Kim

Pearson

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2021 Spring

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### How should the news media cover food justice?

A research collaboration between AAS/JPW 321: Race, Gender and the News and ANT 341: Environmental Anthropology with the News Voices project of Free Press

Part of the Collaborating Across Boundaries ₽ project (NSF Award #1914869)

#### The problem

The 2020 Covid-19 pandemic exposed local, national and global vulnerabilities in our food system. The working and living conditions of farmworkers and workers at meat processing plants placed them at heightened risk for catching the virus, and <u>evidence shows</u> <u>w</u> that too many employers failed to put proper safety protocols in place., Even before the pandemic, public health experts had been sounding the alarm about <u>suicide rates among farmers</u> <u>w</u> distressed by mounting debt and capricious weather and economic conditions. Once the pandemic hit, grocery stores ran short on staples as employees struggled to stay safe. School closures threatened to deprive <u>30 million</u> <u>American schoolchildren</u> <u>w</u> eligible for free or reduced lunch of needed nutrition. Workers at restaurants and bars found themselves in financial peril as their employers were forced to close or limit service. In Philadelphia, public health experts believe the strain is contributing to an <u>alarming increase in opioid overdoses</u> <u>w</u> among restaurant workers. The Women's Environment and Development Organization <u>notes</u> <u>w</u> that about 60 percent of the jobs lost during the Covid-19 recession were held by women, primarily in such industries as hospitality, leisure, and service. Small business owners in the industry were among the 45 percent <u>who were late</u> <u>w</u> in receiving loans from the federal Paycheck Protection Program.

While the pandemic was new, the underlying problems in our food systems are not. The Union of Concerned Scientists argues 🗗 :

"The US food system should be providing healthy, sustainably produced food for all. Instead, it's damaging our health, our land and water, our communities, and farmers and food workers themselves...the current US food system too often plays a different—and destructive—role. Instead of keeping us healthy, it fuels epidemics of diabetes and heart disease. Instead of supporting strong communities, it exploits workers, worsens racial and income inequality, and drains money from local economies. Instead of working with nature in a resilient, sustainable way, today's dominant farming methods despoil the landscape, pollute air and water, and accelerate climate change..."

As the pandemic surges, government assistance lags and the social safety net and health care resources are taxed beyond limits. In October, 2020, CBS News reported that with 23 million Americans out of work because of the pandemic and its related economic crisis, food insecurity is growing at an alarming rate.

#### The goals of this project

How should the news media cover food justice?

We will be working in teams composed of students from Race Gender and the News and Environmental Anthropology. Each team will choose a specific vulnerable population within our food system on which to focus. Our community partner is FreePress' News Voices project. News Voices helps news organizations better understand and respond to the needs of the communities they serve. During the course of semester-long project, each team will address the following issues:

- Through primary and secondary research including ethnographic interviews, we will identify the information needs of specific sets of vulnerable stakeholders in our local food system.
- Through research and interviews, we will identify experts capable of addressing how journalists can overcome structural impediments to explaining the links between food insecurity and climate change.
- We will curate examples and convene conversations about how local journalists and news organizations address those information needs while avoiding the pitfalls of <u>extractive journalism</u> 2 - described by Lewis-Raven Wallace as "reporting on communities without input or accountability."

The **project deliverables** will take the form of a **final report** with research findings and recommendations, as well as a **webinar i**ncluding the perspectives of journalists, civil society leaders and community members who can speak to the issues that you have identified in our research.

#### Background

# The challenge for journalists: understanding and reporting on a complex system

Journalists have a civic responsibility to provide timely, accurate, and comprehensive information on the depth and complexity of the crisis in our food system that will be useful to individuals, communities, policy makers and civil society institutions in a position to take constructive action. However, several factors limit the effectiveness of journalists' work.

First, some numbers. According to an <u>April, 2020 Pew Research study</u> 2, half of the country's newsroom jobs evaporated between 2008-2018. Digital news operations made up for some of those losses beginning in 2014, but the 2020 SARS Covid-19 outbreak precipitated another round of cutbacks, layoffs and consolidations 2 affecting legacy newsrooms and digital startups alike. All of this was taking place as global revulsion at the on-camera killing of George Floyd and other unarmed African Americans provoked yet another reckoning over how race is lived and reported in US newsrooms.

One implication of this is that many newsrooms lack in-house expertise in crucial beats. When it comes to the food system, that leads to reporting that is fragmentary, superficial and inadequate in explaining the complexities we face. For example:

- The ranks of food journalists with stable employment has declined so much that the Association of Food Journalists announced that it was disbanding as of December 31, 2020 because of a lack of dues-paying members. Its <u>ethics code</u> and training will be housed on the Poynter Institute website until at least the end of 2021.
- Journalists on the agriculture beat face pressure to soft-pedal the impact on climate change on the food system. Agriculture journalist Chris Clayton put it this way in a <u>2017 article</u> 
   <sup>a</sup> for the Columbia Journalism Review:

"(F)ewer and fewer journalists use their beats to report on the natural intersection between climate change, agriculture, and food. This is especially true on the local and regional levels where, much like the environmental beat, the ag beat has largely disappeared. In a country full of millennial foodies, middle-aged barbecue enthusiasts, vegans, organic consumers, and paycheck-to-paycheck grocery shoppers, most newsrooms lack a reporter who is dedicated to telling stories about how their food is produced...."

- Food journalism has historically been treated as fluff, not serious journalism, particularly because it was seen as the province of women. The success of cooking shows on cable and streaming platforms has made food journalism more popular, but the nature of the content is still limited in genre and scope. Retired Gourmet magazine editor <u>Ruth Reichl bemoaned</u> at the lack of investigative journalism about the issues facing workers and owners in the restaurants food journalists review, for example.
- Scholars have noted that there is a racialized rhetoric to public discourse about food and agriculture that journalists fail to acknowledge, leading to a perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and the omission of important historical and social context. (Schell, Shah and Yamagami) This includes the denial of non-European influences on American cuisine and under-reporting the historical and contemporary role of structural racism in dispossessing Black and Indigenous farmers, and depriving communities of color of food sovereignty. (Twitty, Sen, Philpott)
- Advocates for sustainable agriculture and eating <u>fail to confront the class biases</u> 
   *i* in the food system, according to farmer and journalist Tom Philpott. In a 2010 Columbia Journalism Review interview, he noted:

"[T]he food industry is a massive business—something like a trillion dollars a year—and it's a huge employer, one of the biggest in the U.S., and paradoxically the people working in the food system tend to be among the lowest-paid workers in the country; I'm talking about farm workers, meat packers, etc. So you've got this vast army of workers who get paid very little and in the end can really only afford to eat the cheapest crap...[S]ince the 1970s, wages adjusted for inflation have stagnated, and starting about the same time—not coincidentally—the USDA switches policies and starts encouraging farmers to grow as much food as possible and you get this long period of declining food prices; you get this steady drop in food expenditures as a percentage of income. I don't think you can run an economy with structurally stagnated wages without food being really cheap."

• A range of computing and engineering technologies have become central to agriculture, food processing and distribution and marketing, with profound impacts on the health, safety, accessibility and affordability of food, as well as the health and safety of workers. (Hughlett and Belz &, Greenaway , Felix , et al., Human Rights Watch , Wilshaw and Willoughby )

#### Systems journalism: A new approach to reporting on complex problems

A growing chorus of journalism experts argue that covering these kinds of thorny problems in a way that is inclusive, accessible and actionable requires an approach to reporting that is grounded in "systems thinking." In a 2020 article for the *Columbia Journalism Review*, Julian Brave NoiseCat <u>cites journalism professor Candis Collison's description</u> of systems journalism as "a methodology that treats news items not as isolated events but as 'windows into what's happening in underlying systems and structures..."

Along with this shift to systems thinking, there's a growing recognition of the need to better understand the knowledge cultures and information needs of specific audiences. Increasingly, journalism is about designing information products designed to meet those needs. (To understand how this differs from traditional approaches to journalism, read Jonathan Stray's 2010 blog post, <u>Designing journalism to</u> <u>be used</u> P) Organizations such as National Public Radio and the New York Times now use a <u>hypothesis-driven design methodology</u> P to guide the creation of its editorial projects.

Finally, news organizations are rethinking the way that they organize themselves to report the news. This might include collaborations with academic researchers, foundations, and grassroots media groups. The goal is to move from reporting on communities to collaborating with them. Free Press argues that it requires thinking like community organizers ractionare researchers is fundamentally about listening to people tell you what they need and what kind of world they want, and working collaboratively to make it happen."

Here's a simple example of what this might look like in practice. Let's say that you have a reporter with an idea for a story about a local urban farm. A traditional newsroom approach might be to write a "feel-good" that includes interviews with organizers and volunteers, along with some photos and perhaps some links to more information. The editorial decisions would be made solely by the news organization.

However, a systems approach to covering urban agriculture would call upon journalists to start with fundamental questions about communities and food production. In a 2015 article in the journal *Environmental Communication*, Pilgeram and Meeuf argue, for example, we should ask, "who should farm and what is their relationship to the community? What kinds of lands and spaces should host sustainable farming? How can we ensure access to 'good' food across communities? And who decides what food is 'good?"

That might require delving into the history of how some neighborhoods became food deserts, or how pollution from long-shuttered factories affects the safety of the soil. It might require considering that in Northern and midwestern US cities, many of the African American residents are descendents of those who were part of the Great Migration of the early to mid-20th century. Many of those migrants were forced out of farming because of Jim Crow-era laws and racial terror. In cities such as Freehold, New Jersey, some African Americans established farms that helped to underwrite civil rights activism.(Greason) Meanwhile, other farming communities relied heavily on African American day workers from Philadelphia or southern migrants until the 1980s, and more recently, on Asian and Latinx immigrants. (Pfeffer) These questions might be starting points for asking how a particular community's history around food production might create very different storytelling contexts and needs. It might result in an editorial team creating one or more products based on criteria developed with community members.

#### Roles and responsibilities of collaborative teams and community partner

Our community partner, Free Press, is among a cadre of nonprofit organizations that are helping news organizations develop new methods of understanding and meeting the information needs of local communities. We will draw upon resources from their <u>News Voices</u> reproject and benefit from their feedback and guidance as we develop and execute our projects.

As part of this class, Journalism/African American Studies students will use secondary research and News Voices' techniques for identifying stakeholders, identifying their roles within the food system, and documenting the ways in which these stakeholders have or have not been represented in our media system. Dr. Miriam Shakow's Environmental Anthropology students will take the lead on designing and conducting ethnographic interviews with members of the vulnerable communities that each team is researching.

## Sidebar: What is ethnography, and what's the relationship between ethnography and journalism?

The authors of a 2004 essay on ethnographic journalism noted, "Ethnography is primarily concerned with uncovering meanings inherent to a particular group and its practices. The ethnographer accomplishes this awareness through a process of immersion in the life, routines, and rituals of the social setting under study." (Cramer and McDevitt) The practices of ethnographers and journalists have a lot in common, As journalist <u>Mandy Jenkins points out</u> a, "It is difficult to see where one might end and the other begins, as the two fields similarly approach observation, interviewing and how they report back what they've found."

But Jenkins and other ethnographic journalists note two particular advantages that a knowledge of ethnography brings to journalism. The first is that as a social science research method, ethnography can offer a more structured way of framing journalistic questions and developing reporting projects. The second is that journalists who adopt an ethnographic perspective learn to be reflective about how their identities and routines as journalists affect the ways in whose stories get told, how and why. As Jenkins puts it:

"In journalism, we need to be comfortable with this practice of <u>positionality</u> 2, carefully evaluating how we look to the people we are covering, and how that might affect their interactions with us and the stories we tell from those interactions. Am I coming across as a person of privilege covering a low-income community? Could my questions reflect judgment of how this person lives? How comfortable is my subject with me telling their story if I'm a college-educated, white, upper-middle class professional (and they are not)?"

Of course, journalists and scholars from minortized backgrounds have been calling for attention to the issue of positionality since at least the 1820s, and it is central to research and practice in Afican American Studies. The course readings, discussions and activities are intended to ensure your ability to consider these issues from multiple perspectives.

#### Timetable

(items in green represent joint activity with Environmental Anthropology Linked items represent RGN deliverables or project resources.)

| Date                | Milestone  | Deliverables   | Relevant<br>resources                          | ANT 341<br>Environmental<br>Anthropology   |
|---------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Feb 2               | First day of<br>class  |  |  | Read Project<br>Brief Before<br>Class. Come<br>with<br>Questions.<br>Discussion<br>Post due<br>before class  |
|                     | Initial<br>brainstorming<br>Meet with<br>Community<br>partners<br>10 minute<br>intro   |  |  |  |
| February<br>9       | <ul> <li>15 minute</li> <li>Free Press</li> <li>presentation</li> <li>5 minute</li> <li>questions</li> <li>20 minute</li> <li>breakout</li> <li>sessions</li> <li>30 minute</li> </ul> | Community Reporting Project: Initial questions discussion.   | Perusall<br>review of<br>Project<br>brief.     | Reading due:<br>Fresh Fruit,<br>Broken Bodies.   |
| February<br>16      | regroup and<br>discussion<br>Form teams<br>across classes  |  | Racialized<br>rhetorics<br>of Food<br>Politics | Reading due:<br>I am not a<br>Tractor!<br>[Immokalee<br>Workers]<br>Report on<br>what they   |
| February<br>23      | Initial team<br>proposal and<br>discussion<br>(joint class)  | Complete collaborative meeting 2 d sheet - Research topic, questions, team assignments   |  | talked about<br>Weiss<br>Learning from<br>Strangers  |
| March 2             | Team project<br>proposals and<br>specifications  |  |  |  |
| March 9             | Midterm<br>presentations   | Presentation (Progress Report) for community partners with anthropology students. You will prepare a 10-minute, visually-supported presentation group presentation. The presentation should describe the group within the food chain that you want to focus on and ;most the research questions that will guide both the ethnographic research and Webinar proposal. Explain who including is responsible for each task. Designate a lead person for organizing the webinar. Each webinar panel should have a scholar or journalist, worker, government worker, and activist - you don't have to know who those people will be at this time. |  | Anthro<br>students have<br>achieved<br>minimum<br>competency in<br>interviewing,<br>what is food<br>and<br>environmental<br>injustice, and<br>what is<br>anthropology? |
| March<br>16 -       | Webinar<br>production<br>basics (Open<br>to ANT<br>Students)   |  |  |  |
| April 15<br>- 29    | Webinars<br>Each group<br>will have its<br>own webinar.<br>(so, 5<br>webinars,<br>each with a<br>set of<br>experts)  |  |  |  |
| Week of<br>April 30 | Joint class to<br>review the<br>presentation<br>and report<br>(dress<br>rehearsal;<br>pre-<br>production<br>meeting)   |  |  |  |

Reflection internal to the class, without the community partners, May 4 dress rehearsal for final presentation. Presentation of final project with one page handout (joint meeting) Draft final report for feedback May 7 Draft community reporting project Final

May 18 Community Reporting Project Final collaborative project

#### Endnotes

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