

Andrea Wenzel, **Antiracist Journalism: The Challenge of Creating Equitable Local News**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2023, 299 pp., \$35.00 (paperback), \$140.00 (hardcover).

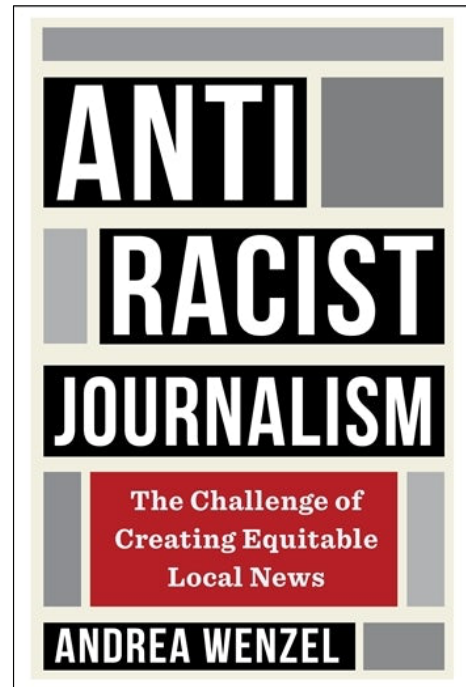
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The shoe is often only half on in antiracism efforts at historically and persistently racist institutions. A generous reading of antiracism efforts would suggest that, though sometimes clumsy or misguided, institutions' hearts are in the right places when attempting to repair their racist histories. Institutions do not have hearts, however, which makes antiracism efforts in America a more contingent, messy, and unresolved story than one of earnest dedication and redemption with a linear learning curve.

Andrea Wenzel's **Antiracist Journalism: The Challenge of Creating Equitable Local News** chronicles the complicated institutional and individual efforts for antiracism at Philadelphia-based journalism organizations including *WHYY*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Germantown Info Hub*, *Resolve Philly*, and *Kensington Voice*. Wenzel finds that antiracism translates into a range of projects, practices, and workflows depending on the journalism organization—none of which provide a tidy formula for dismantling racism in journalism. Legacy institutions in particular have a glaring lack of “accountability infrastructure.” Wenzel argues that accountability infrastructure is crucial for ensuring that antiracism moves beyond a flavor-of-the-month trend and into the bones of organizational processes. Wenzel's work provides an engrossing, vivid, and dynamic account of the friction, tensions, and commitments that arise in efforts to advance antiracist journalism.

Wenzel, a Temple University professor, is well-known as a publicly engaged scholar who focuses on local U.S. journalism. As a former journalist and cofounder of one of the community journalism organizations analyzed in this book, Wenzel has firsthand knowledge of the ways in which race becomes an elephant in the room in many journalism spaces. At the same time, Wenzel is frank, direct, and self-critical about how her positionality shapes her experiences and understanding of race. In the Introduction, Wenzel provides a reflexivity section called “On being part of the problem (and trying not to make it worse)” and explains,

As someone who identifies as a cisgender non-Hispanic white former journalist, there are limitations to my ability to identify and assess how white power and privilege operate within the news organizations and systems that I explore in this book. And while



I can listen to and attempt to respectfully represent the perspectives of BIPOC journalists and residents, I cannot speak on their behalf. (p. 21)

Wenzel's thoughtful considerations about the tensions attached to her subject positions are not limited to her racial identity: she also explains how she often occupied multiple roles in the organizations she analyzes, including insider-observer, participant, auditor, cofounder, and friend. Wenzel's critiques of the limited and limiting antiracist efforts she documents make it clear that her multiplicity of roles in the settings she studies serve to enrich her access and analysis throughout the book, as does her collocation in Philadelphia.

In nonprofit journalism circles, Philadelphia is often likened to Chicago as a racially diverse city that has attracted an outpouring of philanthropic resources. These resources have fostered a wide range of journalism efforts that are not (entirely) restricted by preoccupations with generating revenue. Philadelphia is a "majority-minority" city, with a majority Black population. This creates an intriguing context for studying antiracism efforts in journalism since, given the scale of nonprofit investment and prevalence of BIPOC communities, Philadelphia could be a setting where antiracism efforts could be well-positioned to succeed. Ironically and unfortunately, however, journalistic mindsets of scarcity, catering to affluent White audiences, objectivity-as-detachment, and competition continue to infringe upon and inhibit what could be a flourishing landscape for new and different approaches to journalism.

That said, this book is neither an endorsement nor an indictment of all antiracism efforts in journalism. Instead, with the skill and depth of an ethnographer, Wenzel closely examines dynamics within five local journalism organizations, and pushback from a local journalism watchdog group that calls out the persistent racism of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Each chapter primarily focuses on one journalism organization. Chapter 1 is about the public radio station *WHYY*, chapter 2 focuses on *The Inquirer*, and chapter 3 examines the challenges and absence of what Wenzel calls "accountability infrastructure" at both organizations. Chapter 4 and chapter 5 shift focus from large media institutions and toward community-based organizations including *Germantown Info Hub* (which later became part of *Resolve Philly*), and *Kensington Voice*. Chapter 6 returns to some of the tensions introduced in chapter 3 and explains how Philly J.A.W.N. (Journalism Accountability Watchdog Network) has publicly pushed back against the idea that *The Inquirer* has any right to claim progress under the moniker of "antiracism." Wenzel concludes with a set of recommendations for advancing and institutionalizing antiracism in journalism, including through funding, infrastructure, and journalism education.

The main challenge that antiracism work faces in places that have long histories of institutional racism is at the level of executive leadership commitments—or lack thereof—to doing the work in ways that foster sustainable as well as swift changes. This tension is revealed in conditional statements that point to the uncertainty of antiracism's footing in legacy news organizations. For instance, in the Conclusion, Wenzel writes, "If news organizations want to commit to equitable journalism, all reporters and editors will need to integrate skills such as community organizing and outreach into their reporting practices" (p. 232). Earlier, with reference to NPR Chief Diversity Officer Keith Woods' comments, a similar conditional comes up: "Woods emphasized that DEIB work needed to go beyond training individuals or beyond creating entry-level fellowships for BIPOC journalists if institutions wanted to push toward

structural transformation” (p. 207). The “if” clause illustrates the overarching tension that Wenzel identifies. Do legacy news organizations genuinely want to commit themselves to antiracism? Do they want to “push toward structural transformation” and “equitable journalism,” or do they want to do the minimum necessary to avoid being the target of social media criticism that could adversely affect their brand?

Based on comments that Wenzel includes from top-level management at places like *The Inquirer* and *WHYY*, antiracist journalism efforts often hit a dead-end due to a lack of institutional leadership or “buy-in” that this work requires more than incremental improvements. As Wenzel acknowledges throughout the book, attempting antiracism “within a capitalist framework” (p. 133) heightens many of these tensions. Philanthrocapitalism, rooted in large foundation funding, does little to resolve these issues. As the *Kensington Voice* founder explains in chapter 5 and Black public radio *WURD* staff echo in chapter 6, community-based journalism is often placed in competition with larger nonprofit organizations who funders know and prefer. Ultimately, large foundations may undermine the growth of local organizations that are, by design and by definition, anchored to underrepresented groups.

*Antiracist Journalism* uses an organizational lens to unpack processes, practices, and accountability infrastructure (or lack thereof). This book is relevant to scholars who focus on social justice efforts in journalism, as well as practitioners and critics who may be involved in similar efforts in other locations. This book also opens a range of potential avenues for future studies. Future research that focuses on how these efforts have evolved, grown, or evaporated in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s reversal of affirmative action, backlash against DEI across the United States, and concerns about possible chilling effects on philanthropic support for future antiracism efforts would be fruitful. Relatedly, future work that considers the role of social media in antiracism efforts and the visibility that social media affords would provide the next chapter in this story by situating Philadelphia’s journalism organizations in a broader media landscape that continues to criticize the ways journalism has fallen short of noble promises to serve a diverse public.