“Dark Participation” Without Representation: A Structural Approach to Journalism’s Social Media Crisis

Kaitlin C. Miller¹ and Jacob L. Nelson²

Abstract
Social media platforms have become an integral part of journalistic work. These tools allow journalists to pursue stronger, more intimate connections with their audiences, to cultivate their own professional identities or “brands,” and to advocate for improved working conditions within their organizations. Yet, social media platforms have also created new risks and challenges for journalists, most notably in the form of dark participation, which refers to negative, selfish or even deeply sinister forms of online audience engagement. Although scholars have devoted considerable effort to exploring how this harassment unfolds and how it impacts journalists who face it, there is less research investigating the implications of this harassment for the future of journalism and its relationship with the public. To address this, this research uses interviews with a diverse group of 37 US journalists to propose larger structural changes to newsroom leadership and social media policy creation. The interview data suggest that newsroom leadership must become more diverse so that newsroom policy is assembled by a group of people that is representative of its staff—as well as the public at large. The authors conclude by observing that “dark participation” is not unique to journalism alone, and by discussing the implications of our findings for communication stakeholders invested in overcoming the current, global climate of populism that frequently results in hate, harassment, and hostility within social media.

Keywords
dark participation, harassment, journalism, representation, social media policy

Social media platforms have become an integral part of journalistic work. These tools allow journalists to pursue stronger, more intimate connections with their audiences (Lewis et al., 2014), to cultivate their own professional identities or “brands” (Molyneux, 2019), and to advocate for improved working conditions within their organizations (Cohen & de Peuter, 2020). Yet, social media platforms have also created new risks and challenges for journalists, most notably in the form of “dark participation,” which refers to “negative, selfish or even deeply sinister” forms of online audience engagement (Quandt, 2018, p. 40). While scholars have devoted considerable effort to exploring how this harassment unfolds and how it impacts journalists who face it, there is less research investigating the implications of this harassment for the future of journalism and its relationship with the public.

This article addresses that gap, by drawing on qualitative data gathered from those who suffer most from social media’s dark participation—women journalists and journalists of color—to examine the interventions they believe would help cultivate a more sustainable path forward for news producers, news audiences, and the social media platforms in which they increasingly meet. These data corroborate prior studies that have found that journalists across the globe face increasing pressure to engage with audiences online, yet also face increasing hostility from those very audiences (Lewis et al., 2020). In light of this tension, this article seeks to answer the question: How should newsrooms adjust their institutional values and practices when it comes to social media? We argue that changes must go beyond surface level attempts to mitigate harassment and instead focus on ways institutions as a whole might transform so that online hostility toward their staff is no longer treated as the cost of professional participation in the online media environment.

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Our data comprise in-depth interviews with 37 US journalists—primarily women journalists and journalists of color—working in different roles within a variety of news outlets. We find that although women and journalists of color experience the most hostility online, they also tend to be the least represented within their newsroom’s leadership. Because those in leadership were tasked with setting newsroom social media policies, these circumstances meant that women journalists and journalists of color face the highest risks when it comes to social media, while maintaining the lowest levels of control when it comes to the resources and protection their organizations make available for them. We conclude that the structures that shape social media interactions between journalists and their audiences need to be transformed so that people who have always been marginalized in offline settings (e.g., within newsrooms) are not similarly marginalized online.

This study builds off of previous work that has observed the problems inherent in journalists’ use of social media (e.g., Bélair-Gagnon et al., 2022; Holton et al., 2021) to offer what many within journalism believe to be the most compelling solutions. In doing so, this piece seeks to explore the underlying tension within news organizations where those tasked with using social media to engage with the public have little in common with those overseeing their efforts. In light of these findings, we argue that newsroom leadership must become more diverse so that newsroom policy is assembled by a group of people that is actually representative of its staff—as well as the public at large. We conclude by observing that “dark participation” is not unique to journalism alone and by discussing the implications of our findings for communication stakeholders invested in overcoming the current, global climate of populism that frequently results in hate, harassment and hostility within social media.

Literature Review

Social media’s role in journalism has grown over the years from a small piece of journalistic work to one that appears to be as essential as it is continuous. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook—one seemingly optional tool used by some journalists and disdained by others—have become implicit (and sometimes explicit) prerequisites for journalists looking to succeed in today’s news media environment. There are a number of reasons why social media has become such a powerful force within news work. First, these platforms offer journalists an avenue by which they can find audiences and sources (Santana & Hopp, 2016; Vis, 2013). Furthermore, at a moment when the news industry faces significant instability, with newsrooms continually undergoing layoffs or shutting down altogether, many journalists depend on social media to cultivate personal brands they can use to find new professional opportunities (Brems et al., 2017; Molyneux et al., 2018). Finally, journalists increasingly use social media to publicize criticisms of the organizations in which they work, in hopes that doing so will lead to better labor conditions for themselves and their colleagues (Cohen & de Peuter, 2020).

Journalists’ Encounters With “Dark Participation”

The increase in journalists’ use of social media platforms has been accompanied by the realization that these platforms can often become highly inhospitable places for journalists. At the advent of the internet, many hoped—or even assumed—that social media platforms would democratize news production and lead to a more egalitarian relationship between journalists and news audiences (Gillmor, 2006; Webster, 2014). These assumptions have provided the backbone to aspirational journalistic movements such as participatory journalism (Karlsson et al., 2015), reciprocal journalism (Lewis et al., 2014) and, most recently, engaged journalism (Wenzel, 2020). Unfortunately, the reality of social media has proven much more fraught, with journalists frequently encountering what Thorsten Quandt (2018) calls “dark participation,” defined as the “bleak flip side to the utopian concept of selfless participation in a redactional society” (p. 40). Journalists—especially journalists of color and women journalists (Adams, 2018; Antunovic, 2019; Finneman et al., 2019; Nguyen, 2021; Posetti et al., 2020)—routinely face online harassment via social media in the form of abusive, sexist, racist, and even threatening language. These circumstances have led Quandt (2018) to conclude, “Hateful comments, manipulation of forums, and fabricated information seem to be common features of user participation in the news-making process these days. These and other variants of dark participation are apparently on the rise” (p. 43).

This dark participation does not take the form solely as threats and insults, but more recently as bad faith efforts to get journalists fired from their jobs—efforts that many journalists find frustratingly effective (Grueskin, 2021). In 2020, for example, the Washington Post reporter Felicia Sonmez was suspended by her newsroom managers for tweeting a link to a news story about the allegations of sexual assault against Kobe Bryant shortly after he was killed in a helicopter crash—not because doing so by itself violated the Post’s social media policy, but because many social media users mobilized against her after she posted it (Allsop, 2020). More recently, conservative activists accused Associated Press news associate Emily Wilder of being an “anti-Israel agitator” not for any of her journalistic work, but for social media posts she wrote while still a college student. These accusations were amplified by other prominent conservatives and right wing media outlets, and Wilder was fired soon after (Allsop, 2021). Taken together, the dark participation journalists face from the public combined with the sense that their own newsrooms will not protect them has left many journalists feeling as though they are walking a “Twitter tightrope” whenever they engage with people via social media (Nelson, 2021).
Not all journalists walk this tightrope equally. Research has shown that women journalists’ experiences with harassment online are significantly more frequent, as are those of younger journalists (Chen et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2020). Moreover, the harassing experiences women journalists have online are also more “vicious and personal” when compared with men journalists (Everbach, 2018, p. 141). This harassment includes everything from rape threats and death threats to hate speech (Ferrier & Garud-Patkar, 2018).

These routine experiences with online harassment are especially pointed for journalists of color. As Waisbord (2020) notes, “Journalistic accounts suggest that African American, Latinx, LGBTQ, Arab-American, Muslim, and Jewish reporters have been frequent targets of online harassment” (p. 1033). In a global study looking at women journalists exclusively, scholars found that 81% of Black women journalists experienced online harassment compared with 64% of White women journalists. And scholars note these large discrepancies in experience with online harassment lack a robust examination in scholarship (e.g., McCall, 2005). Indeed, Ferrier and Garud-Patkar (2018) observe this kind of abuse “can lead to the silencing of diverse voices in the media” (p. 319). Thus, scholarship examining structural solutions to combating dark participation must acknowledge both the gender and racial dynamics at play.

**Linking Journalists’ Internal and External Working Conditions**

As journalists face more frequent and vicious online harassment, journalism scholars have turned their attention to better understanding this harassment and its implications for news production and consumption. The result is a growing body of literature focused on the harassment itself as well as the ways that journalists and newsroom managers respond (Lewis et al., 2020; Tandoc et al., 2021; Waisbord, 2020). These studies have been invaluable for uncovering the toll that online harassment takes on journalists, particularly women journalists and journalists of color. As these studies have revealed, the ongoing harassment that journalists face online has led some journalists to use social media less than before, self-censor when it comes to what they share with the public on these platforms, or even disengage from social media altogether (Chen et al., 2020). These studies have also shown that newsroom leadership—which, within the United States, tend to comprise primarily white, male employees—do little to help protect their journalists from the harassment they face on social media or, alternatively, establish policies that make matters worse (Holton et al., 2021). This has led some journalists to wonder if newsroom managers’ lack of firsthand experience has inhibited their abilities to understand the severity of the threat that journalists face when navigating social media, and consequently prevented them from doing more to mitigate it (Nelson, 2021).

These circumstances raise an important question: What is the relationship between the composition of newsroom management, the policies they establish for their newsrooms, and the impact of those policies on the journalists they are charged with overseeing? This study seeks to explore this question. Our underlying argument: The conditions journalists face internally (i.e., within their newsrooms) and the conditions they face externally (i.e., within the news media environment more broadly) are linked. In other words, how news organizations treat their employees and how well those employees are represented affects how journalists interact with and approach the public. As our data suggest, journalists believe that the harassment they currently face when it comes to social media, as well as the lack of resources they have at their disposal when it comes to protecting themselves from that harassment, is a structural problem that requires a similarly structural intervention.

With that, our research question is given as follows:

**Research Question 1 (RQ1). How do journalists’ perceive the link between their organization’s management and their own experiences engaging with the public via social media?**

**Method**

This study draws on in-depth interviews with 37 reporters, editors, publishers, freelancers, and social media/audience engagement managers who are current or former employees of local, national, for-profit, nonprofit, print, digital, and broadcast outlets throughout the United States. Interviews were concluded at 37 respondents, at which point saturation was reached, and strengthened validity in data. This semi-structured interview design allows for the discovery of new information congruent with an inductive research approach, while also helping to increase reliability for future research to follow. What’s more, by allowing respondents to choose where they are interviewed, and how they want to respond to questions (or where they take the discussion), they are more likely to feel comfortable and speak honestly—increasing the truthfulness and validity of the data.

The data set comprises mostly women journalists (22 women and 15 men) and journalists of color (18 journalists of color), as journalists from these two groups are more likely to encounter abuse and harassment on social media. Details about each respondent can be found in Table 1. Interviews typically lasted an hour and took place between July and September 2021. The second author conducted the interviews via Zoom, recorded them as audio files and subsequently had those files transcribed by a professional transcription service. This research was exempted by the second author’s university’s institutional review board.

Interview participants were found using a social media-driven form of snowball sampling. The second author posted a call for interviewees on Twitter, which was shared by
Data analysis relied on the axial coding method, as outlined by Lindlof and Taylor (2017). This method involves “developing a set of axial codes whose purpose is to make connections between categories” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2017, p. 324). As such, data transcripts were read through thoroughly twice to identify categories. Once categories were identified, data in each category was reread to locate more specific themes, which underwent further analysis and comparison. From these themes, representative quotations were utilized to illustrate the data in the findings section (see, for example, Thompson et al., 2017). The close reading of qualitative data and constant comparison of categories is a widely practiced and generally accepted qualitative research method (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013).

Findings

In answering the guiding question of this research around how newsrooms should adjust their institutional values and practices when it comes to social media, three clear and present themes emerged around (1) journalists’ perceptions of problems with newsroom social media policies, (2) how organizations should adjust these policies through better representation within newsroom leadership and (3) the perceived effects that this improved representation would garner. The following findings section will address the three in that order.

The Problem

When exploring the link between their organization’s management and journalists’ own experiences engaging with the public via social media, a key theme that emerged centered on a lack of representation. In particular, the management of journalists and development of social media policies by newsroom managers who tend to be predominantly older, white men was, for many, a symbol of the disconnect between those who are active journalists on social media, and those in charge.

This disconnect created conflict around social media policies between those who make and enforce them, and those who endure them. For example, many journalists interviewed noted that social media policies frequently limit comments from journalists that are considered to be biased. This raised questions for many journalists about the nature of objectivity and when any journalist could truly be unbiased. As Respondent 6 noted,

I think that trying to pretend that your reporters aren’t people—and that they don’t have biases—it’s just dumb. Again, it’s white men that are deciding that. They can’t see their own biases because they think of themselves as neutral and objective.

| ID  | Person of Color | Gender |
|-----|----------------|--------|
| R1  | Yes            | Woman  |
| R2  | No             | Woman  |
| R3  | Yes            | Woman  |
| R4  | Yes            | Man    |
| R5  | No             | Man    |
| R6  | No             | Woman  |
| R7  | No             | Woman  |
| R8  | No             | Woman  |
| R9  | No             | Man    |
| R10 | Yes            | Woman  |
| R11 | No             | Woman  |
| R12 | No             | Woman  |
| R13 | No             | Woman  |
| R14 | Yes            | Woman  |
| R15 | No             | Man    |
| R16 | No             | Man    |
| R17 | No             | Woman  |
| R18 | Yes            | Woman  |
| R19 | No             | Man    |
| R20 | Yes            | Man    |
| R21 | No             | Man    |
| R22 | No             | Man    |
| R23 | Yes            | Woman  |
| R24 | No             | Woman  |
| R25 | Yes            | Man    |
| R26 | No             | Woman  |
| R27 | Yes            | Man    |
| R28 | Yes            | Woman  |
| R29 | No             | Woman  |
| R30 | Yes            | Woman  |
| R31 | Yes            | Man    |
| R32 | Yes            | Woman  |
| R33 | Yes            | Woman  |
| R34 | Yes            | Man    |
| R35 | Yes            | Woman  |
| R36 | Yes            | Woman  |
| R37 | No             | Man    |

Table 1. Gender and Person-of-Color demographics for study sample.
Similarly, Respondent 1, who identifies as a journalist of color, noted,

My managers, most of them, grew up in [state omitted for anonymity]. They are White. We have two different views of the world, and I don’t think that there is a lot of conversation of trying to understand everyone’s perspective. Because if managers really understood why minority journalists are tweeting and why things that they might see as bias really aren’t—if they had a more honest conversation—they can understand, well, no, that wasn’t really biased because of a series of facts.

Journalists like those noted above argued that the traditional belief within journalism that there is a single universal truth not steeped in bias stems from policies created by White men who fail to see their own personal biases.

This perception has implications that extend beyond the creation of social media policies about bias to their actual enforcement. As interviewees explained, when anti-bias social media policies are defined by a group of people who come from similar backgrounds and consequently have a narrower lens through which they define objectivity (i.e., older white men), they see their positional identity as neutral and the positions and experiences of some women journalists and journalists of color as inherently biased. For example, as Respondent 34 noted, “I do not believe that asserting that Black Lives Matter is a sign of bias. If you’re saying it as a literal statement, it is a statement of humanity, equality, and dignity.” However, they noted that some newsroom managers view such a statement as political and biased. It is in these interactions where journalists noted that a lack of representation has not only harmed them from engaging with audiences and public conversations in a meaningful way, but has even scared them away from interacting on social media.

Indeed, the fear of using social media was mentioned by several journalists. Respondent 12 noted,

I remember, for example, when the Capitol riot happened earlier this year. Everybody’s turning to social. I was refreshing my feed constantly and watching television like, “My God, what’s happening?” I was so scared to tweet anything because I’m like what’s the—am I going to get in trouble if I say, “Holy shit. This is scary.”? If I say something about Donald Trump, is that going to get me in trouble later on? It’s frustrating because it’s doing a disservice to our audiences to make your journalists too afraid to say anything that has any political implications because you’re making them scared to observe observable reality.

Furthermore, when addressing the way policies are formed, and how newsroom leaders support their staff around social media more generally, many journalists noted a clear lack of diversity and representation in leadership has hindered proper support. Journalists described feeling that representation in leadership is pivotal, and its absence frustrating, especially in instances in which a journalist is seeking support from managers after experiencing harassment or abuse on social media. Journalists from more diverse backgrounds and experiences said that when newsroom leadership is predominantly composed of older white men, they tend not to offer the support from which these journalists would most benefit. As Respondent 30 noted when describing an instance in which she encountered harassment via social media:

In that newsroom, I was the only person of color. It felt very discouraging in my first job, feeling like, “Well, I don’t know who to go to. This is really scary.” Obviously, my news director was like, “It’ll be fine if you just wait it out. It’ll be fine.” He is an old white male, who was not on social media, probably never even saw the invite about a Facebook group event, whatever it was. It’s scary. … I think it’s really important to have diverse staff, to have other people to lean on.

Indeed, Respondent 30 and many other journalists noted feelings of isolation when they experienced hateful rhetoric on social media targeted at their racial backgrounds, only to find no empathetic newsroom leaders to turn for support. While in some cases journalists may feel their newsroom managers are sympathetic to their unique experience on social media, the lack of representation in leadership makes true empathy near impossible. As Respondent 30 noted, there was no one to “lean on” who would understand her unique experience as a Black woman.

The Intervention

Journalists’ sense that their newsroom leadership was not representative of the newsroom as a whole also surfaced when examining social media policies. Social media policies that are aimed at protecting the company often lack a robust understanding of what their journalists do, and how a policy affects them, or in many cases, fails to protect them. For example, Respondent 28 noted,

Even now, as it’s getting more diverse, those at the top in management, who are typically the ones making and enforcing these policies, tend to be older and tend to be whiter, and those who are reporting day-to-day tend to be more diverse, younger, etc., and so I think there’s a clash there. I think that’s problematic in the design of the policies because it’s based on that particular view versus having a broader conversation with people with a bunch of different backgrounds.

In addition to advocating for younger journalists from more diverse backgrounds to be promoted to leadership roles, many interviewees also suggested that these younger, more diverse journalists—especially those who are highly active on social media—should be consulted regarding newsroom social media policies. Respondent 1 noted,
Our managers who are in charge of enforcing this policy, I do think that they should have a conversation with the entire newsroom, with the reporters who experience that harassment daily, with reporters who are putting their words out there every day and getting all kinds of feedback. I do think that managers should listen to our perspective and make a policy where their organizations stand by their journalists who are being attacked right now.

This goes beyond simply hiring more journalists who are diverse in background, experience, and identity, but also employing journalists from across a newsroom—not just in leadership—to help craft policies that affect them personally. Some interviewees went a step further and said journalists from across the newsroom should not just be consulted but specifically included in the process of creating newsroom policies around social media. An example is a remark from Respondent 28, who noted, “I would first start with who’s in the room when [social media policies are] developed, which should be a much more diverse group of journalists. Journalists with different roles, with different backgrounds both professionally and personally having that conversation.” Indeed, for journalists like Respondent 28, it is not enough to simply consult a diverse group of journalists with differing experiences, but they must also be part of the decision-making process.

The Perceived Effects

Many interviewees argued these shifts would result in specific, positive outcomes for news organizations, journalists, the relationship between journalists and their newsroom managers, and, finally, the relationship between journalists and the public. Journalists interviewed said these shifts would lead to three particular interventions when it comes to newsroom social media policies and newsroom management more generally: (1) the creation of social media policies that protect both organizations and journalists, (2) the creation of policies that outline how to respond to social media harassment against their journalists, and (3) a more deliberate and equitable response plan to accusations of bias against journalists on social media. Broadly, it would also lead journalists from marginalized backgrounds to feel more supported when facing online harassment, rather than further marginalized by newsroom managers who neither identify with the backgrounds of these journalists nor understand how those backgrounds could result in increased online harassment and increased singling out when it comes to newsroom social media policies that privilege traditionally white notions of “objectivity.” Ultimately, these expected outcomes are considered to enhance the experiences of diverse journalists working in newsrooms across the United States as they seek to update and improve newsroom culture and address growing concerns with mistreatment on social media.

Protecting Journalists and Organizations. Many journalists criticized their organization’s social media policies for lacking depth in terms of protecting both the organization and the individual journalists. Although these policies frequently look for ways to minimize accusations of libel and bias against the employees who represent the organization, they are painfully silent on the ways in which they protect journalists from abuse on social media. Respondent 32 noted,

The main issue with the social media policy is that it was based upon protecting the institution. It made it pretty clear that everything you do on social media, first and foremost, you must consider the credibility of the institution. Every other use of social media comes after that. That’s just not a very employee-friendly policy to have in any way. It makes itself known, insists upon itself being made to protect the institution, is one that values its workers less.

As Respondent 32 noted, social media policies have nearly universally been aimed at the protection of the organization above the journalists. However, to bring staff into the decision-making process around such policies—many journalists believe these policies would shift to an objective of protecting employees and the organization. This shift will only occur, however, when employees are seen as individuals and not liabilities exclusively. In fact, with so many journalists considering leaving the industry because of harassment (Miller, 2021a) and a near systematic lack of support for journalists when it comes to abuse (Holton et al., 2021), it is likely that a shift in such a policy could help significantly with retention of journalists. Moreover, it sends a message to journalists that they are not only important enough to be included in the decision-making, but a priority and asset to a company worth protecting and not just regulating. Journalists described feeling that a first step toward making these policies more employee-focused would entail bringing women journalists and journalists of color, especially those on the front lines of social media harassment into management roles or, at the very least, into the initial discussions surrounding newsroom social media policies.

Responding to Harassment. By including the voices of journalists from throughout a newsroom and historically marginalized background in policy creation, an additional anticipated side effect is that of better institutional responses to harassment of journalists. For example, after being harassed repeatedly on social media, Respondent 17 noted,

I said to my editor, “At what point do they hear back from somebody who’s not me?” [. . .] We kind of look like rookies that we’re not willing to stand up for our people. Do we want to be the wild west, or do we want to be a place that’s like, “Yeah, there’s no room for that here. Bye. You’re blocked. Next time you contact that person, we contact authorities.” Again, I’m not saying that’s my dream policy. I’m just saying can we have that conversation because right now, writers are just on their own to read that stuff or not read that stuff or have it sent to junk or not have it sent to junk.
Indeed, when referencing ways in which organizations support journalists who have faced abuse and harassment on social media, there is a clear lack of regulations dictating how to respond. Not only are journalists frequently left with little to no direction for how to respond to harassment, hostility, and threats on social media, there is also a lack of clear avenues through which to report the abuse. For example, one journalist noted, “The support never really existed.” Similarly, another stated in an interview that “it feels like there should be at least a person who it’s obvious to go to and say, ‘Hey, this is happening. Do you have any recommendations? What should I do? Am I okay?’ I don’t know that that exists” (Respondent 12). For many journalists they are left feeling as if they are alone in responding to hate. This is especially pressing for women journalists and journalists of color who experience the most abuse, but also the least representation in newsroom leadership—causing many to feel uncomfortable to turn to a White man manager in lieu of a clear policy for responding. And in instances in which they do seek advice, they are frequently told to just block or ignore the abusers. However, this laissez faire response often raises additional concerns about journalist’s personal reputations. As Respondent 6 noted in one example where managers told her to ignore online harassment: “It was just like—they didn’t take it seriously. I’m just like, ‘This affects your reputation, too’, because this guy is saying I slept with a congressional candidate, which I didn’t.”

Many interviewees felt that better representation in newsroom management—from diverse journalists as well as those active on social media—would lead to policies that lay out clear instructions and action plans for responding to abuse, rather than simply offering difficult to follow and unfairly enforced rules. For example, in cases like Respondent 30 who, as a person of color, felt uncomfortable going to a white supervisor, there would be a path for reporting abuse and ensuring the organization responds. Indeed, through representation, journalists described how they would be given the agency with which to craft a policy that supports staff with clear directions for how to respond to harassment, to whom to report the abuse, and even how the organization itself can respond to help manage reputations and contact the abusers.

**Equitable Response to Claims of Bias.** The final, enduring issue that came up throughout these interviews related to journalists’ tension surrounding traditional notions of objectivity, its apparent incompatibility with social media platforms, and the role of objectivity within contemporary journalism more generally. This criticism is not new, nor is it specific to this study. On the contrary, the last few years have seen many journalists from diverse backgrounds and historically marginalized communities argue that the pursuit of “objectivity” within the newsrooms treats their perspectives as biased while privileging White, male perspectives as neutral truth. Because social media policies have historically been created based on definitions of objectivity as outlined by White men managers, they disproportionately marginalize and punish women and journalists of color.

Indeed, Respondent 1 noted previously the need for more conversations—and especially representation—could drastically alter the way in which “bias” is perceived. One example that emerged frequently in conversations with journalists is that of Black Lives Matter, or BLM. For some White managers, tweets that supported BLM were considered political and thusly biased, while others saw it differently. For example, Respondent 18 noted,

I identify as a person of color. I’m Latina and of indigenous ancestry. Not just that, but even to what extent can I share my feelings on what’s happening with this racial reckoning movement that’s happening around the country because, obviously, this is something that I’ve experienced firsthand in my life. I have often heard of newsrooms really not okay with journalists of color supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, which I personally don’t see as a political issue. To me, this is a social justice issue.

Therefore, when social media policies require journalists to avoid bias and conflicts of interests, which are enforced by newsroom managers who are predominantly white men, there is a slant toward their definitions of what is biased, frequently at the expense of stifling the voices of their historically marginalized staffers. Therefore, to create an organizational shift in leadership that reflects varying concepts of what is bias, Respondent 34 suggested in an interview that, “we as leaders have to be, A, more diverse and inclusive; and B, reflect the population that we’re trying to serve and the communities we serve and our newsrooms and America more broadly.”

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Journalists have faced risks on social media for years, including mounting abuse that calls them fake news (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019), threatens them (Waisbord, 2020) and pushes them to even consider leaving the industry (Miller, 2021b). Moreover, journalists feel concerned to be their “authentic selves” on social media for fear of violating policies that are at times ambiguous and beneficial only to their organization. In fact, many journalists have noted that harassment and hostility online is often a problem they are left to deal with on their own (Holton et al., 2021), especially when they feel they are not represented in management. Through interviews with 37 journalists from a variety of newsroom roles, publication types, racial identities, gender identities, and backgrounds, a repeated theme that emerged was a need for better representation in leadership to address the dangers and fears of being online as a journalist. This is perhaps one of the solutions Carlson et al. (2021) called for when they said research “needs to consider structural solutions to match structural problems” (p. 752).
Taken together, our findings suggest that better representation in newsroom leadership hinges on a larger structural shift in newsroom culture that values representation, equity, and inclusion not just as a journalistic value, but as an organizational value. As Respondent 12 noted, “You need to create an environment where women journalists and journalists of color are valued equally as white male journalists. Again, it’s all connected. It’s a wholesale culture change that needs to happen in newsrooms where these people are valued as much as anybody else is.” For many journalists operating in the frequently tumultuous waters of social media, it is in leadership where this shift must happen first—so these diverse voices can create more representative social media policies and create avenues for diverse journalists to have stronger more empathetic support systems among newsroom leaders.

These changes would not only affect how journalists interact with and work alongside their newsroom managers, but would also reshape their engagement with and approach to the public as well. We find ourselves at a moment when many in journalism have embraced engagement as an important means by which journalists can improve trust in news among the public and, subsequently, increase audience revenue within newsrooms. However, the excitement surrounding engagement has yet to meaningfully reconcile with the serious dangers and challenges lurking within social media platforms, the setting in which most journalists attempt to connect with their readers and the public more widely. Journalists from diverse backgrounds have spent the bulk of their careers navigating the racist, sexist “dark participation” inherent within social media while also trying to thread the needle of sharing their thoughts and observations on social media while maintaining traditional notions of “objectivity. Consequently, if these journalists were to be placed in newsroom leadership roles, they would likely be well positioned to reconfigure their newsroom’s approach to social media in such a way that journalists would feel protected and supported when engaging with the public, rather than left to their own devices or unfairly penalized. The result might mean that the very journalists who have for too long been marginalized within offline settings—specifically women journalists and journalists of color—would not feel similarly marginalized online as well. It might also mean that members of the public would be more often exposed to a wider array of perspectives than they currently tend to see.

However, this cultural shift is no small task. Journalism has consistently lagged behind national averages when it comes to representation of diverse voices. In a 2018 study published by the Pew Research Center, they noted that “More than three-quarters (77%) of newsroom employees—those who work as reporters, editors, photographers and videographers in the newspaper, broadcasting and internet publishing industries—are non-Hispanic whites,” compared with 65% of the US Population (Grieco, 2018, n.p.). Furthermore, the study found when it came to age, “Among older workers, newsroom employees are disproportionately male: About two-thirds of newsroom employees ages 30 and older are men, compared with a little over half of all U.S. workers” (Grieco, 2018, n.p.). And when it comes to leadership, the US census Bureau reports that only 13% of US newspaper leadership is composed of minorities (Arana, 2018). While broadcast outlets are better, they similarly lag behind the US population with only 15.6% of broadcast news directors being people of color (Papper, 2021). However, this is all to say that we continue to still struggle with a full understanding of newsroom diversity due to decreased response rates to many national surveys (Scire, 2022).

Indeed, while the problem of representation in newsrooms and leadership has improved, the industry continues to lag behind the general US population, leaning toward more men and non-Hispanic White persons taking leadership roles. As this research illustrates, this presents a cultural and structural problem in newsrooms when considering the diversity of staff and their experiences online does not align with the experiences of the predominantly white men newsroom leader.

**Limitations and Future Research**

While scholars took charge to build a strong and robust study, this one is not without limitations. Primarily, this study relies on the experiences of journalists from a diverse pool to explain what they believe to be areas of concern around newsroom social media policy, and what changes they believe will help to improve these concerns. While their experiences working in various newsrooms inform their ideas and research backs up a clear lack of representation in newsroom management, there is no way to definitively note whether enacting the proposed changes will in fact result in the aforementioned outcomes. While we can say with confidence this is likely, this remains a limitation of this research. We hope more scholars will complement this research with observation-based studies focused on how journalists actually engage with the public via social media, how they engage with their managers when it comes to newsroom social media policies, and how interventions when it comes to these policies impacts the practice and reception of journalism.

We specifically hope that more scholars will invest their efforts into understanding the impact of diversity and representation within newsroom management on newsroom routines and labor conditions within the profession. This includes a close examination of research looking exclusively at newsroom leaders and why they create the social policies that they do, and how they think about and prioritize diverse voices. With more representative newsroom leadership, many journalists expect to see shifts in social media policies that protect both the organization and the journalists who work there. Furthermore, they expect more equitable responses to claims of bias, and that journalists will be better
supported when facing online harassment. Moreover, there is likely a third outcome: higher retention of journalists. Indeed, the burnout rate in newsrooms has been studied and reported on for years (e.g., Reinardy, 2011). However, recent scholarship has shown that support from managers and one’s organization has a significant impact on the effects of harassment and overall job satisfaction for journalists (Beam, 2006; Miller, 2021b). Therefore, it is likely that the increase of representation in US newsrooms will help to make journalists feel more represented and supported, and possibly increase retention or decrease burnout. However, further research is needed in this area.

Outside of journalism, this research has implications within organizational studies. Indeed, if representation in leadership has the trickle-down effect as respondents believe it does in journalism, there is likely a similar disconnect in other fields. For example, even in industries that do not spend as much time on social media as journalists do, many face abuse from the public (e.g., nursing, police, customer service) and may also face narrowly constructed work policies (e.g., leave policies, etc.). Without proper representation in management who often build and enforce these policies, or are in charge of responding to reports of abuse, the outcomes can be less than satisfactory at best, and even harmful to the staff at worst. Future studies should examine possible links in other fields.

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