimes related to them if that publication was negatively impacting their lives. This program was mentioned in McGrory’s July 2020 email to the staff and announced in January 2021. Another document was an announcement with Neiman which detailed a commissioned diversity audit. While the *Star Tribune* was still thinking through how to conduct an audit, the *Globe* had acted on it. An audit, though,

does not necessarily mean lasting change will happen, it is simply a noteworthy step toward that goal.

Conclusion

The summer of 2020 was a time when newsrooms began to pay attention to concerns that people of color within their ranks had expressed for years before and committed to some concrete and standardized rules for improving their papers' DEI. It was also a time when large numbers of journalists of color felt comfortable speaking up about the challenges they faced working in predominantly white institutions where their perspectives had not been fully heard in the past. These problems were not new, even though many DEI statements treated them as if they were. The DEI statements in my sample focused narrowly on the time after Floyd's death as being a time that called them to action. Their stated goals were to improve relationships between the newspaper and marginalized communities and to make their organizations more diverse. Inclusion was mentioned as a concept, but rarely given the same discursive space as diversity numbers. The case studies analyzed the real-world implementation of the metajournalistic discourse that appeared throughout DEI statements. The findings in this thesis show that metajournalistic discourse illuminated problems for newsroom managers – problems that others at their papers had been aware of for years if not decades – and helped spur what actions newsroom leaders took. But that same metajournalistic discourse could not predict or promise real change. The literature reviewed here painted a daunting picture of the institutional barriers that stand in the way of changing practices and norms at U.S.

newspapers. U.S. newspapers have been tools of a system meant to support the status quo even when that status quo is dangerous to everyday citizens and supports racist structures or practices. Public metajournalistic discourse, though, appeared to be a pre-requisite for creating a fertile environment for the acceptance of meaningful DEI initiatives.

My analysis revealed that in many ways the DEI statements produced by newspapers after the summer of 2020 were acts of self-preservation by outlets who had found that trust in their products was diminishing and thus were looking for ways to grow audiences. The metajournalistic discourse within these texts sought to bolster the very institutions which adhere so firmly to the way things are and always have been. Even while the newspapers expressed a desire to make changes, they defended their past practices, something that I argue damages trust in journalism. There is, after all, no reason for a person whose being is threatened by an existing and powerful system, that of white supremacy, to trust the artillery used by that system to subjugate them, which journalism has often been. The metajournalistic discourse emanating from newspapers in the summer of 2020 served the same purposes metajournalistic discourse has often served – to protect their reputations and legitimize their past behaviors, even while calling out flaws. There are many times when legitimization supports the positive functions of journalism, and the instinct to defend one’s practices is understandable. However, when a newspaper is attempting to admit harm that it has inflicted on marginalized communities, the legitimacy work that happens through metajournalistic discourse can increase rather than alleviate that harm. These strategies might also hamper efforts to build trust within communities that have been misrepresented or marginalized by these newspapers in the

past. If one major component of trusting an institution is a belief in how they will behave in the future, then how can news audiences trust that an organization will change past behavior it defends?

Although the need for newspapers to improve their treatment of people of color was not new in the summer of 2020, my case study did show that summer served as a catalyst for newspaper leaders to empower and listen to people of color who had been fighting for better DEI behind the scenes at the *Boston Globe* and *Star-Tribune*. It also highlights the importance of DEI efforts being undertaken by people other than those who those in formalized DEI positions, but it also tells us about the holistic way newspapers must attack DEI. *Globe* and *Star-Tribune* had different DEI histories and found themselves in different stages of their DEI efforts during the summer of 2020, but DEI leaders at both publications spoke of DEI efforts being backed by the highest ranks of their newspapers, and by their white colleagues, which made those DEI leaders feel optimistic about making their newsrooms more diverse, equitable and inclusive. All the DEI leaders interviewed in this thesis were people of color, which aligns with the disproportionate burden typically placed on people of color to help fix newspapers' DEI issues. The way they spoke about the importance of white newsroom staffers and managers supporting their DEI efforts showed that it cannot be just the people of color in newsrooms fighting for racial equality. Creating an environment where all newsroom employees, regardless of their racial or ethnic identity, are fighting together for DEI in their newsrooms and coverage, will have two important consequences. First, it will make the goal of inclusion, which newspapers sometimes forget in favor of the easier goal of

demographic diversity, more realistic. Second, it will help insulate these DEI efforts from the backlash that typically comes after progress toward racial DEI.

Another important finding of this paper was that the loud, sometimes messy, public discourse about a newspaper's racial failings created a fertile ground for real DEI efforts to take root. That was the case for both newspapers in this case study, but only one of them went through that public process during and after the summer of 2020. There was significant public discourse about the Star-Tribune, its failings in terms of DEI, and its efforts to fix those failings. It's important to note that the Star-Tribune was not alone in having its internal turmoil become public – this happened at places like the Los Angeles Times and the Washington Post, where that public conversation was borne out of internal frustrations at a lack of action on DEI concerns (Farhi & Ellison, 2020). But this stood in stark contrast with the Globe, about which there was very little public discourse regarding DEI efforts during and after the summer of 2020. However, metajournalistic discourse about racial inequality at the *Globe* was prevalent in the 1990s. That earlier public conversation, although it was 22 years prior to 2020, might have fostered over time a climate within the *Globe* that allowed the newspaper to be more prepared to act on DEI concerns. Even if it took until the summer of 2020 for newsroom management to truly buy into improving DEI, as Osterheldt and Lee said it did, the paper had established inclusion councils years before. The existence of those formalized structures might explain why the Globe was so much better prepared to act after Floyd's murder sparked a high volume of metajournalistic discourse about race. This tells us that more noise does

not always correspond to more action within newsrooms, but noise might be necessary to force dogmatic organizations to change.

This thesis focused on newspapers' formalized internal DEI processes, and discourse produced by the newspapers about racial DEI, but what happens inside a newsroom is only one facet of understanding newsroom DEI. One limitation of this study is that it does not consider how the DEI discourse and action that followed the summer of 2020 interacts with audiences and potential audiences. We now know how newspapers viewed their relationships with audiences and what steps they said they would take to rebuild trust, particularly with marginalized communities, but we don't know how those audiences felt about those efforts to rebuild trust. Audiences are critical to the trust- and relationship-building goals many top U.S. newspapers have identified. While there is ample literature about how audiences have reacted to newsrooms in the past, and even to newsroom outreach efforts, this particular moment is important to study because it offers a window into how audiences react to crises. Another limitation is that while the case study helped me conduct a deep comparative analysis of two newspapers engaging in different levels of metajournalistic discourse, it lacks generalizability that could help provide a more comprehensive picture of the interplay between metajournalistic discourse and actualized actions to improve DEI.

My thesis offers a starting point for further research about the role of metajournalistic discourse in the staying power of DEI efforts. Given the findings in this thesis, it is tempting conclude that the contrast between the internal actions of the *Boston*

Globe and the *Star-Tribune*, indicate that less public discourse, which often becomes performative in nature, might lead to more action, but that type of conclusion is outside the scope of this paper. Future research might further consider the relationship between metajournalistic discourse about racial inequality and DEI efforts in practice. Future research might also examine the way social media changes this dynamic. Social media offers an avenue for public discussions that did not always exist. For example, social media offers the ability for rank-and-file reporters to publish their experiences without a mediator. It might embolden them to speak up in their newsrooms and incentivize newsroom managers to listen. On the other hand, the public nature of social media might cause journalists to worry about revealing details of their own public issues with the newspapers that employ them for fear of having their professionalism questioned. Future research might also revisit the newsrooms whose DEI statements were analyzed here to understand what changed after the discussions that happened in the summer of 2020. In five years, will their newsrooms look more diverse and inclusive? Or will the backlash to DEI work that has been seen in the past (Mellinger, 2013), emerge once again. It is also important to note that while this study focused on metajournalistic discourse produced by newspapers, there was significant metajournalistic discourse about race from outside of newsrooms. So many DEI statements analyzed in this thesis referred to “this moment” as unique, but perhaps what was truly unique about it was the exterior pressure that existed and demanded newspapers do something about the environments they fostered.

The summer of 2020 was not the first time racism was a problem in U.S. newsrooms, nor was it the first time newsrooms had felt compelled to make promises

about diversity, equity, and inclusion. But it was a moment in time when people of color who worked for newspapers were able to shake open the minds of their white colleagues and gain their support to make progress toward more diverse, equitable and inclusive workplaces. It was a moment when many of them were being empowered in newsrooms that had been led by exclusively or mostly white people in the past. That support created a sense of optimism for the DEI leaders at the *Star Tribune* and *Boston Globe*, and it also led to both organizations enacting standardized policies designed to address newsroom DEI. But the gap between each organization's preparedness to enact DEI policies speaks to the melding of performance and action. Public-facing texts about one's DEI goals, often in the name of transparency, might not just be performative. It's possible that they are a precursor to lasting change. They create a record of what changes were demanded by the people working for newspapers – institutions which resist change. They live forever online as a reminder of what promises an organization made. The more noise made, the easier it can be to hold organizations accountable. Perhaps with newsroom DEI, like thunder and lightning, the noise comes before the light. That light, though, can fade quickly without the sustained support from newsroom structures that have failed to truly address DEI many times in their histories.

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