

Research Paper

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Reaching for reconciliation

Reader responses to seven newspapers' apologies for histories of racist coverage

Abstract: A few years before the 2020 »racial reckoning,« institutions in the United States began issuing apologies for complicity in systemic racism – and the news industry was no exception. This paper surveys the apologies issued by one U.S. news publication, the *Montgomery Advertiser*, that apologized two years before the 2020 reckoning, and six other newspapers that issued apologies between 2020 and present day: the *Los Angeles Times*; *Kansas City Star*; *Baltimore Sun*; *Philadelphia Inquirer*; *Seattle Times*; and *Oregonian*. The present study investigates these publications' apologies for racist and other problematic coverage through the lens of the Christian principles of sacramental reconciliation, which are designed to address past wrongs and repair relationships between transgressors and those who have been harmed. In addition, this paper assesses public responses to each of the new organizations' expositions of and apologies for racist coverage. It focuses on opinions published in public forums, particularly by people of color who belong to communities that have been harmed by problematic news coverage; journalists of color; editors and others involved in news making processes; and other prominent thought leaders on issues of race. Examining the wide range of responses to such apologies provides insight into public opinion about U.S. news institutions' current standing with racialized communities and future steps toward more accurate and equitable coverage of those who have historically been mistreated by news organizations.

Keywords: racial reckoning; US newspapers; racist coverage; reconciliation; apologies

In May 2020, George Floyd was killed while in police custody in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Floyd was one in a long list of African American people who had been killed by members of law enforcement during a moment of heightened public attention to the issue of police brutality, particularly in Black communities. Floyd's murder prompted what has subsequently been referred to as the »racial reckoning« of 2020. A spate of public apologies for complicity in racism and other social ills were subsequently issued by organizations across law enforcement, business, industry, politics, and the news media. Editors at newspapers such as the *Kansas City Star*, the *Baltimore Sun*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* issued apologies for decades of racist coverage of African Americans in particular, as well as other communities of color. Indeed, staff at the *Kansas City Star* and the *Oregonian* cited Floyd's murder and its aftermath as catalysts for their self-study and the public apologies that followed.

However, publishing an apology is not enough to account for a newspaper's role in deeply rooted systems of historic inequality and racism. Several newspaper editors recognized this fact, making sure to also convey the papers' commitments to more equitable coverage and business practices. Just as important as the content of those apologies and proposed action plans is the ways in which the public, particularly those in Black communities and other racialized groups toward whom the apologies were directed, responded. Using the Christian principles of sacramental reconciliation as a framework, this paper examines seven news organizations' self-examinations and public apologies for their roles in perpetuating systemic racism, which were published between 2018 and 2023. Analyzing the content of the apologies and assessing whether each newspaper fulfilled the five elements of reconciliation, the present study focuses on a wide range of responses that were expressed by average citizens; political and other leaders; and stakeholders in the creation of news stories.

Literature review: The function and form of apologies

This study draws on several theories and concepts to assess the content of apologies issued by newspapers. Legal scholar Roy L. Brooks identified four components in a well-crafted apology: »the perpetrator confesses the deed; admits the deed was an injustice; repents; and asks for forgiveness. ... [It] is an *acknowledgment* of guilt rather than a punishment for guilt« (2004, p. 144; italics in original). When transgressors apologize publicly, they face a credibility test. The genuineness of their apology is assessed in terms of sincerity and authenticity, and whether it takes or evades responsibility (KAMPF 2009). An equivocal non-apology, for example, expresses sorrow that something happened rather than admitting to causing a transgression. A sincere apology restores public trust at the expense of

a momentary loss of face, while an evasive and insincere non-apology saves face at the cost of true restoration of trust. Shallow apologies do not reflect deep remorse; they are issued by »perpetrators who are only sorry that they got caught« (BROOKS 2020: 831) and are as much for the transgressor as for the victim. More than a simple »I'm sorry« is required to cleanse the apologizer's moral character. The apologizer must self-consciously seek repair and reconciliation through a redemptive act, commonly called »a reparation,« that »in the context of atonement ... makes it believable« and »more than rhetoric« (BROOKS 2020: 817).

Addressing recent apologies for racist news coverage, communication scholar Robin Hoecker (2021) suggested that the more of the following elements are present in an apology, the more effective the apology will be at repairing a damaged relationship with the public: 1) corroboration of the factual record; 2) acceptance of blame by the appropriate person or group; 3) identification of each transgression and how they harmed victims; 4) recognition of the victim as worthy of engaging in moral discourse; 5) performance of the apology in a meaningful way; and 6) commitment to change in behavior. Journalism historian Michael Fuhlhage and media ethics scholar Lee Wilkins considered these elements when assessing apologies issued by the *Los Angeles Times* and *Kansas City Star* for complicity in systemic racism (2023). They based their analysis on theology scholar J. J. Carney's (2010) Christian pattern of sacramental reconciliation, which contains these elements: contrition – genuine regret for past wrongs; confession – publication of self-examination with an apology; mediation – acknowledgment of the ways racist coverage damaged the news organization and its community; seeking forgiveness – with the understanding that doing so returns power to the victims of the transgression; and penance – publicly professing how the news organization will do better and committing resources to doing so. Mediation in a church setting involves confessing sins to a priest and understanding how sin damaged the church and hurt the transgressor's neighbors, with the goal of mending relationships. Although the number of U.S. Americans identifying as Christian has significantly dropped, from 90% in 1972 to 63% in 2021 (PEW RESEARCH CENTER 2022), Christianity continues to exert strong social influence (see PERRY 2022). The sacramental reconciliation model is therefore appropriate for assessing apologies made to the U.S. public.

In the context of reconciliation within the news community, Fuhlhage and Wilkins (2023) examined how a transgressing organization may come to understand how its complicity in systemic racism harmed its relationship with communities of color that bore the brunt of the damage. They suggested the journalistic parallel to sacramental mediation could take the form of public forums or focus groups, in which journalists explain their understanding of the damage and hear community members' experiences. As means of mediation, public forums could also offer space for the next stage of sacramental reconciliation: seeking

forgiveness, knowing that this turns power over to the victims of transgressions who then decide whether to offer forgiveness. This pattern contains a framework for news organizations to perform self-examination, and a means to assess the moral depth of news media organizations' apologies for racist wrongs of the past, that is applied in the present study.

Apologies have often been recommended as the best response when prominent individuals and organizations misbehave (HARGIE/STAPLETON/TOURISH 2010). However, scholars have focused on responses' value to the sender rather than the experience of the recipients. To rectify this, Coombs (2010) called for examinations of audience reactions to organizational messages. One study examined stakeholders' reactions to apologies to identify ways an organization can »atone for its transgressions to a level of acceptance by stakeholders so that it can move forward« (LWIN et al. 2017: 50) The present study examines the apologies extended to the U.S. public at large. »Public« here is defined in terms of the moral philosophical concept of *duty*: To whom does each newspaper presenting a self-examination and apology have a duty? The Society of Professional Journalists declares journalists have a duty to seek truth and report it *to the public* (SPJ 2014, italics added). But whom does that »public« include? The veil of ignorance (RAWLS 1971), which proposes considering how stakeholders could be affected when deciding how to handle a moral quandary, provided a guide to identifying stakeholders and proposed giving special consideration to those with the least power, as they are the most vulnerable. These stakeholders may include the journalists covering a story; sources; ordinary people; leaders who possess economic, political, and other forms of power; and the functionaries who carry out their orders.

Finally, there is limited research on the views held by journalists of color about news organizations' recent assessments of racial pasts. Their various points of view are particularly important because they experience racism directly. *Times* editor Brent Staples (2020), whose editorials on racial terror won a 2019 Pulitzer Prize, explained that power manifests as a white normative view in news representations of racialized people. Journalist and scholar Brad Clark further argued that the experiences, concerns, and calls for reform made by Indigenous and other racialized journalists demonstrate that journalistic practice and ethics are »deeply entrenched in white dominance« (2022: 1). The voices of racial minorities who are former journalists and insiders in news making processes are therefore essential. The present study contributes to literature on audience's responses to news organizations' apologies for their role in perpetuating systemic racism by connecting the elements of such apologies with assessments made by journalists of color, the general public, and other stakeholders.

Methods: Analysis of apologies and purposive sample of audience responses

The purpose of this study is to open an investigation into public reaction to newspapers' self-examinations of their historic reporting and editorials concerning racialized minorities and their apologies for complicity in systemic racism. In April 2018, the *Montgomery Advertiser* was the first to undertake such a project. Six other newspapers followed through the end of 2022: the *Los Angeles Times* (September 27, 2020), *Kansas City Star* (December 20, 2020), *Baltimore Sun* (February 18, 2022), *Philadelphia Inquirer* (February 20, 2022), *Seattle Times* (March 27, 2022-present), and *Portland Oregonian* (October 24, 2022). Keyword searches were used to locate public responses to each of these publications' apologies. The present study centers the racially and ethnically minoritized groups who have been wronged in the estimation of the papers doing the apologizing, followed by the rest of the news organizations' communities (subscribers and others in their circulation areas; the apologizing news organization's staff, including former staffers; the professional journalism community; and others who have commented with substantive, relevant affirmation and/or critique of their apology projects. Omitted from this study are bad-faith actors such as internet trolls and »shitposters,« defined as those who post »worthless or irrelevant content online intended to derail a conversation or provoke others« (AMERICAN DIALECT SOCIETY 2017).

This stakeholder list led to several venues where responses might be published: the apologizing newspapers' own websites; databases containing versions of their print editions such as ReadEx, NewsBank, and ProQuest newspapers; journalism industry websites and publications such as Poynter.org, Nieman Reports, and the *Columbia Journalism Review* (cjr.org); the culturally targeted press of each of the cities in which the apologizing newspapers are based; Ethnic NewsWatch database; alternative press outlets local to each apologizing newspaper; blogs by prominent commentators on race and the press; and comments on Twitter and Facebook. Structured purposive searches built around the headlines that the newspapers used to label their self-examinations and apologies and relevant keywords – e.g. those pertaining to ethnicity, significant landmarks and personalities, names of historical figures who were included in them, names of journalists in the bylines, and names of top editors or publishers – were run during a period beginning five days before the publication of apologies and self-examination articles (to account for those that ran online before print publication) and six weeks after print publication. The questions driving this study are:

RQ1: How did the self-examinations and apologies address each of the elements in the pattern of reconciliation?

RQ 2: How did audience response reflect the presence or absence of elements in the pattern of reconciliation in these newspapers?

The following sections lay out the apologies issued by each newspaper before focusing on how satisfied or dissatisfied members of the public were with each newspaper's apologies, whether they thought the apologies and self-examinations were appropriate and thorough enough, what they thought was deficient, and what was needed to make them satisfactory.

Montgomery Advertiser: »There will be lynchings«

On April 20, 2018, the *Montgomery Advertiser* published a series titled »»There will be lynchings«: How the *Advertiser* Failed Victims of Racial Terror.« Its publication corresponded with the opening of the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, dedicated to remembering the horrors of lynchings of Black Americans. The series opened with a story about two Black men accused of assaulting white women who were shot by a mob in 1919. In response, the *Advertiser* had declared, »All right-thinking people deplore lynchings,« but »as long as there are attempts at rape by black men, red men or yellow men on white women there will be lynchings« (LYMAN 2018). Reporter Brian Lyman wrote that the quote »encapsulated the *Advertiser's* attitude toward lynching in the late 19th and early 20th centuries,« which was »opposition to lynching in the abstract; indifference to the violence,« reinforced by the paper's use of racial stereotypes. The *Advertiser* assumed lynching victims were guilty without reviewing the evidence and failed to publish Black perspectives. Lyman concluded that these failures were reflected decades later, when the *Advertiser* covered civil rights with problematic language and demonstrated clear patterns of racial bias.

The editorial board followed up with an April 26 opinion piece titled »Our shame: The sins of our past laid bare for all to see.« It began »We were wrong,« with the board declaring, »We take responsibility for our proliferation of a false narrative regarding the treatment of African-Americans in those disgraceful days« (*Montgomery Advertiser* Editorial Board 2018). Although its members were not alive when most of these lynchings occurred, they positioned themselves as transgressors. The board conceded that the *Advertiser* was »careless« and admitted »we dehumanized human beings« and assumed lynching victims were guilty without proof. Specifically, they wrote, »we propagated a worldview rooted in racism and the sickening myth of racial superiority« that dismissed African Americans as inferior. In response to readers' comments that the past should be left in the past, the board declared, »We can't do that« because innocent people died solely because of their race. The board admitted, »We didn't take the time to learn who [lynching victims] were and tell their stories, and we take responsibility for our predecessors' negligence.« Referencing a man named Robin White, who was hanged after a neighbor lied that White had shot at him, the board expressed hope

that museum and memorial visitors »will better understand their connection to a history of unmitigated violence against humans.... We must never be as wrong as this again.«

Two weeks later, Jamil Smith declared in a *Rolling Stone* article, »The frankness with which the *Advertiser* handled [the apology] was welcome, especially considering how essential the press' willful ignorance and criminalization of lynching victims was to the proliferation of that kind of violence« (2018). He expressed hope that journalists would learn from the apology, which »was not merely recognition of past wrongs, but an earnest pledge to correct them. There was no pressure put upon black people in Montgomery to swallow it, lest they appear ungrateful.«

Finally, on May 8, the *New York Times* recorded a »RaceNYT« segment on Facebook Live facilitated by reporter Rachel Swarns. The session included *Advertiser* Executive Editor Bro Krift and *Times* editor Brent Staples. Krift noted that public response to the article was »overwhelmingly positive« and that people were proud of what the *Advertiser* did. »They consider it a courageous thing – I do not. I just consider it responsible,« Krift explained (*New York Times* 2018). In an article about the *Advertiser's* apology, Staples assessed the newspaper's historic role in racial terror (STAPLES 2018). During the Facebook session, Staples pointed out that the *Advertiser* had historically justified these lynchings by failing to report who killed these Black people and using »banal« language to describe the killings. Finally, Swarns shared comments from viewers, including Dar McCray, who said »No [*sic*] they should not apologize. Most of the journalists that were responsible are dead. Let's keep moving society into the future.« Another viewer, Lisa Capuano, said, »It was a sign of the times and historically accurate. No apologies.« Yet another viewer, India Elaine Holland-Garnett, replied, »Yes, [newspapers] need to own up to the rolls [*sic*] they played!« (*New York Times* 2018).

Los Angeles Times: »Our reckoning with racism«

On September 27, 2020, the *Los Angeles Times* launched a weeklong series of examinations of the ways it failed to cover minority groups in a fair manner. The *Times* also published a column by editor and publisher Patrick Soon-Shiong, who acknowledged that the *Times* had »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« (SOON-SHIONG 2020). He admitted the paper »has had blind spots« and »ignored large swaths of the city and its diverse population, or covered them in one-dimensional, sometimes racist ways.« One reason was that the *Times* »has never truly reflected the region:« They failed to employ any Black journalists until the mid-1960s and any Asian Americans until the late 1970s, and never hired Latino journalists in numbers

representative of Latinos in the community. Soon-Shiong wrote he would hire, retain, and promote more journalists of color, and build »an organizational culture that truly values representation and equity« to increase diversity and »better represent Los Angeles and California« by providing more equitable coverage of underrepresented communities.

An apology by the *Times* Editorial Board in the same issue confessed to racism in the paper's past. Referencing a 1981 story headlined »Marauders from Inner City Prey on L.A.'s Suburbs,« the board admitted that the paper reinforced stereotypes of Black and Latino people as »thieves, rapists and killers,« sensationalized poor families' struggles, and stereotyped South L.A.'s residents through biased quoting of police and prosecutors. The editorial apology held the story up as an example of the ways the newspaper has »displayed at best a blind spot, at worst an outright hostility, for the city's nonwhite population,« reinforced by lack of newsroom diversity. The Editorial Board apologized for decades of reporting that marginalized and demeaned people of color. The board wrote: »On behalf of this institution, we apologize for *The Times*' history of racism. We owe it to our readers to do better, and we vow to do so.... We know that this acknowledgment must be accompanied by a real commitment to change« (The *Times* Editorial Board 2020). A weeklong »self-examination« of racism in the *Times*' coverage followed: Each day, the paper published a story examining stereotyping and marginalization of Black, Latin, and Asian Americans, along with lack of newsroom diversity.

Reception among minority journalists at the *Times* was mixed. Fidel Martinez (2020), who writes the paper's Latinx Files newsletter, noted that the paper still fell short in its newsroom staffing. »The @latimes is only 13% Latinx« in a county that is 48% Latin, he wrote. But Jean Guerrero, a *Times* columnist, held up the package as an example for others to follow: »I hope other news orgs learn from @latimes – this is a powerful step in the right direction« (2020). Journalists of color outside of Southern California generally praised the *Times*. Alejandra Molina, a reporter at Religion News Service who focuses on Latinos, wrote that the apology was »powerful« (2020). Lolly Bowean, a former *Chicago Tribune* reporter who is Black, put the apology package in broader historical perspective, writing, »There was a time when newspapers profited from what they called Fugitive Slave Ads. Newspapers ignored Black communities and then criminalized them. But now – a reckoning has begun« (2020). Cierra Brown Hinton, editor of *Scalawag Magazine*, a nonprofit publication that reports on Southern politics and culture, praised the *Times*' apology as a »clear model for what meaningfully starting this work looks like« (2020).

Some non-journalists were astonished that the paper apologized. Tina Vasquez, a native Angeleno, commented, »Despite the ways LAT failed communities of color over the years, I still turned to it hoping for more and better. I never thought I would see this day« (2020). Others asked the *Times* to do more. Jeannette Harrison,

a Twitter user, complained that the *Times* lacked a dedicated beat reporter for Indian Country (2020). The Congressional Hispanic Caucus (2020) praised the *Times* for showing »that telling stories of a diverse America requires diversity in the newsroom. More newspapers should follow suit.«

Finally, institutions and white journalists outside the *Times* cast the project as worthy of emulating. A Nieman Lab article praised the project as »a start to correcting decades of damage« (*The Objective*, 2020). ProPublica editor Ziva Branstetter wrote she would like to see the *Tulsa Tribune*, in her native Oklahoma, follow the *Times*' model by examining its role in the 1921 Tulsa race massacre (2020). Violet Blue, an author and freelance journalist in Northern California, echoed that sentiment by simply tweeting, »Your turn, San Francisco Chronicle / SF Gate« (2020).

Kansas City Star: »The Truth in Black and White«

The murder of George Floyd in 2020 and the resultant racial reckoning led Mará Rose Williams to propose that *The Kansas City Star* apologize for its failure to »adequately and accurately tell the rich stories« of Black Kansas Citians' contributions to the city. Williams (2021), an African American and a veteran reporter, wrote the paper should account for »its role in spreading the racist attitudes woven in the fabric of this country to oppress an entire people.« Internally, *Kansas City Star* reporters and editors discussed how to honestly examine the paper's past to move forward. A team of reporters dug through the newspaper's archives; searched for court documents, congressional testimony, and meeting minutes; interviewed retired *Star* editors and reporters; and sought out those who lived through the events the project explored. Finally, the *Star* periodically met with panels of scholars and community leaders to discuss significant milestones of Black Kansas Citians that the *Star* overlooked (FANNIN 2020).

On December 20, 2020, the *Star* published the first article in its series, »The Truth in Black and white: An apology from *The Kansas City Star*.« In his apology, editor-in-chief Mike Fannin wrote for much of its »early history – through sins of both commission and omission,« the paper »disenfranchised, ignored and scorned generations of Black Kansas Citians« (FANNIN 2020). The editorial board confessed it failed to speak out »against historical injustices to Black Kansas Citians« (*The Kansas City Star* Editorial Board, 2020). The paper reinforced Jim Crow laws and redlining, and »robbed an entire community of opportunity, dignity, justice, and recognition« (FANNIN 2020). For this, wrote Fannin, »We are sorry.«

The *Star*'s transgressions included its depiction of Black Kansas Citians as criminals or occupants of a »crime-ridden world« (ADLER 2020a) and its failure to cover the civil rights movement (HENDRICKS 2020) and notable Black Kansas Citians

(FANNIN 2020). The *Star* and *Times* published 132 articles about the devastating Brush Creek flood in September 1977 but failed to substantively cover »the devastated minority communities or the residents who felt neglected by authorities in its aftermath« (M. R. WILLIAMS 2020). Conversely, J. C. Nichols, a white developer who systematically »employed racially restrictive covenants to control his neighborhoods« (STARK 2020), appeared frequently in the *Star's* pages. Nichols' 50-year career of building homes and apartments for Kansas Citians laid the foundation for a »system that denied Black families access to [the] housing market« and the generational wealth it created for white families (STARK 2020b).

The response from Black Kansas Citians, public officials, journalists, and *Star* readers was mixed. Some expressed appreciation for the series. *Star* reporter Courtland Stark expressed pride after working on the project, and tweeted, »The *Star* has also launched an advisory board to ensure fair, inclusive coverage of diverse communities« (STARK 2020). Others noted the *Star's* efforts but felt the paper needed to do more. Kansas City Mayor Quinton Lucas commended the *Star's* reporting as a positive first step and tweeted, »Now I hope my friends in the local TV news business do the same« (MAYOR Q 2020). Twitter user Michael Rung wrote: »And what are they doing to right the wrong????« (RUNGE 2020). Others viewed the *Star's* apology as unnecessary and too political. Chris Morgan tweeted, »Too late and too woke and won't move the needle one bit« (MORGAN 2020).

Baltimore Sun: »We Are Deeply and Profoundly Sorry«

On February 18, 2022, the *Baltimore Sun* published an editorial titled, »We are deeply and profoundly sorry: For decades, the *Baltimore Sun* promoted policies that oppressed Black Marylanders; we are working to make amends.« The editorial board wrote that the *Sun* »frequently employed prejudice as a tool of the time,« published stereotypes and caricatures of Black Americans, and »sharpened, preserved and furthered the structural racism that still subjugates Black Marylanders.« It admitted to past mistakes and stated, »We have made efforts before to bolster diversity and inclusion, but the evolution has been slow.« The board partnered with staff volunteers from the *Sun's* Diversity Committee to consult archives to document »the paper's offenses,« which include running ads for enslaved people; publishing editorials to disenfranchise Black voters in the early 1900s; failing to hire African American journalists until the 1950s and hiring too few since; identifying Black people by race without doing the same for other groups; relying on the word of law enforcement over Black residents; publishing an editorial in 2002 in which a Black lawyer was disparaged for »bringing ›little to the team but the color of his skin;« and failing to publish »stories about issues relevant and important to non-white communities« (2022). The board wrote, »The paper's

prejudice hurt people« as well as its business: these biases resulted in the loss of »paper readership and community credibility.«

The board detailed corrective steps that included establishing a diversity, equity and inclusion reporting team; creating a »cultural competency style guide« to ensure that coverage of particular groups is »respectful, accurate, inclusive and fair;« diversifying its sources; developing a »talent pipeline« to increase the number of non-white people employed by the *Sun*; working with the nonprofit Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education to »provide diversity and bias education« and audit *Sun* content; creating outreach committees to connect with groups the paper had »inadequately served« in the past; and diversifying the photos it publishes. The board pointed out that it has »a public responsibility to confront and illuminate societal ills so that they can be addressed and eradicated.« Finally, the board provided details of some of the most egregious mistakes in reporting about and representing Black Americans. The board concluded that it was »still grappling« with »improving diversity in our staff and our coverage« and that many issues facing the board are because »the connection is lacking« with Black communities (2022).

A week later, the *Sun* followed up with a »Readers Respond« article titled »Actions speak louder than words: *Baltimore Sun* readers weigh in on the newspaper's apology for a history of racist coverage.« Silver Spring resident Angela Harris applauded the *Sun* »for its deep introspective exercise« but noted that »in this period of social justice, such inward-looking examinations are expected,« which »raises questions around [the *Sun*'s] sincerity and motivation. Is this a performative exercise to get in front of the inevitable call for accountability? Is this a genuine pivot toward taking corrective action to effect real change?« Harris wrote that the answers to those questions depend on the *Sun*'s ability to »combat disparities in health care, employment, education, housing, wealth, justice and civic participation,« which »will take more than a DEI [diversity, equity, inclusion] focused reporting team.« She identified a lack of »a proactive and strategic community engagement effort,« which would »present opportunities for change for those who have been hurt by the systemic system of racism and prejudice.« Harris identified herself as a member of the group targeted by the apology: A Baltimore native, she is »a Black woman who has been hurt by the systemic oppression that this publication has participated in.« Harris concluded, »The *Baltimore Sun* is a brand with the power to effect change. I am happy to partner with you. Let's get it done« (2022).

On March 18, 2022, the *Sun* published an op-ed by Lawrence Brown, a Baltimore resident who researches the consequences of trauma on community health and has contributed to discussions of racial segregation in the city. Brown declared that the *Sun*'s apology »is laudable for its intent, but only half the story was told« because the paper had contributed to apartheid in Baltimore (2022). Brown shared his research, which revealed that the *Sun* had the highest rates of both racist terms

for African Americans and white supremacist phrases, concluding that the *Sun's* editorial board had issued a »half-apology.«

Philadelphia Inquirer: »Black City, White Paper«

In 2021, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* committed to becoming an anti-racist institution, pledging to examine »the roots of systemic racism through institutions founded in Philadelphia« in a series titled »A more perfect union« (HAINES 2021). Its first installment, in February 2022, examined the *Inquirer's* newsgathering practices and coverage of Black Philadelphians, and their reaction to that coverage. Pulitzer Prize-winning Black journalist Wesley Lowery conducted more than 75 interviews with current and former staffers, historians, and Philadelphia residents (LOWERY 2022). His 6,400-word report enabled the *Inquirer's* Black journalists to bear witness to the ways they had been discriminated against, but it did not thoroughly examine the paper's history. He found that the *Inquirer* hired its first full-time Black staff reporter in 1954, slowly adding non-white journalists until urban uprisings in the 1950s and 1960s made major newspapers realize they needed Black staffers to access stories in neighborhoods they had long ignored. During this era, Black reporters said they were given racialized labels such as »boy« and »Aunt Jemima« by white editors. Black staffers said that even in the era of Editor Gene Roberts' push to hire more people of color in the 1970s, Black reporters were left off major beats, and budget cuts were used as an excuse to deprioritize staff diversity. Although Philadelphia is 40% Black, only 12% of newsroom staff identified as Black in a 2020 audit of newsroom diversity. Lowery reported that as part of becoming »anti-racist,« the *Inquirer* raised the pay for 60 newsroom staffers after a study found they were undercompensated, and recent hiring boosted the proportion of non-white employees from 24% to 31%. A Black former staffer was recruited to run the editorial board, and Latino journalist Gabriel Escobar was promoted to executive editor. Lowery noted a new review of editorial policies and the values of objectivity and fairness (2022, 15 Feb.)

An editorial apology accompanied the story. »We must recognize that *The Philadelphia Inquirer* has historically failed in its coverage of the Black community – in a city where Black people have been integral since before the founding of the republic,« wrote publisher Elizabeth Hughes. »We have failed Black journalists who for decades have fought, often in vain, for us to be more representative and inclusive.« Hughes apologized »to the Black residents and communities of Philadelphia, to the Black journalists of the *Inquirer* past and present, and to other communities and people whom we have also neglected or harmed.« Hughes wrote that although the investigation focused on the modern *Inquirer*, »any historic assessment would doubtless find many more faults« (2022).

Most of the responses to the story and apology came from the *Inquirer's* own journalists, past and present. A dominant theme was that Lowery hadn't told the whole story about the *Inquirer's* efforts at diversity. Dan Rottenberg, a former *Inquirer* columnist, said the report ignored that »the *Inquirer* was a pioneer on integration« (KRAKOW 2022). Mark Frisby (2022), who worked for nine years as an executive with the *Inquirer*, *Daily News*, and *Philly.com* and was the *Inquirer's* highest-ranking African American reporter, pointed to the Pulitzers won by the *Inquirer* for exposing a narcotics squad that preyed on people of color and revealing violence against students in public schools.

Among Philadelphians, one non-journalist wrote, »Kudos, plaudits, and blessings for *The Inquirer* in taking on the utter emptiness of the myth of white supremacy« (GREGORIO 2022). Another applauded the apology but urged the paper to give more voice to Jews, Asians, and Native Americans (ROSENBERG 2022). *Philadelphia* magazine writer Ernest Owens faulted the *Inquirer* for giving »the impression that its work here was done« after »simply giving us an exposé and an apology« without sharing an action plan or seeking community input (2022). Outside Philadelphia, the National Newspaper Publishers Association (2022) noted that Lowery's point that the *Inquirer* had »been largely for and by white Philadelphians, and largely at the expense of the Black residents« was also true about every mainstream paper that »used the word »rioters« to describe Black people speaking up and protesting police violence after George Floyd's murder in 2020.« Finally, media critic Margaret Sullivan called the *Inquirer* »inspiring« for putting »so much muscle into trying« to reckon with its racial past (2022).

The Seattle Times: »A1 Revisited«

On March 27, 2022, *Seattle Times* Executive Editor Michele Matassa Flores announced that reflection on the paper's past news coverage led the editors to launch project »A1 Revisited« to examine past coverage, take responsibility, and apologize. The push for the project came from editor Crystal Paul and after a review of the *Times's* coverage of Japanese Americans during the Second World War. Flores (2022) wrote, »We are deeply sorry for our harmful coverage of the incarceration of Japanese Americans and for the pain we caused in the past that reverberates today. We are still learning hard lessons. We acknowledge the power we have and the need to wield it responsibly.« She noted that the racist coverage was close »to the kind of mistake we could – and sometimes do – make today.«

To acknowledge how that coverage contributed to the paper's legacy and current racism, the *Times* launched a project to re-examine its coverage of key moments and impact on communities of color. As of March 2023, the *Times* has published two installments of »A1 Revisited:« one that focused on coverage of

the 1942 removal of Japanese American Bainbridge Island residents and the other about lack of coverage of Native Americans' 1970 occupation of Fort Lawton. The *Times* worked with organizations from the affected communities to give them »a say in defining what healing is for them« (ISHISAKA 2022). In the second installment, Paul (2022) listed steps the *Times* intended to take, such as hiring staff that more accurately represented Seattle communities and including more historical context in its reporting – but gave no way to measure those commitments.

Upon covering »A1 Revisited,« news station King 5 noted that feedback had been both negative and positive (BERNHARD 2022). However, the specific communities to whom the apology was directed, namely Japanese Americans, Native Americans, and media professionals, gave a more positive response to the *Times'* initiative. The Bainbridge Island Japanese American Community, the group directly harmed by initial *Times* coverage, and the First Nations Development Institute posted the installments on their websites, acknowledging the efforts and urging members to read them (BIJAC 2022; FIRST NATIONS DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE 2022). Naomi Ishisaka, interviewed by Elaine Ikoma Ko (2022) for the *International Examiner*, said that as a Japanese American, it was empowering to work on the Bainbridge Island installment. Media professionals whose institutions, practices, and social groups are impacted by past racist coverage also praised the *Times'* efforts. Melissa Greene-Blye (2022), an assistant professor of journalism and member of the Miami Tribe of Oklahoma, urged more media organizations to follow the example of the *Times'* Fort Lawton installment.

The greatest concern expressed by groups harmed in the *Times'* coverage was doubt about the newspaper's follow-through on its commitments. Retired *Times* Managing Editor Alex MacLeod (2022) noted that the *Times'* current practices create other disparities in coverage. Seattle community members, such as Twitter user Ray Dubicki (2022a, 2022b), aired similar doubts about the *Times'* new commitments to the community due to recent unfavorable coverage of unhoused populations.

The Oregonian: »The Oregonian's Racist Legacy«

The *Oregonian's* »Publishing prejudice« article examined the paper's racist legacy by reviewing its news coverage and editorials. On October 24, 2022, editor-in-chief Therese Bottomly apologized to *Oregonian* readers and the Oregon community for the paper's racist legacy. Bottomly wrote she expected to find blind spots such as missed stories and major cultural movements. She continued, »But the gravest mistakes were sins of commission.« She described what reporter Rob Davis found in the archives as »revolting. Painful. Indefensible« (BOTTOMLY 2022).

On October 24, 2022, the paper published »The *Oregonian's* racist legacy.« It traced the paper's origins and how it helped create modern Oregon, the whitest

state on the West Coast, anchored by Portland, America's whitest big city (DAVIS 2022c). Two men were primarily responsible for the daily newspaper during its first 60 years: Henry Pittock, majority owner and publisher, and Harvey Scott, its founding editor and minority owner. Under Pittock and Scott's leadership, the paper excused lynching; promoted segregation; opposed equal rights for women and people of color; described Indigenous people as uncivilized, endorsing their extermination (DAVIS 2022c); and supported the internment of Japanese Americans during the Second World War (DAVIS 2022b). For decades, Pittock and Scott treated Oregon's nonwhite communities as inferior and perpetuated stereotypes, which left an indelible mark on Oregon (DAVIS 2022b).

In addition, the article »The modern impact of the *Oregonian's* racist history« traced the connections between the paper's coverage and editorial support of segregation and nonunanimous juries to the issues of justice and equity Oregonians face today. The paper supported a 1934 Oregon law that allowed nonunanimous convictions, except in murder cases, which was not overruled by the U.S. Supreme Court until 2020 (DAVIS 2022b). In an editorial published on October 28, 2022, the editorial board unequivocally rejected »the racism, xenophobia and paranoia that fueled« prior editorials and apologized to the community. The board wrote that although the paper had written about its past racism, it had only recently »conducted such an exhaustive look and taken ownership of the profound harm to which such coverage has contributed« (The *Oregonian*/OregonLive Editorial Board, 2022).

Investigative reporter Rob Davis and editor Brad Schmidt led the examination into the paper's history. The team spent months reviewing its archives and consulting with historians and affected Oregon communities. Because Davis and Schmidt are white, the newsroom created a months-long review process to gather feedback from Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color, as well as a newsroom diversity committee to reduce implicit bias (*About this project* 2022). The newsroom contracted five community members to review story drafts, identify blind spots, and limit potential harm to Oregon's BIPOC communities.

Oregonian readers, community members, and journalists had mixed reactions. In a letter to the editor, one subscriber wrote that the series kept him and his wife from canceling their subscription. He wrote, »What a powerful message it sends to the public when our newspaper's editors have the courage to bring this history out into the open« (KEITER/KEITER 2022). The series prompted some organizations to reconcile their own ties to the *Oregonian* and its founders. *Oregonian* founding editor Harvey Scott was an alumnus of Pacific University. The university lauded »The *Oregonian's* work in facing its own racist history,« acknowledging its current, and future, work to address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion (COYLE 2022). Some readers felt the *Oregonian* needed to do more. Twitter user Ashley Schofield argued, »This is irrelevant unless you are providing reparations« (SCHOEFIELD 2022). Others disagreed with the paper's decision to issue an apology

at all. Twitter user Pamela Fitzsimmons described the series as a »white guilt project« and tweeted, »Editor Therese Bottomly was focused on apologizing for mistakes the paper made before she was born« (2022).

Conclusion: The Elements of Apology

The sections above summarized the content of the individual newspapers' apologies and audiences' responses. The conditions of the Christian pattern of sacramental reconciliation, which includes contrition, confession, mediation, seeking forgiveness, and penance, were satisfied in these newspapers to varying degrees. First, the *Montgomery Advertiser* Editorial Board took full responsibility as the offenders. The board fulfilled the contrition and confession aspects of the apology, as well as mediation to a degree, but did not follow through by seeking forgiveness or offering penance. Despite these gaps, the response was overwhelmingly positive, except from Brent Staples, a Black *New York Times* writer who researched *Advertiser* coverage of racial terror in depth. This positive reaction is logical because in 2018, such an apology was largely unprecedented: It would not be until the 2020 racial reckoning that such apologies became expected. Because the standards were lower, the *Advertiser's* apology quickly gained public approval, except from those who believed no apology was needed in the first place.

The *Los Angeles Times* satisfied four of five requirements of the Christian pattern of reconciliation. It expressed contrition by admitting transgressions after a thorough examination in the form of the weeklong story series and editorial apology. It published that self-examination, a form of confession, seeking responses from diverse readers about how racist coverage harmed them. Finally, the *Times* did penance through Soon-Shiong's commitment to increasing newsroom diversity and expanding coverage of minority communities it had previously neglected. What it failed to do was to explicitly ask for forgiveness.

Kansas City and the *Star* have both seen gradual improvements in race relations over the decades, but the paper admitted it must still diversify its staff, engage in deeper conversations with Black Kansas Citians, and be more reflective in its coverage (FANNIN 2020). After analyzing its historical content, the *Star* expressed contrition for past sins by publishing a series exposing past coverage and apologies from its editor-in-chief and editorial board. It partially engaged in mediation by acknowledging how its racist reporting, and the actions of its founders, harmed Black Kansas Citians. The *Star* sought community feedback, but the paper could have done more to acknowledge how its transgressions affected the organization. Finally, the *Star* began to pay penance by committing to hiring a more diverse staff; creating an editor position focused on racial and equity issues; and establishing a diverse advisory board to work with editors and reporters to ensure fair

and expansive coverage of Kansas City's communities of color (T. WILLIAMS 2020). However, the newspaper failed to ask for forgiveness.

The *Baltimore Sun* expressed contrition and confessed to specific transgressions. The board pursued mediation by asking community members for responses to the apology and penance by listing ways the *Sun* was redressing its wrongs. But while it asked for forgiveness, the *Sun's* commitment to turning power over to community members and addressing structural issues was questioned by certain audiences. As one community member quoted in the »Readers Respond« publication had pointed out, by 2022, it was expected that newspapers would issue such an apology. She called on the *Sun* to combat economic disparities, echoing other Black respondents' call for full accountability and systemic change to rectify harms endured by African Americans.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* satisfied the element of contrition by apologizing for the harm it did. However, without examining its record before the 1950s, its journalists could not fully understand the degree of their institution's complicity in racism. »Confession« is partially satisfied through publication of the Lowery report and the Hughes apology, but an apology without deep understanding of wrongs comes across as a half-apology. Mediation is partly satisfied – the *Inquirer* acknowledged ways its coverage had damaged the community but did not enter into dialog with its members. It did penance by committing resources to address the problem, which included promoting people of color to newsroom leadership. Where the *Inquirer* fell short was in not understanding its full history. Finally, unlike the other apologies, that of the *Inquirer* was criticized for ignoring the paper's decades of racial justice work.

The *Seattle Times'* push for reflection came from within the organization, and its staff worked with the affronted communities to make their apologies. These actions and the apologies fulfill four of five aspects of the pattern of reconciliation: contrition, confession, mediation, and seeking forgiveness. The *Times* listed commitments for the future but did not give ways for the community to check their fulfillment; because of this, it only partially meets the standard of penance. Members of the affected groups mostly agreed with this assessment of the *Times'* apology. Doubts voiced by some confirm that not enough time has passed to judge if commitments made by the *Times* have resulted in the actions needed to satisfy penance.

Finally, the *Oregonian* expressed contrition for past transgressions after analyzing its historical content. It confessed to specific sins by publishing the series and apologies from its editor-in-chief and its editorial board. It partially engaged in mediation by acknowledging how its racist reporting had harmed Oregon's communities of color. The *Oregonian* sought feedback, but the paper could have done more to acknowledge how its transgressions affected specific groups. Finally, the *Oregonian* began to pay penance by stating in early 2023 that it would hold »listening sessions« to gain feedback from BIPOC communities about how the paper

can improve its diversity and equity coverage. The newspaper plans to use that feedback, along with recommendations from the senior editor for inclusive journalism, to guide its decisions. However, the *Oregonian* did not ask for forgiveness.

The role that American mainstream journalistic institutions have embraced for almost a century is to assess social situations and provide coverage that is fair and democratic (COMMISSION ON FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 1947). Journalistic publications have an obligation to their publics, which in the U.S. have become increasingly racially and ethnically diverse. Journalists and community stakeholders of color, who bear the brunt of the consequences of inequality, have led the charge against white supremacy and other harmful ideologies. Public apologies made by newspapers since 2018 were designed to reflect their awareness of issues of race and diversity, along with their commitment to making their coverage more balanced and fairer. However, the racial reckoning of 2020 in particular drew attention to systemic problems that performative diversity, in newsrooms and beyond, could not solve. Yet another issue is that while a few of the newspapers mentioned lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other queer communities, these groups remain marginalized in this conversation. Future research should focus on these communities and their historic exclusion.

The present study is a foray into an understudied phenomenon: audience responses to news publications' apologies. Future research will build on this preliminary assessment of such responses by using content analyses, interviews, focus groups, and other methods to generate a fuller picture of public perceptions of newspaper apologies. The apologies and audience responses examined in this paper demonstrate a need for journalistic institutions to prove their commitments and move toward fully democratic news making and representation. As the 2020s continue, the respect that communities of color and other minoritized groups have for journalistic institutions will depend on their ability to fulfill all elements of the pattern of reconciliation, making good on their promises to not only fair news coverage, but also systemic change – starting with their own penance.

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