

Transcript:

Databite No. 136: Metrics, Media, and Race

Angèle Christin and Joseph Torres

Recorded: 10/06/20

danah boyd: [00:00:02] Good afternoon, morning, evening, some time of day.... Thank you so much for joining us here today for the 136th Databite at Data & Society. This is the Metrics Media and Race Databite featuring Angèle Christin and Joseph Torres. My name is danah boyd. I'm the founder and president of Data & Society. So I'm going to be your host today, supported by an amazing team of people, including C.J., Rigo, and Eli. They're hiding behind the scenes, but they're doing wonders to make this possible. For those of you who don't know us yet, Data & Society is an independent research institute that studies the social implications of data and automation. We produce original research. We convene multidisciplinary thinkers, and we really try to challenge the power and purpose of technology and society. You can learn more about us through our website at datasociety.net. So we're going to be spending the next hour together. So let's get ourselves a little bit grounded first, so everybody knows what's going on. If you're joining us from your computer, you will see features at the bottom of your screen that you can use to participate, so you can ask and upvote questions using the Q&A function at the bottom of the screen. There is closed captioning functions for subtitles. You can also view links and prompts over in that chat window and note that this event is being recorded and it will be shared afterwards on the website. So this is also an opportunity to tell everybody who can't join about what a wonderful conversation you've had. I want to also acknowledge that while we're meeting in a digital environment, there's a moment to think about the lands of which we are located.

danah boyd: [00:01:26] So I'm going to start by acknowledging the land where Data & Society was founded. Lenapehoking is a network of rivers and islands in the Atlantic Northeast that we now refer to as New York City. Today, we're connected via a vast array of servers situated on all sorts of different stolen lands. We acknowledge the dispossession of indigenous land by the data driven logics and the technologies that we're dealing with. The settlers who participated in this. As white settler expansion really challenged the sovereignty of indigenous people, the data, and territory. And we struggle with this as part of the work that we do today. So we commit to dismantling the ongoing practice of colonialism and its material implications in our digital world, knowing that as we interface and think about power, we have to account for race, class, gender and ability as well as indigenous natures of this world. So you'll notice a link that's now in the chat Native Land dossier that will allow you to find out more information about the occupied lands that you may be situated on as well. And if you haven't used the Q&A to share a little bit about where you are coming from, where you're physically located today. So now we're going to turn to the talk that we're here to listen to. And I want to tell you a little bit about the speakers and why we came to have the talk, this conversation

danah boyd: [00:02:42] So I relish books. You might be able to tell that from what's going on behind me. I regularly read books and get into the state where I imagine what would be like to have authors talk to one another, seeing fascinating conversations between their arguments, seeing these synergies and disconnects. And so I keep having this moment where I want to bring authors together to actually have a conversation. So today is an event that's in attempting to enact exactly that desire. So we're here with a book talk with twist. So we have two different books that we're highlighting today. The first is Angèle's book. This is a brand new book, "Metrics at Work: Journalism and the Contested Meaning of Algorithms." And the second, which is almost a decade old, is Joseph's book, which he wrote in collaboration with Juan Gonzalez, "News for All the People: The Epic Story of Race and the American Media." Now, each of them provides different angles to what our conversation is about today. So if you think about it, "News for All the People" documents the long history of journalism relationship with race and class conflict, whereas "Metrics at Work" is rooted in an ethnographic account of the present, looking at contemporary journalists as they grapple with statistical accounting. Taken together, these books reveal a brutal tension. Journalism is simultaneously holding power to account in a democracy and rooted in and helping extending the logics of capitalism, including the culture of white supremacy. Each of these books sheds light on this duality from different angles, with different methods and different emphases.

danah boyd: [00:04:07] And so part of it today is to bring these two together and see how they can speak to one another. So I'm going to turn it over to Angèle in a moment who will provide insights to her book before Joseph talks through what has he learned and then we'll connect the dots from some audience questions. But before I do, I want to highlight an important thing about a book talk. I know that these physical artifacts are really antiquated in a digital world, but they're really important. And part of a book talk, whether you like it or not, is to encourage you to buy the book. We'll take the digital copy, we'll take the physical copy, whatever makes you happy. But just know that there's a, you know, a sales pitch going on here, too. There's also a third thing that actually is going to be highlighted today and will be put into the chat as well, which is a new report that Joseph and his team have just put out today. This is brand new called "Media Twenty Seventy," which is the case for media reparations. So all of these will be interwoven today in a lot of our conversations. Before we begin, let me just remind you that the Q&A feature is there. I will take a look at this and make sure that Q&A gets elevated into the conversation. And now I'm going to turn over to Angèle.

Angèle Christin: [00:05:17] Thank you so much, danah, for this introduction and [INAUDIBLE] of putting together this discussion, which also makes me so excited to like think about Media Metrics and race together. OK, so let me just fumble with my PowerPoint as it should happen. OK, now should be good.

Angèle Christin: [00:05:40] Ok, so first, thank you so much. And this is so exciting in part because I started thinking about this book while I was a fellow at Data & Society I think five years ago already. So I'm just, you know, it makes perfect sense to kind of come back here. So in

order to address the kind of metrics, media and race kind of conundrum. So what I'm going to proceed in the next 10 minutes is first give an overview of the book and then tease out some of the ramifications that this ethnographic study of metrics and how they impact news production and of how that kind of impacts the question of how the media is reproducing and reinforcing a structure and culture of white supremacy and then kind of move to give the floor to Joe.

Angèle Christin: [00:06:31] Ok, so let me start with that debate by kind of talking about the book and where it comes from and kind of what are the main questions that drives me in this study. So it's not a surprise,

Angèle Christin: [00:06:41] We are surrounded by metrics, right?

Angèle Christin: [00:06:46] Likes, shares, clicks, most e-mailed, trending, buzzing, going viral. All of that stuff is part of our digital background. We see it over and over again when we look at our screens and we see these metrics so often that really, we kind of stop paying attention to what they mean or when we pay attention, we're like, well, that's big tech tracking us. That's vanity metrics telling us how popular we are and, oh, how superficial. In the book, I try to change how we think about these metrics and about the cultural and political work that they do. And I do that by looking at news production. So now journalism, when we think about it, we tend to have this kind of like very white, very male, very print-based kind of representations, with you know, as a classical journalist with his hat and his cigarette and his typewriter and these big headlines. But more importantly, I think, we tend to think about the audience as a kind of mass audience that doesn't talk back right? An audience that receives the news without kind of communicating its desires, its needs and its political engagement to the producers of information. Now, of course, journalism is not like that today, and it's not like that, in part because it moved online. And as it moved online, it started relying on very fine-grained data about what users are doing. This data is really important, both economically, because that's advertising revenue, that's monetization, and that's how newsrooms make a profit.

Angèle Christin: [00:08:20] That's how they're commercially viable or kind of viable enterprises. But it's also a way in which journalists know now what their readers want. And they know that typically true these kinds of support programs, which I called web analytics software programs, this is just one of them, there are many, but basically you kind of programs that provide real time data about what readers are doing at any given point on a website, where they come from, where they are located, what they're tweeting about, and also rankings of the most popular articles kind of moving in real time. So now the question is, okay, so journalists have access to all these data, okay, they are like platforms that get kind of take advantage of us is kind of a folding source of digital media. What does that mean for news production? Until now, the way in which it's been mostly framed is like, well, click bait. It leads to click bait. That's what it is. Trashy headlines, deceptive headlines, bad content, kind of spiraling down to the bottom of news production. That's kind of the way it's been mostly framed until now. And so I came to this question as a cultural sociologist, been like, huh interesting. So what does that look like? And

how do journalists make sense of what they are doing? Do they think they're doing click bait or do they think that they are doing something different? And how does that work out? So I did a study, an ethnographic study of web newsrooms in two countries with very different journalistic traditions.

Angèle Christin: [00:09:47] So United States and France to go very quickly. And I won't talk too much about this today, but I'm happy to answer questions if there are any. The U.S. media landscape, as Joe shows so well in his book, is a very commercialized media landscape where market and financial pressures have been essential in shaping news production for two centuries. In France, the situation is a bit different, in part because journalists see themselves as intellectuals in charge of gauging public opinion. Long story short, I ended up focusing on two news websites, one in Paris and one in New York, and then I anonymize both of them in the book. So I spent a ton of time with journalists, interviewed them, had lunch with them, followed them, kind of try to understand what they were doing when they were writing articles. Based on that, what did I find? Well, the main kind of set of findings that I want to talk about today is both the kind of like ways in which the presence of audience metrics kind of pushed all of the newsrooms towards standardized content, but also how they reproduce different. So let me talk briefly about that. First convergence, something that I found very strongly in all of the newsrooms when I spent time is this kind of very kind of depressing story of like utopian beginnings and then the kind of move towards the, what I call, the chase for clicks. So utopian beginnings. And that's something that we should not forget. All of the newspapers, all of the newsrooms, all of the journalists I talked to really believed in using digital media and metrics to give voice to more diverse communities of readers and writers. They wanted to change journalism. And they wanted to change journalism in part because they thought that mainstream media was reproducing existing structures of power and white supremacy. That's what they were hoping to do in many cases. Right? Sometimes not as explicitly but trying to change the flow of information to appear more distributed kind of public sphere.

Angèle Christin: [00:11:42] Starting in 2010, 2011, however, the situation changed and it changed because social media platforms entered the picture. As social media platforms entered the picture, mostly Facebook, to some extent, YouTube and Twitter, news websites enter the chase for clicks. They had to publish more. They had to publish faster. They had to make a profit. They had to monetize their audience. And so they turned to sensationalism and inflammatory content, trying to produce like shock kind of hits that would go viral and would kind of tease out to readers, just like makes them click. Right? And so what I found in the newsrooms that I studied, both in New York and in Paris, is this constant tension between what I call editorial and click-based evaluation, where journalists were like, "oh, you know, am I a good journalist because I published something important, even if no one clicked? Or, am I a good journalist because it went viral, even though this doesn't do much to, in fact, change the way in which readers think about the topic. So very strong standardization process around this kind of click-based content. But that's not all there is. What I also found was that depending on the newsroom and depending on the kind of governance structures that these organizations have in

place, the way in which metrics are used and the way in which they're kind of put to use for news production is changing. And in the book, I contrast what I call bureaucratic versus disciplinary use of metrics to go very fast. In one case, you have a strong division of labor between people who do metrics and do viral stuff and people who do important articles or what they think are important articles versus disciplinary uses of metrics, which is a kind of Foucauldian, like everybody does a bit of everything and stresses out about everything. Right? And so I think here that one of the interesting findings, especially thinking about race and social justice more generically, is that, you know, these different structures had really paradoxical repercussions on the amplification of social, racial and gender inequalities in the sense that, for example, in the bureaucratic model was a strong division of labor.

Angèle Christin: [00:13:48] Well, on the one hand, it did protect, shall we say, investigative news content more. But it also created this very strong gender, racial, and economic hierarchies within newsrooms, where basically all the people of color, all the journalists of color, the female journalists, and the young journalists were only doing click-based content. Right? And the white, senior journalists would only be doing investigative content. So kind of complicated dynamics here. So now one thing that I want to mention, because I think that it bears like really important repercussions on the question of race and racial justice, is the kind of complex role of metrics, which is something that emerges very strongly in my book. Metrics don't only mean one thing. They really mean many things, but in particular, they mean both market pressures and what I call algorithmic publics, online publics that are mediated and represented through algorithmic procedures, usually meeting through social media platforms. Why does this matter? Well, because when you're thinking about how metrics and race interact, you have to take into account these two aspects of metrics. It's more complicated than the first aspect, which is clicks as commerce. Right? Which is like, oh, and that would be kind of a caricature version. You know, journalism used to be great. It used to be so professionalized. Oh, by the way, it was completely white, completely male, but let's not even talk about that. And then, all newsrooms kind of went down the drain of the chase for clicks and they started covering civil rights, covering white supremacy, doing cheap articles that really kind of serve as kind of inflammatory kind of content that spreads social and racial divisions. That's part of the story, but that's not the whole story. Another aspect of the story is that clicks can also serve and metrics, audience metrics and these kind of data can also serve, as shall we say, problematic, but nonetheless important forms of democratic feedback. And that's something that I've seen a lot in the newsrooms that I saw were, you know, in order to kind of fight back against problematic media norms, for example, oh let's not talk about race. It's kind of depressing. And no one likes that. No one's want to talk about that. Well, journalists would, in fact, look at metrics and be like, hey, did you see how many people read that article? Did you see how many times it was shared on Twitter? There is a community for this and we need to cover, you need to tend to the cares and the desires of that community.

Angèle Christin: [00:16:19] So it's complicated, I guess, is a way of concluding. And here just as a as a last word, I think that, like, when we think about journalism and social and racial

change and social and racial justice, we need to take into account this kind of complicated, dialectical dynamic where on the one hand, journalists are professional communicators. There the ones who shape how we think about the world. On the other hand, journalists are also professional communicators that make a living based on doing that. And so as such, they most of the time try to cater to the largest audiences. Right? And that's especially the case for mainstream media. And so, kind of thinking about that, you can think that, like, journalists are always going to be perhaps a tiny bit changing the kind of dominant frameworks, rights, a kind of supremacist frameworks in how we think about racial questions. But they're not going to be that far out unless, unless they're part of a more diverse media ecosystem. And unless we change the kinds of metrics, the kinds of incentives, the kinds of recruitments that we have in how we create very diverse and vibrant media ecosystem. And perhaps I'll stop here. I have ideas about what could be done to go in that direction. But Joe also has amazing plans and amazing ideas for that. So I'll stop here.

danah boyd: [00:17:41] Thank you, Angèle. And I am going to turn it over to Joseph (Torres) now to share more about his book.

Joseph Torres: [00:17:50] Thank you, danah, for having me at Data & Society, and I'm glad to be on the panel with Angèle and yeah, I'll just start that, I'll just start from present and work backwards. You know, as danah mentioned, when you put out a report today, I work for a group called Free Press as well. That's what I do for a living work for Free Press and it's a media and telecom advocacy organization. Right? And so we fight for media and telecom policies that serve the public good. And I'm very proud that within the work I am doing a Free Press, I've been working with the Black Caucus within free press to put out this essay today it's called "Media 2070" and its trying to reimagine a new media system where reparations is possible for the historical harms media companies and media policies has caused the Black community. There is a reckoning happening in newsrooms across the country as we speak, Right? It is historical reckoning happening. And at the same time, last year, you know, over the past year, there has been much more attention brought to the issue of reparations. We had congressional hearing on it. We had Nikole Hannah-Jones put out an essay, put out a column on it, and it's just, it's getting more attention.

Joseph Torres: [00:19:11] Presidential candidates are being forced to take positions on it and so for us, at Free Press and, you know, for me personally, like I personally believe that we living in a time where the question of whether a multiracial democracy can be fully realized, the question is unanswered. Democracy has not been fully realized whether a multiracial democracy can be fully realized. I think that is what's happening in the world today and it is going to continue to be something we have to deal with as our nation becomes, people of color would make up the majority of the population. So what is the media's role in an unjust society?

Joseph Torres: [00:19:56] And from the book that I worked on with Juan, where we wrote that book in order to try to organize and to help journalists better understand what's happening in society, particularly when it comes to media policies. Because when we started that book, there

was all kind of consolidation happening in how the federal government plays a role in structural racism and the reason Black and Brown people don't own TV stations and radio stations while we don't, we don't control the creation and distribution of our own narratives.

Joseph Torres: [00:20:24] And that is about power at the end of the day, it's about power. Media institutions are no different than any other institutions that is in our society. The media system is no different than any other system that exists in our society, whether it's the criminal justice system, education, you name it. The system wasn't created to help Black folks. The system wasn't created to help people of color. That's the media institution as well. So we document in the book, and we document in the essay as well, and continue to learn that this history should be more widely known. And it still isn't, that you know, from the very, very beginning, for example, the very beginning, the first newspapers that were printed in this country in a Boston newsletter, first continuous newspaper, talk about Black folks being addicted to stealing in line.

Joseph Torres: [00:21:14] But also the publisher of the paper was also the printer of the paper and in colonial times, often the printer of the paper, and when he placed slave ads in newspapers for the sale of in-state Black folks, the printer was the broker between the buyer and seller. And so this is the history of our own early colonial newspapers. There's evidence to suggest that Benjamin Franklin was a broker between the owner and the seller of slaves. Right? So you have this DNA from like upholding a white racial hierarchy. This is the role that our mass media has played and so dominant white media companies, their role is to be all part of the power structure in our society.

Joseph Torres: [00:22:05] So as they are part of a power structure, their job with upholding white supremacy policies in order to uphold a white racial hierarchy. They didn't have newspapers in the eighteen hundreds supporting, of course, slavery, the annexation of the Southwest, the takeover of indigenous lands.

Joseph Torres: [00:22:26] And and you've seen over the past decade or two decades several newspapers who have apologized for their role in the harm they caused Black folks. Right? You just had the L.A. Times apologize for its role in harming the Black community, the Latinx community. But over the past decade, you've had the *Valley News* and *Observer* apologizing for its role in 1898, coup of Wilmington, North Carolina, where you had a government made up of Black leaders that the newspaper, the Valley News Observer the editor and publisher worked with the Democratic state chairman, to have a plan to overthrow the government because, as the paper said, the paper was like, we are the militant voice of white supremacy. Right? And it was a white supremacist coup that included militia, that include the writers, Democratic papers, papers that were aligned with the Democratic Party.

Joseph Torres: [00:23:25] After World War I, the Justice Department investigated the Black press because they thought they were a threat. They saw them as a threat to challenging racial

injustice happening in our society. So ,and then you have like, you know, in the 60s where the white citizens councils had a public affairs program that it distributed to stations across the country. How many stations carried it, we don't exactly know. But members of Congress actually helped them to get the privileges to record their show in Congress, in the Congress recording studios, Congressional recording studios. So the point is that our media institutions and then if you look at like CNN or you look at, you know, like a Les Moonves, you know, the famous quote, CBS may be bad for America, but great for CBS, what is it really saying?

Joseph Torres: [00:24:23] Right? He's really saying this racist, misogynist person, it may be bad for all y'all, but it's good for us, and who is us? Right? "Us" is like white dominant companies, right? And it's like racism is profitable. Right? Racism... it also has again to ensure a white racial hierarchy exists. In that white, racial hierarchy exists, the media companies play in the coverage in the way it covers communities of color, ensures that other policies are passed that harm people of color. Right? Because if you are the de-humanized right, you can pass any kind of policy against the Black community and communities of color. So with media reparations, what we're trying to do is, is to have the full story right of like what is the historical harms? Because a lot of people are actually keepers of the stories. They actually know the harm that happened in their communities, but is not widely known in that community. And it's definitely not known nationally. As you'll see these papers and news institutions need to reckon with their own history of racism. The L.A. Times wrote the first 80 years of its existence.

Joseph Torres: [00:25:41] It was a paper of white supremacy. Right? And so with our project, what we want to do is to work in coalition with media makers, activists, anyone who is the keeper of the story to tell the story of the harm of anti-Black racism in the media to the Black community and to deal with the policies. I mean, we have a policy now like as a twenty seventeen of all the commercial radio, television stations, full power, commercial radio stations, television stations in the country, there were just twelve Black owners.

Joseph Torres: [00:26:19] Right? So that's like less than one percent of all full power television stations are owned by Black folks as a twenty seventeen.

Joseph Torres: [00:26:26] So I'll end with this. You know, how can we envision a world where Black folks create and control the distribution of their own narratives without any gatekeepers? How can we have online platforms that are emancipatory as opposed to platforms based on surveillance, and you continue to give voice to white supremacy? So the last point I'm going to make, regardless of each platform, whenever technology comes along that creates new media systems and those new media systems create and continue to replicate what is happening in society. And what's happening in society is capitalism and racism continue to intertwine to continue to do harm to Black folks. And so I'll stop there. I can continue to go, but I'll stop there.

danah boyd: [00:27:18] Thanks, Joe. So just a reminder to everybody. There is the Q&A, as you put some questions. But I'm going to take moderator's privilege and begin us because I think that Joseph left off in a perfect place for us to pick up and talk about.

danah boyd: [00:27:31] So in *News For All The People*, Juan and Joe describe how the Telegraph came into power and its this reminder that the questions of the relationship between technology and journalism is age-old. This is not a news story. In fact, part of what's so fascinating about the present is how it's a continuation of a much longer story. And one of the quotes from the book says, the new technologies instant speed and its monopoly pricing structure demanded shorter and simpler news items, actions over reflection, screaming headlines over news analysis. It's funny to think that that is actually a reference to the Telegraph because arguably you could say this quote for nearly every form of technology and Angèle in *Metrics At Work, America*, you show these parallel processes, You show how the race for clicks, the need for amplification on platform and so with each of these new technologies. We see the news industry respond. And what's notable to me about a lot of the responses is that they justify the need to revert to some version of a faster, a quicker, a less thought through version. So they undermine their own ideals in that process, justified by economic considerations or the need to actually hold up. So how do we think about the consistently bad decisions made by the news industry that are consistently replied to and justified through each technology? How can we look at the history and the present and say, hey, what's going on here?

danah boyd: [00:28:57] Why do we keep reverting to these bad decisions justified by new technologies? Maybe Angèle, I'll throw that to you first.

Angèle Christin: [00:29:06] Yeah, you know, it's so interesting because, like, I'm going to take a slightly different angle, but because I think it's complementary, right? I mean, I think that, like, for example, in Joe's book and handbook, like basically one other thing that he finds, I find, is that with the Telegraph, many new voices also came to the fore, that like it was each new medium, with each new technology you get first the kind of like kind of organizational, kind of, oh, yeah, let's be faster. Let's publish faster, shorter, more aggressive. Let's just like, you know, put oil on the fire again and again and again because we can do it. But you also have this kind of new spaces for communities that want to speak up. Right? And like what I find fascinating is like looking at, you know, first the print medium and the telegraph. So radio, television, cable TV, now the internet like is how, you know, not only so you get several stages, you get the like, oh, let's go faster. let's do headlines like, let's you know kind do the kind of click bait version. Right? Or the telegraph-bait version.

Angèle Christin: [00:30:10] You get the new voices that are just like, hey, actually for once we can get in and they sit in the chat and rebroadcast here. And I know that he did a data byte and wrote this wonderful book about distributed blackness. And so you get also all of these effervescence and all of these results that he talks about in using these technologies. But as things consolidate and that's something that shows up so clearly when you look at the history of

media, you keep the kind of faster rhythms or like publish more, publish faster, do more like kind of throwing it all on the fire and the new voices, the more diverse voices get pushed away or like co-opted into existing structures. Right? So it's not only reverting to bad stuff, it's also that all the good stuff that's happening, that's the stuff that gets eliminated or, you know, through the consolidation process, through the financialization process. And that's been happening like four or five times already, you know, if not more. And so I just wonder, like, yeah, what can we learn from this? Right? To, like, not keep repeating the same stuff over and over again.

danah boyd: [00:31:19] No, I think this is a great point, and I think I maybe I'll turn it to Joe with this thought, which is that one of the things that keeps coming up in your book with Juan is that as communities want to speak up, especially like your accounting of the indigenous press, your accounting of Spanish, LatinX press and Chinese-American press. There's a lot of conversations about how these groups try to make their voices heard. They try to build a press, but they're doing it as a side job. Or there's all of these ways in which they're stopped systematically and so they keep struggling. And so these financialized logics that Angèle points to, they don't hold water with communities who can either afford to pay for subscriptions to the newspapers because we are talking about the 1800s or, you know, advertising, which, of course, is birthed around this time. So how do we grapple with what we're hearing in terms of, well, it's because of the finances that justifies coming back to some much more racist headlines, for example?

Joseph Torres: [00:32:27] Well, I mean, you know, with the press, Black press, for example, indigenous press, their presses were also destroyed, you know, for challenging the white supremacy Ida B. Wells, who was a great data journalist, right? Her press was destroyed. She was a co-owner, right? After she challenged the lynching of Black folks in the paper, Alex Manley, who was the publisher of the paper in Wilmington, North Carolina. I mean, they wanted to kill him. You know they were like after him because he was challenging the white supremacy movement in Wilmington, North Carolina. They actually kept track of him after he was forced to flee for his life.

Joseph Torres: [00:33:11] So there's a history of like your dissident press, if you're a Black journalist, a part of it, and you voice is a dissident voice, you're taking your life, you're putting your life at risk. After World War I, when the Justice Department, they arrested A. Philip Randolph, who was the publisher of The Messenger. Right? And [INAUDIBLE], they both created The Messenger and they (were) considered the most dangerous publication in the country, Black publication in the country. They arrested them for a couple of days and they were let go, but they took away their mailing privileges, you know, because you have privileges to be able to, postal privileges to deliver your paper at a discounted, subsidized rate. Right?

Joseph Torres: [00:34:04] And so they took away that so they were constantly missing, Abolitionist papers weren't delivered, you know? So there's always this opportunity as Angèle

was saying, to me a place that needs to be studied more is the early days of radio, because at the early days of radio, anyone who was a US citizen could get an amateur radio licence.

Joseph Torres: [00:34:30] And we found examples. Just examples. I know that. Just examples. I know there's so many more out there, like examples of Black folks in Baltimore creating a radio club. And like in 1916, 1917. Right? Because they were like, we can actually broadcast and broadcast the Boy Scouts what they're doing and but then radio, but then the government has always interest to monopolize the media system. Right? I feel like it's more comfortable with, its actually where radio, its much, much more comfortable with it being in a monopoly. In fact, Josephus Daniels, who I mentioned, who was the racist white supremacist publisher who was involved in the coup that killed more than 60 Black folks in Wilmington in 1898, becomes the secretary of the Navy during World War One.

Joseph Torres: [00:35:17] And he devises, he plays an instrumental role in the creation of the Radio Corporation of America in order to have the government control radio, he wants the government just to control radio. But when plans were rebuffed, he said we need to create a monopoly where the US Navy actually has a chair. The US government has a chair on the board and he creates and it becomes from this radio system that we're like hobbyists you know like developing what radio potentially could be to government stepping in and and allowing instead of regulating each new industry to allow in the voices of the many to speak, it consolidates the voice of few. So RCA creates NBC Red and Blue Network and then NBC and in nineteen. He quickly puts Amos and Andy on the radio and Pittsburgh (?) the Black press. Pittsburgh Courier protested this racist programming. So the idea, here you have the potential to have many voices on right? Throughout history, there's always a critical moment you have many voices, but the government comes in to regulate the institute to put it in the hands of a few large corporations. Right? And now, you know, someone put like a question in there like what's happening now with the idea of the future of the social media platforms and all that is like you can see, to me the early days of radio is like and how the government treated radio is kind of like something which you look back on what's happening now, you know?

danah boyd: [00:36:51] Thank you for that. Well, you know, one of the things that I want to highlight is that the new report that the group that Joe was involved in just put out, it opens with a great quote from Octavia Butler, which I just want to highlight here, because I think we're actually seeing enacted in this conversation right now, which is: "to try to foretell the future without studying history is like trying to learn to read, without bothering to learn the alphabet." And I think that's a really important thing to highlight at this moment, because that history that we're discussing here is so critical to understand what's going on right now. And that gets us to this question. I know that Joe sort of alluded to it with regard to the 230 question. We'll come back to 230 in more detail, but in the history of journalism, there were a ton of restrictions on who could speak, what could be shared and what were the technologies that they could use to disseminate? You know, for all the conversations we're having right now on a postal system, the postal system refused to deliver countless newspapers if it didn't abide by the interests of the

particular establishment, if you will. And so we saw these restrictions on speech. Right. And so this assumption that we've always had a First Amendment is a very naive assumption. It has not been true. It's been contested. It's been fought over who gets to have access to voice. And so, of course, in usually and when we talk about it in terms of journalism, we come back to the Federal Communications Commission and the creation of the Commission, because part of what was so important about the FCC was that it was not just a matter of who could speak, but who could get a license to broadcast.

danah boyd: [00:38:25] And one of the things that, you know, Juan and Joseph make a very good job of pointing out is that this is not actually just a free for all. It's not open to anybody. And quoting from the book, federal regulators did not simply ignore the white supremacist views of some applicants. They refused to sanction racist broadcasts for violating public interest requirements of federal communication law. And I think this is really important because we had this moment where we talk about where regulation comes in and how valuable can regulation be. But we also, of course, have to account for the ways in which the idea that anybody can speak is used as a way to, in many ways, oppress other people from speaking. And here we are in this moment right now where we have to ask questions about why it is that The New York Times thinks that it's a good idea to elevate the "Nazi next door" as an equal voice or what it is when Facebook decides what they should or should not restrict and amplification. So we're back to a conversation that is, in fact, age old and was previously understood in regulation, but regulations that were often not applied by. And so here we are at this moment of 230. So for those who are not familiar with CDA 230, you're really lucky. I'm jealous of you.

danah boyd: [00:39:41] I wish you to not have to actually know about this. So close your ears if you don't want to know. But the basic idea is that when early internet developments were occurring, there was a regulation that was put out that was known as the Communications Decency Act. The main goal was to try to prevent the internet from being a place of terrible content, a.k.a. pornography. But there was a carve out, a particular section of it known as 230 and 230, basically allowed the platforms, the corporations, to not actually have to regulate speech. And the idea was that why should AT&T be responsible for once a drug deal is occurring across its wires? Why should -- insert company from the 90s -- be responsible for what people put on their platform? Now, most of CDA was struck down as unconstitutional, but 230 held. And so this is where we get to the question, which is that how do we think about the fights over CDA 230 right now? What's being contested? How do we think of that? How do we think about what Facebook is doing and what, you know, organizations like The New York Times are doing in light of the long history of constantly amplifying and returning to a lot of the white supremacist logics. And I don't know if one of you want to pick up on that first. Maybe I'll pick on Angèle because of some of the technology components of it. How should we be thinking about what's happening with CDA 230 in the fights over Facebook and New York Times?

Angèle Christin: [00:41:09] It's so complicated. I mean, so the way I think about it is that, you know, every technology comes with an aura of democratic participation, right, aside this time the

floor is really open. Everybody can kind of come in and express our views, except that the track, of course, it's never the case. Right? And as you showed, like the FCC and like before that, you always have incumbents. And so the way I think about it is like they serve as like obligatory passage points. Right? And now the obligatory passage points are the platforms. And so that's I mean, for me, what's fascinating is that, yes, there are regulations in place and certainly like 230 is what kind of makes this possible. But platforms now are the ones kind of making decisions about what gets visible and what doesn't. And so I guess like another way of putting it is that I think that thinking about 230 and about what kind of content can be allowed like and should be allowed on social media platforms or should be allowed this kind of visibility online and this kind of traffic right, this kind of like high metrics relates back to and I'm sorry, it's not like a super strict answer, but like to kind of both side' ism, right? To say like, oh, we need to like give voice equally to both sides, even when, like, both sides are like a complete construction.

Angèle Christin: [00:42:35] Right? It's like both sides of what? Like what are you even talking about? And somehow that that gets wrapped up into kind of First Amendment and kind of professional norms of objectivity. Right?

Angèle Christin: [00:42:47] And what I find fascinating is that you see this kind of like both sidism trope, both within news organizations, and that's like, oh, we are going to give voice to a Nazi at the same time as we kind of give voice to a member of Black Lives Matter. Right? And you're just like that's not like that just doesn't compute. Like it's just like, what are you even talking about? Right.

Angèle Christin: [00:43:09] And you see that on platforms, for example, like, you know, the past couple of days, Twitter making an announcement that any kind of Tweet wishing the death or like illness of Trump would be banned from the platform. And of course, every single person who's been a victim of harassment on Twitter are being like, what does that even look like? So this whole kind of both sidism I think just plays out in really interesting ways to kind of justify the kind of production, diffusion, amplification of radicalized white supremacist content. And I really think that it's interesting for me. And that goes back to Ted Potter's work on numbers, how standards in the US, particularly, but similar things could be said about the French context, how the standards are used to in fact like reproduce inequality. Right? And reinforce inequality and racial inequality in particular in the US. I just find it like this whole veil of objectivity saying, just strikes me as like particularly interesting and like always happening anyway that's a bit of a tangent, but it relates to your question.

Joseph Torres: [00:44:19] I'll just add on top of that, my colleague [INAUDIBLE] in [INAUDIBLE] Colorado wrote a long essay on this recently, on this topic of free press to kind of like go through it. And I haven't really marinated it with yet because I was finishing his essay, but I'm going to. But here's the thing with 230 that it concerns us, is obviously like the, here we have the FCC killing net neutrality. Right?

Joseph Torres: [00:44:45] And at the same time claiming that the platforms are neutral like that. They're saying it's neutral like its company net neutrality exists. It doesn't exist. And the companies can actually block your websites right now if they wanted to. But at the same time, this is about power.

Joseph Torres: [00:45:02] And I'm so glad you said it the way you said it, because there is the idea and we're in a time where there's a racial reckoning happen in our country and it's like no Black Lives Matter equated with with the Proud Boys, you know, like that's you know, this is what's happening is like the idea of like there's a fight over narrative, right? It's a fight over power, right? And whose story gets to be told. But at the same time, we believe in a free press and we have projects on this, like these guys, you know like a white supremacist groups and like Facebook is a private company and that's private actors.

Joseph Torres: [00:45:46] We can go and challenge private companies. I mean, people of color we talk about it in the essay, have been challenging media institutions to get rid of hate speech and white supremacy in their content. And so the idea that we don't want David Duke on Twitter. You know what I'm saying? We want to de-platform folks who are calling for violence against people of color, right?

Joseph Torres: [00:46:07] But what Facebook is a private company right? They're a private company and so the idea that we can challenge private companies to be held responsible for what they publish, you know they may not state themselves a public company. And also the algorithms that's there, there's nothing usual about the algorithms that allowing which groups they're pushing people to support. Right? To join. So a lot of people say that's a contradiction, but it's not a contradiction.

Joseph Torres: [00:46:43] We challenge broadcast licenses for their failure to serve communities of color. We challenge racist programming and we're challenging racism on these platforms. But we're concerned as an organization about 230 and to me it like a power play. It's a power play to allow racism and hatred to continue to be unchallenged online. And these companies not to stand back and not do anything and there's concern that especially with Facebook, because they stand back, they have stood down a lot during this administration, you know, and so the idea that these massive companies are, you know, like the pressure put on by government. And what does that mean going forward is really concerning and troubling because they've already have allowed too much to proliferate on their platforms.

danah boyd: [00:47:39] Thank you. You know, and thank you Theo for raising the question of 230 in the Q&A, a friendly reminder. Feel free to jump in and put into questions in the Q&A. And I'm now going to mix in a question that is brought to us by Alice in the Q&A, who asks about examples of media companies and organizations who are using metrics to approach issues of race and inclusion and more positive or decolonial way. And I think this is a moment, you know, Joe, you referenced Ida B. Wells' phenomenal work. And as you referenced her as a data

journalist, which I just love. And certainly I think that part of what's interesting is some of the work that Color of Change has been doing and trying to make it very clear, the systematic ways of, in which news media continues to hold up racist tropes. And Joe, can you talk us through some other examples that might be relevant for Alice so like where can we understand data as an act of resistance for a lot of the colonial work that is so age old? And where can we see hope in some of the work that's coming from BIPOC communities to try and challenge the status quo through the use of data?

Joseph Torres: [00:48:53] Well, I think some of the things you've seen and just, you know, this example that comes to mind as you give me the Color of Change example is that is that is the challenge of like how do you collect data on police shootings? Right.

Joseph Torres: [00:49:09] And so we've seen, I believe, was The Washington Post that was under I think Wes Lowery. And I'm going to get this a little wrong. But, there's been efforts by like The Washington Post.

Joseph Torres: [00:49:19] Just double check me like The Washington Post to try to create newspapers trying to create their own databases to understand the number of folks who have been shot by police because the records on that are not nationally kept. Right?

Joseph Torres: [00:49:33] And so that's an example of data journalism that's serving toward to bring more justice into criminal justice. My concern with data journalism, my concern with metrics, what the companies use is like the L.A. Times like we talked about this a few minutes ago before we got on, like the idea, like the L.A. Times apologized, which is a great beginning to apologize as a part of reconciliation. For, you know, not for not covering Black and brown communities because they were covering white leaders, that's true of like, that's a norm of so many white dominant newspapers. So they use metrics to how to exclude people of color. You know what zip codes not to serve. And so you could even say Facebook is using metrics to serve a certain particular group more because racism is profitable, that you inflame folks, so to continue to come back to your platform. Right? And using racism in and to recommend people to more racist content, that's a form of using data in order to profit off of racism. So I'll just update. But I think that's an example of like what The Washington Post, I continue to say The Washington Post, I'm not this continuum, but I was an example that came up years ago that they were beginning to collect this data on race. And you see, you've even seen during Covid-19 a lot of newspapers like The New York Times talking about disparities in race when it comes to COVID that they were they were creating databases for. But I'll stop there.

danah boyd: [00:51:21] Yes. Thank you. And, you know, Angèle, in *Metrics at Work*, you actually do a phenomenal job of also highlighting the fetishization of data. And this, I think, was where this contradiction starts to emerge, which is how can data be used as a tool to challenge colonial histories, but also how do we grapple with the ways in which it upholds them? And, you know, I'm struggling with this both because I you know, I'd love your accounting and you

referenced [INAUDIBLE] earlier, but this moment of like, what is the work that data is doing for the imagination of work? And to that end, you know, Khoa in the Q&A asked, like, “Are there metrics that are complementary or alternative instead of digital media metrics. Can we imagine a way within the rubric of of metricization that is actually more just?”

Angèle Christin: [00:52:11] This is such a good question and it's such an impossible question to answer, right? So okay, so I keep like kind of moving back and forth between the like. Let's just, like, throw metrics away and just like kind of have a blanket saying that says, like, you know what, all metrics are bad. Let's just like get rid of this. And the more kind of reformist approach, which is like, well, some metrics are better than others and some metrics can be used in a good way compared to bad ways. Right? So good and bad being obviously subjective constructs, but shall we say, more accountable ways and in ways to kind of promote kind of social justice and social reform. Right? And so, you know, I really move back in both ways. OK, so let me kind of just provide a quick overview of the different metrics that are out there.

Angèle Christin: [00:52:57] So you have page views. Basically, everybody says pages are just so bad, they encourage the worst kind of click bait. Then you have unique visitors. Slightly better because at least they don't make you click through like 20 different pages that count as 20 different clicks. At least that's only one percent, etc. Then you have more qualitative metrics. So that would be time engaged, for example. And several companies, several newsrooms have been switching to time engaged, and there the idea is that, you know, it doesn't matter if a reader clicks in an article and bounces off after two seconds, what you really want is them to engage with the content of the article and to stay on the website for a long time. Now, the problem with that is like how does that tie back to the economic infrastructure that supports news production? And for me, at the end of the day, that's a real question, right? Can you sell advertising space based on time engaged? And like basically some newsrooms and companies are like, oh, yes, you can, because the longer people stay on the websites, the more likely they are to remember the brand and do later, like, kind of buy stuff from that brand. And you're like, well, if we're having these questions, is it even worth it to switch to time engaged, right? I mean, if, like, the whole thing is about selling brain space for brands like, you know, is that a productive discussion? And like two other aspects of the last metric is impact metrics. So newsrooms like ProPublica, for example, have kind of decidedly switched away from page unique visitors, time engaged, etc., to measure impact by like changes in legislation and other kind of more, shall we say, institutional metrics of how it's affecting social and political change.

Angèle Christin: [00:54:42] So as far as I'm concerned, all of this is complicated and it's complicated by the fact that news production right now, most news production relies on a mix of advertising and subscriptions. Right? And advertising and subscriptions basically depend on two main things, well three: absolute number of eyeballs, absolute number of people, socio-demographic characteristics of the people. And we go back to Joe's comment, which is that Black people are less valuable to advertisers than white people. Rich people are more valuable than poor people. People in rich zip codes are more valuable than people in low-income zip

codes. And all of that is whether you want it or not. The structure of media production right now. And, you know, an editor that would tell me that they don't look at that, I don't believe them because that's how they make money. So it cannot be completely ignored. Now, moving to the positive side, I do think, to date something that I've seen more at the individual level. I do think that some editors in particular are trying really hard to use metrics in ways that's like productive to kind of engage communities of readers. You know, I could name names. I have lots of ideas, but I'm not going to do that. I will just say that, like, you can use metrics as a form of feedback, as a form of like, oh, look, people are interested in this topic that we are not covering. How do we cover this more? What does this mean? How do we build meaningful relationships with these publics? Right? How do we advance our course? How do we build expertise? How do we change a way we frame a question? How do we learn from them? And especially when they're underrepresented, underserved minorities? Right? And some editors are doing that. But to like the level that I've seen, it's mostly a kind of one on one off where is it possible? When is it possible? One person somehow really has a knack for like dealing with that. And that's when we kind of goes back to like another, anyway it's up here.

Joseph Torres: [00:56:54] That's why I like my organization's working on free press. What does the future of journalism look like? Because the number of journalists that have been laid off or furloughed. The number of journalists has rapidly declined especially in newspapers. It is a significant loss, right? And so how can we ensure, like how can we have government, there's a lot more support in D.C. for bailing out the newspaper industry, for example. But how do we make sure journalists get the money right to actually produce journalism?

Joseph Torres: [00:57:33] And how do we reduce the pressure that you're describing here of like I mean. So you can use metrics in a way that's supporting your journalism, that is in support of building community, that relationship with the community in order to support journalism, as opposed to giving money to institutions that would rather see the journalists get the money to actually produce journalism than institutions that have failed to get funding.

Joseph Torres: [00:58:02] But the future of journalism, the conversation, it's more supported in D.C. to do something about it. And so what does that look like? And how can we not replicate models that are not working. That's it.

danah boyd: [00:58:17] I can't thank you enough, both of you Joseph and Angèle, like this is such a fruitful conversation, and it kills me to actually have to cut it out before we address even a fraction of the questions that have come in, which means there's plenty of room to follow up. Both of these wonderful people are on social media so you can reach out to them. They're happy to engage. And I think, you know, in closing, I think what you're hearing here is that the contestation over journalism is the contestation over democracy. They are intertwined. There are these questions of who counts, whose voices matter, who is being represented, and how do we ensure that that this is the ideal that we all dream of. And as you leave here today, I have two requests because, of course, I have to end with a nice sales pitch. Number one, know your

history. Make sure you pick up *News For All The People* by Juan Gonzalez and Joseph Torres, because it's really important to understand where we come from with this industry. Number two, pick up *Metrics at Work* from Angèle Christian, because understanding what's at stake in the newsrooms right now, to understand the contestations right now is a really important part of moving forward with this, because if we want to build the ideal of journalism, we have to account for its past and we have to account for all of its contributions and connections up into capitalism and into white supremacy. And that leads us to sort of the final point, which is that having just been released today, your other homework assignment is to make certain to pick up the report, *Media 2070*, which is trying to imagine what a more fair and just media ecosystem might look like and how we might get there. And with that, I want to thank all of you for coming out today, for taking the time, you know, in an afternoon, evening, night on a Blursday to try to figure out how to think through the relationship between metrics, race and news journalism.

I want to thank you to everyone at Data & Society for making all of this possible. So thank you.