



The Moment Is Magic:

7 Tips for Journalists from Restorative-Justice Practitioners

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About

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Allen Arthur, who wrote this guide for Free Press, is the online engagement manager for the Solutions Journalism Network. He's also a freelance journalist who has spent the last six years working with currently and formerly incarcerated people. That has resulted in unique projects like "The Art of Return," a recurring live event in New York City for formerly incarcerated artists. It has also led to stories that have appeared in The Marshall Project, USA Today, Documented, YES! Magazine and more. He's incredibly grateful for all the knowledge shared with him across the years, and for all the participants who gave their time to this guide. You can see more at allenarthur.work.

Free Press was created to give people a voice in the crucial decisions that shape our media. We're working to create a world where people have the information and opportunities they need to tell their own stories, hold leaders accountable and participate in our democracy. Our **News Voices project** organizes with communities, journalists and newsrooms to build power and advocate for the news, information and narratives that people need to thrive. And our **Media 2070 project** is fighting to secure media reparations for centuries of harm inflicted on Black communities. Learn more about all of our work at freepress.net.

Introduction

By Allen Arthur, Solutions Journalism Network

Imagine this. Someone suddenly knocks on your door. You don't know them. This visitor tells you who they are, but they aren't from anywhere you trust. They inform you that a few nights ago, someone was killed not far from where you live.

The visitor has a notepad. They want to know what you know. Were you friends with this person? Did they ever get into trouble? How does it feel having someone killed so close? This happens a lot now. Must be hard. Did you see anything?

So, who are you talking to? Is it a police officer? A caseworker? It could be either. Or it could be a journalist.

The field of criminal-legal reporting has long housed some of journalism's worst impulses. It has helped define **entire neighborhoods and races as criminal** in the public consciousness. It has **prioritized law enforcement's press releases** over the experiences of diverse communities, despite the regular overturning of official narratives. And it has contributed to an **outsized sense of danger** despite **significant drops in crime rates** relative to historic highs.

But standard crime reporting's biggest mistake might be this: By forgoing compassion and complexity in favor of sensationalism, the beat has created classes of people far too easily sorted into victims and villains. In doing so, we've normalized the idea that certain people are simply criminals while others are not.

Yet as many formerly incarcerated people can tell you (and as **growing mountains of data show**), the person who commits harm has, more often than not, first been harmed themselves. When we cover harm and trauma — which are central to the criminal-legal system — we report at this fragile intersection.

I've spent six years reporting with currently and formerly incarcerated people. For years, I tried to fashion better questions and a sharper interview process to generate unique answers and deeper stories. **They're out there for sure.**



But I'd never considered that there might be a whole other way to approach interviews, one rooted in skills held by many people I already knew.

Before the pandemic interrupted us, an activist named Five Mualimm-Ak and I ran a recurring event in New York City for artists who'd been incarcerated. Through that event I met community organizer and healing-justice teacher Cory Greene and the organization he helps lead, **How Our Lives Link Altogether** (H.O.L.L.A!). They recorded an album called **The Report-Back** based on dozens of healing circles they'd hosted around the city and country. We invited them to perform.

While reporting with formerly incarcerated people, I'd been exposed to a fair bit of knowledge around restorative justice. But as I collaborated with H.O.L.L.A!, it dawned on me: Their circles covered some of the same issues we cover in journalism. After meeting — sometimes for the first time — groups shared their traumas, mistakes, aspirations, hopes and fears. Yet people leave circles feeling nurtured, understanding their stories in new ways.

In contrast, people often leave journalistic interviews feeling retraumatized, exploited or misunderstood. What lessons could we learn from restorative-justice practitioners that we could apply to the journalistic process — especially for stories about public safety and criminal-legal issues?



In this resource, you'll find practical actions you can take to build healthier — maybe even healing — conversations during your reporting. These strategies are based on restorative- and transformative-justice practices.

The majority of people we interviewed for this resource are formerly incarcerated, and all work with people who have been harmed in a criminal-legal context. The restorative-justice practices we discuss can transform coverage of the criminal-legal system. But journalists can use these tips for any difficult story. The conflict and callousness infecting so much of society have left a lot of us wounded.

I've interviewed several dozen formerly incarcerated people for stories and shared time at conferences, workshops and meals with dozens more. In six years, they revealed a beautiful opportunity: Everyone wants to tell their story. This is especially true of people the media have either excluded or harmed. But as Cory Greene said in an **Echoing Green interview**, “wound searching” and “wound healing” require safety. Whether we like it or not, people often regard journalists as unsafe and untrustworthy.

As California-based restorative-justice practitioner Ken Hartmann told me, both formerly incarcerated people and harm survivors often feel like journalists and society at large see them solely through those lenses. That produces a pressure, he says, to avoid missteps and the judgments they can bring. Restorative-justice processes can lift that pressure.



Here is a tremendous opportunity: As journalists we can help people feel whole as we speak to them, fostering mutual trust and connection. And a restorative-justice approach also helps audiences see our subjects as complete and complex human beings. But to succeed, we need to make very different choices right from the jump.

What are transformative and restorative justice?

(And how are they connected?)

According to the resource hub TransformHarm.org, **transformative justice** is an approach that seeks safety and accountability without relying on punishment or any other kind of state or systemic violence.

Rooted in Indigenous practices grown over centuries, **restorative justice** “is a process to involve, to the extent possible, those who have a stake in a specific offense and to collectively identify and address harms, needs and obligations, in order to heal and **put things as right as possible.**”

Transformative and restorative justice **are both** “invested in non-punitive responses to harm that seek healing, accountability, and transformation while avoiding the reproduction of violence and domination core to the criminal legal system and other carceral settings.” Transformative justice offers a framework to understand systemic harm while restorative justice helps determine what will be necessary to address that harm. It’s necessary to have both to provide a holistic approach to transformation and repair.

This guide focuses on restorative-justice tools that journalists can use to address harmful practices.

Restorative justice is usually dialogue-based, taking place either between two people — a person who has committed harm and a harmed party — or in circles.

“The truth is, it’s extremely successful,” says Ken Hartmann. “It’s not new. It’s been done forever. Many cultures do a version of this that are more culturally specific, but they have very similar components of embracing the person who has been harmed but also embracing the person who did the harm and helping them see their own humanity. In our society it becomes you vs. the state.”

Working with H.O.L.L.A! illuminated the psychological and emotional factors that affect storytelling. Many restorative-justice practitioners are experts in consciously addressing those factors. They build trust in difficult circumstances; embrace complex, sometimes uncomfortable truths; welcome healthy conflict; explode traditional power dynamics; and prioritize constructive storytelling. They understand that how we listen changes how it feels to share personal experiences.

At this point, you might be asking yourself why. This sounds complicated and hard. Well, you’re right. Some of this can be time-intensive and emotionally draining. Some of the ideas here might be the complete opposite of what’s taught in journalism schools. But I’d argue that what we’re taught — or rather, not taught — has profoundly (and justifiably) **fueled the skepticism** people have about journalism as an institution. In short, many journalists aren’t prepared to care for or even understand the stories we’re entrusted with.

No single journalist can fight all the historical harm and trauma brought on by the industry, but we have tremendous power to build healthier practices and conversations, especially tough ones. Fortunately, as **Restore Circles** co-founder Phillip Gatensby told me, “The moment is magic.”

News Voices would like to express our deepest gratitude to the restorative-justice practitioners who shared their passion, medicine and knowledge for this resource. These tips are invaluable to the world of journalism and they are held with a deep graciousness.

7 Ways to Embrace Magic in the Moment

1. Your work, your why: Develop a personal understanding of your motivations and role as a caretaker of stories.

This resource is an invitation to question what's assumed about an interview. Why am I having this conversation? What could I and the other person get from it beyond adding components to a story? Could I learn something about being human? Could they understand their story differently, or leave feeling valued?

From a restorative perspective, our ability to understand ourselves is intimately tied to our ability to understand others. Unless we as journalists engage in self-reflection, we end up filtering everyone's stories through our limited individual worldviews. If we believe, for example, that everything is essentially a "good vs. evil" struggle, the stories we produce will reflect that oversimplification regardless of what people share with us. As Cory Greene says, each journalist must interrogate their "moral role."

"How do you build trust?" asks Greene. "Trust is the thing. How do you build comfortability? We have circles, sometimes we know people, sometimes we know people a lot, sometimes we don't know people at all. It's the first time we've ever seen them and we probably won't see them again. But the real question is, 'How do you build trust?' The answer is in who you are ... and how you decide to show up. What do you say in your email? What's your first introduction? What's your dream for that relationship? Because that becomes the instructions ... that help you build trust."

Though journalists are rarely incentivized to unpack their personal relationship to power, class, race or even their own work, Greene says it's impossible to understand others without looking within. We need our own emotional development, Greene says, to be fully present for others building their own.

"Journalists are all about taking [themselves] out of it," says Greene. "The journey is about how do you come to this with all of you in it? I'm really talking about a spirit epistemology. A spirit epistemology is, you gotta wash out all the technical shit. Even if you know some shit they tell you in school — this is how you structure it, this is how you open, this is how you close — if you don't believe that in your spirit and you're not journeying, you just ain't gonna get certain truths."



"Don't just find me," he says. "Find you."

✦✦✦ **For journalists,** this means going beyond "I'm a storyteller" or "People need to know about this" to explain why — in clear and meaningful ways — you do the work you do. People's stories are precious, and if they're going to share some of their most difficult ones, they want to know what you will do as you hold this delicate piece of themselves. Having a deep sense of the story is important, **but having a vibrant understanding of why and how you do your work can radically change a conversation and relationship.** "Healing is about journeying," Greene says.

“The more you’re on your journey and in your spirit of trying to heal, that means [asking], ‘**Why are you a journalist? Of all the disciplines in the world, why’d you decide to become a journalist?**’ As you are asking yourself that question, through your experience, I think that shows up in the work.”

2. The landscape. Be intentional about creating safe and comfortable environments that challenge unhealthy power dynamics.



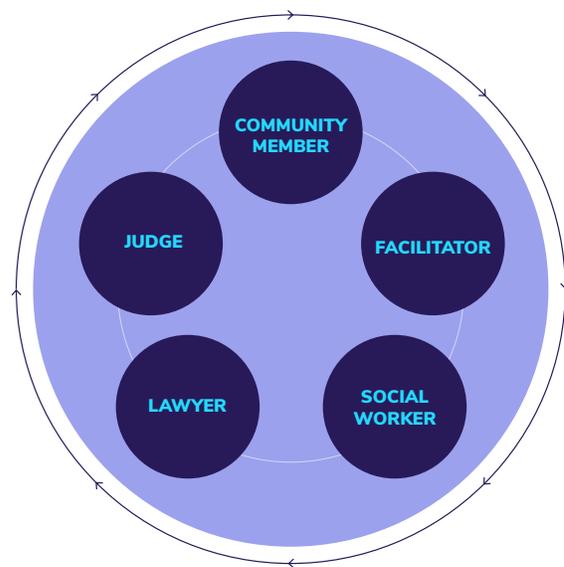
Photo credit: Brad Resnick Photography

Philip Melendez, a restorative-justice practitioner in California, says small steps can help create a “general ambiance” of comfort. He chooses spaces that are neutral, private and conducive to focus. He noted that for pre-interviews or prep sessions, people might feel more comfortable meeting in public, provided the venue is quiet. He also points out that people might want more space early on but often grow open to closeness as conversations progress. He says it’s best to choose a location that is spacious “but can be pared down” so both parties can adapt as the conversation evolves.

Once we are able to create affirming environments for conversations to take place, it’s important to embrace that same intentionality within those environments. In restorative-justice circles, all **participants are positioned as equals**. A judge, social worker or lawyer sits in the same seat as facilitators, those who have committed acts of harm and those who have been harmed. That may seem small, but a setup reflecting equality and respect sends subtle cues about who and what is important, and it reminds everyone that they are all working toward the same goal.

Sometimes, restorative conversations have mandatory locations. For incarcerated people, they happen on prison grounds, subject to the rules of the administration. **But restorative conversations thrive in spaces that are conducive to emotional safety and comfort.**

“You know, when you’re working in a school, you don’t go meet in the principal’s office. It’s totally unbalanced, right?” says Phillip Gatensby. “You find a neutral zone. Sometimes people go to churches, basements, whatever.”



An illustration of a restorative-justice circle practiced in a criminal-legal setting

 **For journalists**, this looks like: **finding a neutral or supportive space, considering seating arrangements and being supportive through changes or cancellations.**

3. Readiness. Look for cues about emotional readiness before and during conversations, and prioritize safety and comfort over story production.

A good “source” might seem irresistible, but journalists asking people to journey into painful places should actively look for signs that the person is (or isn’t) mentally and emotionally ready. **Willingness to talk does not equal readiness to do so.**

Outside of a journalism context, experienced organizations typically oversee one-on-one restorative-justice sessions. The intense emotions in play mean the process is handled carefully and intentionally.

“There’s a very formalized process for how these things work,” says Hartmann. “We have to sort of make a determination: Is this a healthy thing? If somebody just wants to meet the guy and yell at him and tell him he’s a piece of crap, that’s not a healthy process.”

People may feel compelled to speak for a variety of reasons.

“When I first came home, I was being pulled this way and that way to share my story, to talk about my trauma, talk about my journey,” says Melendez. “And I feel like I was just being used a lot. I feel like people were playing on the fact that I’m home and just grateful to be home. And suffering from that dynamic of being less than human for 20 years, and just not feeling worthy.”

Melendez says that even now, with some distance from incarceration, restorative-justice work remains “painful” and “taxing emotionally.”

 **For journalists**, that makes it all the more important to ensure the people we’d like to interview are ready and that we have prepared to keep them as safe as possible should the interview happen. If someone **shows significant hesitation, reschedules multiple times, expresses negative emotions about previous interview experiences, or seems confused about why you’re asking certain things**, it could be that they simply are not prepared to speak with a journalist.



Top two photos: Brad Resnick Photography; bottom photo: Timothy Karr

4. Agreements. Share power through transparency, values and goals.

Transparency arose in every conversation we engaged in for this resource. It keeps difficult conversations healthy in real, tangible ways. The best ways to foster that transparency in restorative settings is to **foreshadow the process itself as much as possible, open yourself up to questions and concerns, and mutually establish a shared set of values and guardrails.**

“That’s a part of a typical circle,” says Teiahsha Bankhead, executive director of **Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth**. “What do you agree to do and what do I agree to do, and what are our values? It’s not really ground rules, but it sets the stage for what to expect.”

 **For journalists**, Bankhead said those agreements can range from basic needs (you can eat or go to the bathroom if you need) to deeper things like letting people know they don’t have to answer every question or are free to express how something is affecting them.

“Before we start anything, I ask, ‘What kind of relationship are we gonna have here? Shall it be honest? Shall we try our best to be respectful?’” says Harold Gatensby, Philip Gatensby’s brother and a co-founder of Restore Circles. “It’s a good way to engage in a dialogue, whatever might come [next], to sort of get that established first.”

Harold Gatensby says the responses to these questions reflect “how we’re going to conduct ourselves” and are essential to “creat[ing] a safe environment.”

“If you have a dialogue with a group of people about respect, about kindness ... it takes the edges off. Then you sort of take a sigh and say, ‘I’m in a safe place here. I can open up a bit.’”

Next, those participating in restorative settings benefit from a transparency of process: Literally, what will happen? And what rights do they have during the process?

“You have full autonomy to say no. This is your choice to [talk],” says Melendez, “and I think that puts them at ease.

I just prepare them for the work ahead.”

Though these details might seem small, they’re crucial, says Bankhead. “Transformation happens in the preparation.”

Melendez and others spoke of giving people detailed descriptions of the process and letting them know their power during it, including encouraging pushback on questions or ideas, pausing whenever they need, and asking questions themselves if something isn’t clear.

Bankhead also suggests foreshadowing the end of the conversation. A very intentional opening and closing “helps to create a container and trust.”

Bankhead says she often gives people notice of how much time remains toward the end of a circle (“We have five minutes left, we have three minutes left”) to help them decide what they want to share. She also acknowledges the depth of the circle experience and will “speak to it directly.”

“A lot’s been shared today,” she says as an example. “It’s very powerful, personal, maybe painful experiences, and it’s resonating with me. I’m feeling vulnerable, and I’m hearing your vulnerability. We had this scheduled for this amount of time, and we’re going to be ending soon.”

Taken together, these practices can shift the power dynamic to the place of shared trust, vulnerability and agency needed to navigate intense emotional experiences. And though they mostly take place before an interview starts, the effects shape the conversation in remarkable ways.

5. Medicine. Honor other people's stories with reciprocity.



Marilyn Armour is the founder of the Institute for Restorative Justice and Restorative Dialogue at the University of Texas at Austin. Early in her career she was interviewing a family in Minnesota. About five minutes in, she recalls, the mother stopped her and said, “I want to know about you.” Armour shared the personal experiences that brought her to research restorative justice with harm survivors. “Don’t you ever, ever speak with a homicide survivor and not share that information,” the mother said. “We’re sharing everything we’ve got with you, and that’s critical information for us to have.”

Like restorative justice itself, the use of reciprocity has roots in Indigenous practice. In a Twitter exchange on the subject, **Kelsie Kilawna, senior consultant at Your Syilx Sisters**, said, “One person’s personal story means you are now carrying some of their medicine that they gained from experience. It’s only respectful to return some of yours.”

In a follow-up, Kilawna added, “It comes from my own Syilx understanding of reciprocity. It means we never take without giving, so when someone gives us something, even a story, we then offer a story of our own. So for instance, maybe you told me a story of your fishing spot and I have an uncle who told me of fishing near there, then I share that story and we create a connection. That connection gives us a kinship tie and starts to build trust.”

“We talk about the South African concept of *sawabona* — deeply seeing into the soul of another,” said Bankhead. “Journalists want to do that, I would imagine. You want to see that truth, but [restorative justice] would say it requires that you then tell your personal truth.

So you can’t get to my truth without me knowing your truth in a deep and authentic way.”

For journalists, we don’t want to be part of the story. In our efforts to avoid that, we have substituted institutional distance and mannered professionalism for depth and compassion.

This does not mean we should blurt our own stories out unsolicited. And there are crucial ethical considerations that can vary from journalist to journalist. Again: We’re not restorative-justice practitioners. But articulating, when appropriate, the experiences that have led you to this moment can build safety through a common humanity.

6. Accompaniment. Move in solidarity by substituting curiosity for control.

Journalists often **drill for information** and **exert superiority** in ways that can alienate people. Rather than giving people space to explore their own wisdom, we tacitly hand them a checklist.

“There’s a competitive spirit in [journalism] that really sees the interviewee and the subject as, ‘You are just the object that I need to fulfill my story,’” says Bankhead. Journalism’s style of questioning, she noted, “feels more like an interrogation for a lot of people. Especially with folks who have less experience with media and who have less social, political, economic, racial power in society.”

One subtle way we exert control is with our credentials, using understanding of a subject or professional accolades as a marker of credibility. However, in restorative-justice settings, power dynamics are ideally flattened. People **do not need to prove intelligence or worthiness**; they must prove their **trustworthiness and care**. As journalists, our (sometimes subconscious) assumption that we “already know” — either the story we want to tell or the nature of a person’s experience — is palpable.

“You’re inviting these people to be part of a process that’s truly magical,” says Phillip Gatensby. “But the biggest enemy of a circle is control.”

Fortunately, **curiosity** is control’s antidote. When we release expectations and substitute curiosity for expertise, wisdom has more room to flourish.

 **For journalists**, rather than walking (or worse, pulling) people through their stories, we can walk with them. **This means reflecting what people hear, allowing silence, providing space for people to share their emotions and holding off on questions until intense parts of the story have been told.**

“It’s about being respected. It’s their story, they are in charge,” says Armour. “I don’t have to say it, I show it by sitting and being with them while they talk. I cannot listen to something and not have responses as they’re talking, emotional responses, and I have them, and I don’t hold them back. I don’t take over the interview. I can sit there and say ‘I get it.’”

And my belief is that if I situate myself with them that way that what they need to say out loud will just come. And it does.”

Armour and Hartmann both point out that more gratifying conversations emerge **when we deprioritize our own process and acknowledge that, as Armour says, the process of the people we’re interviewing is “paramount.”**

“You can’t impose how you think things should be onto the people that are participating,” says Hartmann. “Are you imposing your own sort of standards? Things are different for everybody — different cultures, ages, genders.”

Like journalists, Armour says she often needs clarification or more detail.

“Sometimes I do it at the beginning by saying, ‘If there’s something more that I need to understand or clarify, I may interrupt you and ask for it. But please know it’s minor, and my goal is to keep you where you need to be.’ So I sort of preview for them that I might do it, so then if it comes along and I feel I need to, I can say, ‘This is one of those times I talked about. Let’s just take a time out for a minute and let me clarify something with you.’ Other times I may make notes and just say at the end, ‘There’s a bunch of stuff I need to get clarity about, so I’m going to take you back to some things that I missed or want a little bit more about.’”

If you need to push back, Bankhead recommends maintaining a focus on the person’s well-being. Instead of challenging them, ask them instead to reflect in different ways.

“We might say, ‘Well, you said that, you feel that way, we honor your feeling. Would someone else who was there see it that way? Would they also experience that?’”

“There was an incident, somebody said something that was their truth. And the other person said, ‘That’s not exactly accurate,’” recalls Melendez. “So I didn’t go back and call out the [first] person. I just said, ‘Hey, is there anything else about this situation that I need to know?’ So it’s like a gentle prod and a gentle push. It’s about making people feel safe, comfortable and supported, but also doing the best job that I can [in] picking out the truth.”

7. Expansion. Journalists can build understanding by exploring people’s many sides in creative, holistic ways.

Most people don’t wake up in the morning thinking, “Today I’ll be a great formerly incarcerated person!” or “I will be the best survivor of violence I can be.” In fact, there is a common fear among both survivors and those who’ve caused harm that they will be defined solely by those experiences, regardless of how much time has passed or how much change has occurred. One way to allay that fear and tell more holistic stories in the process is by embracing a person’s other sides.

Stories frequently use one-dimensional labels to pigeonhole survivors, perpetrators and others. But it’s important to recognize that people may also want to be great parents, they may want to make their families proud or they may want to be valued community members. Similarly, though significant harm might bring people to restorative justice, harm is not the totality of the experience, or even necessarily the focus.

“That’s not a circle that I know. There’s some tough stuff that comes out of it, but that’s not what it’s about,” says Harold Gatensby. “When I know I got spirit, it changes something in me.

I have responsibility. I’m not just a victim in life anymore. I have a purpose in life ... We’re not out to collect horror stories from people. We’re out to lift people up.”

Restorative practices make ample space for people’s contributions, aspirations and purpose outside of their darkest experiences. And these practices embrace how people define themselves as a vehicle for understanding and change.

Journalists have a similar potential to build understanding, both during conversations and in how we share those stories with the public. However, in trying to build empathy, journalists often paint people solely as victims of systems — which

perpetuates narratives of helplessness. Though well-intended, this approach doesn’t generate empathy or understanding — it elicits pity on one hand and suspicion on the other. It can also reinforce a fear for many who have committed and/or survived harm — namely that people will see them as a problem to be solved.



Photo credit: Timothy Karr

 **For journalists**, building understanding can change the conversation. One way is by illustrating the interplay between systemic issues and individual behavior — being careful to, as Hartmann says, explain rather than excuse. These kinds of details help readers understand how someone came to a particular belief, experience or act while still acknowledging that person’s agency. Offering this kind of context also helps place the interview subject in conversation with the world and systems around them.

This can also mean asking about facets of the person outside the immediate story: ambitions, hobbies, how they decided on their kid’s name. But it can also mean following up at a later date on life events they mention in conversation: How did your exam go? Did your sister pass her driving test?

This yields mutual benefits: By understanding people outside the narrow window of a particular incident or trait, we tell richer stories, allowing audiences to see complete humans rather than players in a piece. For those we speak with, they see we value them as people. This can help alleviate the stigma and fear that come with describing personal trauma.

“I don’t want to be defined by acts that I committed when I was a teenager,” Hartmann says, “and spend the rest of my life constantly explaining to people, ‘I’m not really just that. I’m other things.’”



Photo credit: Dorrell Edwards of Always Timeless Productions

Resources

Resources for listening:

Embodying Key Principles and Ethics of Deep Listening

Cole Goins

Listening Is a Form of Healing

Jennifer Brandel

Listening Is a Revolutionary Act (Parts 1 & 2)

Jesse Hardman

Why Should I Tell You: A Guide to Less-Extractive Reporting

Natalie Yahr

Resources on coverage of systemic harm:

[Transformharm.org](#): This is a resource hub about ending violence and is an introduction to transformative-justice practices. Created by **[Mariame Kaba](#)**, the site includes selected articles, audiovisual resources, curricula and more.

[Media2070.org](#): Free Press' Media 2070 project documents how U.S. media and tech companies have harmed Black people and supported state violence. It seeks to highlight how the media can serve as a lever for racial justice — and underscore the repair and reconciliation necessary to build strong, free, democratic communities. To achieve full freedom and democracy, it's critical to change entrenched media narratives about Black people.

[NewsVoices.org](#): Free Press' News Voices project organizes with communities, journalists and newsrooms to build power and advocate for the news, information and narratives that people need to thrive.

Contributors:

We're deeply grateful to our contributors, whose insights and expertise greatly enriched our guide.

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