



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Look Back to Live Ahead: Connecting the Power of Museums and Journalism for a Stronger Democracy

Laura Kebede-Twumasi¹ 

¹University of Memphis

Email: lfkebede@memphis.edu

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Abstract

Museums and news organizations make up major parts of the structure that maintains an informed community essential to democracy. As resources for both of these institutions dwindle, it's more important than ever for these sectors to work together toward their common goals – not only with each other, but with their respective communities in ways that are collaborative and egalitarian. The following outlines Civil Wrongs, a program started at the University of Memphis Department of Journalism and Strategic Media in 2022, as an emerging example of how these institutions can work together and learn from each other for the sake of a more informed community. Civil Wrongs is both a journalistic project of the nonprofit Institute for Public Service Reporting, and an academic class for junior and senior college students from multiple disciplines, including journalism, history, and political science. Through narrative podcasting, the program aims to examine past cases of racial terror in the Mid-South and analyze their connection to present-day injustices. It is a break from the traditional journalistic model that focuses solely on the present with little historical context and therefore naturally creates a bridge to museums that are grounded in history education.

Keywords: journalism; museums; public history

Where past and present meet

Museums and news organizations make up significant parts of the structure that maintains an informed community that is essential to democracy. As their place in American society is changing and their future hangs in the balance, it is more important than ever for these professions to work together toward their common goals – not only with each other but with their respective communities in ways that are collaborative and antilistist.

I have begun exploring this relationship through Civil Wrongs, a program I created at the University of Memphis in 2022. The program was inspired by the Georgia Civil Rights Cold Cases Project at Emory University led by journalist and author Hank Klibanoff. Civil Wrongs is both a journalistic project of the nonprofit *Institute for Public Service Reporting* and an academic class for junior and senior college students from multiple disciplines. Through podcasting, the program aims to examine past cases of racial terror in the Mid-South and analyze their connection to present-day injustices.

In the spring of 2023, I taught a social justice writing and reporting class through the university's Department of Journalism and Strategic Media. I had 13 students, all journalism majors except for one political science major. We produced a podcast season about the Memphis Massacre of 1866 and researched its connections to police brutality, sexual violence, and the history of miseducation today. We also hosted an exhibit entitled "Look Back to Live Ahead" in partnership with the department's event planning class that was attended by more than 100 community members at the Urevbu Contemporary Fine Art Gallery in downtown Memphis. Supporting organizations included the Memphis Museum of Science and History, a century-old institution that has undergone significant changes in its programming recently, and Facing History & Ourselves, a teacher training nonprofit organization that seeks to support educators in teaching particularly painful parts of American and world history, such as racial terror lynchings and the Holocaust.

I have seen how journalists can use their skills of analyzing the present to bring forgotten history forward in a way that museums can learn from to bring more relevance to their indispensable work. I have also seen how museums can be a needed reminder to a fast-paced information world that nothing we see today is created in a vacuum and that our society could make more informed decisions about the future if we know our origins. Both are needed. In a democracy, especially in a multicultural society such as the U.S., an informed and connected community is vitally important. But even 160 years after emancipation from slavery and 50 years after the abolition of Jim Crow segregation laws, Americans do not know what to do with our shared past, much like how the end of formal colonialism in Europe did not bring a shared framework to wrestle with the damage the system caused.¹

Note that when I mention the press, a news outlet or organization, media, and journalism, I am referring to local news outlets that emphasize fact-checking and verification and focus on a single town, city, or region. While national news outlets significantly contribute to the U.S. media landscape, local news has an outsized impact on creating an informed public. When I discuss museums, I am focusing on history museums that engage their local audiences. The principles discussed here can be applied to museums that cater to tourists, but local community engagement has greater potential to foster community because their audience can easily visit repeatedly, increasing their exposure to other sectors of the community they may not have regular contact with.

The problem of inclusivity, relevancy, and trust

Both museums and news organizations, especially those that have been operating for more than 30 years, have been struggling to shed racist and exclusionary practices, keep up with digital-first generations, and come up with content that more closely matches their communities' information needs.

In the media, trust is already in peril. Across race, generation, and political affiliation, trust in news, inclusive of national media, is at a record low. About 68 percent of Americans who participated in a Gallup poll in 2023 said they had not much trust or none at all in mass media – the lowest on record. The poll has been conducted since the 1970s and since 2005, the share of Americans who reported a "great deal or fair amount of trust" in mass media has not been in the majority.² But one bright spot sticks out in aid of fostering meaningful community

¹ Mbembe 2019

² Brennan 2023

dialog: In a 2019 study conducted by Gallup and Knight Foundation, people said they trust local news more than national media to report without bias (66 percent versus 31 percent). They also said that local journalists are more likely than national journalists to be seen as caring (36 percent versus 4 percent), trustworthy (29 percent versus 8 percent), and accurate (25 percent versus 8 percent).³ This calls for greater investment in local news if the industry is going to recover trust anytime soon.

Legacy news organizations also have racist practices and mindsets that negatively affect trust and community participation. The journalism industry still does not reflect the communities it serves, though there have been spurts of progress. The most recent national survey of major newsrooms showed that fewer than 10 have similar racial representation to the city or region they cover.⁴ Historically, as white, middle-class families migrated to suburbs as racial integration changed the face of American cities, newspaper circulations followed them to chase advertising revenue.⁵ Advertisers did not value inner-city families, often seen as a proxy for people of color, as worthy consumers. As newspapers spread themselves thin to follow advertisers, they divested from covering communities of color, though it was not a given that many were doing that in a substantial way prior to white flight. News organizations today are still feeling the reverberations of these decades-ago coverage decisions.

Trust in museums is significantly higher than in news organizations. The American Alliance of Museums 2021 survey found that museums are still mostly considered to be non-partisan, neutral spaces for dialog. Conservatives and liberals are equally likely to visit a museum. Even if attendees think museum leaders, and therefore their work and exhibitions, have a point of view, only 15 percent of survey respondents believed they had a political agenda. About half of respondents said they trusted museums because they offer primary sources for visitors to examine and interpret. And even though trust is lower among non-white populations, museums as a whole still maintain a high level of trust across ethnic groups.⁶

Yet visitors still skew toward older adults and a larger share of white people than the general American public. This overrepresentation limits diverse community interaction that fosters deeper understanding. That disconnect can lead to a narrow view of how the museum's offerings connect to the world outside its walls, which endangers the institution of becoming obsolete. Trusting an institution from afar is an essential first step, but ultimately does not cultivate real-world impact. This trend has roots in the industry's colonial practices and mindsets that steal artifacts and approach interpretation from the outside rather than lean on the collective wisdom of the groups represented in the museum. This is further exacerbated when museums do not uplift legitimate work from underrepresented groups. Even when museums attempt to build inclusive exhibits, resistance to share authority or value lived experiences of those the exhibits center, can lead to harmful practices – as witnessed when an Indigenous woman was escorted from a museum exhibit honoring her people for wearing a traditional baby wrap that went against institution policy.⁷ To correct this, museums must share power with the communities they aim to serve.

³ Knight Foundation and Gallup 2019

⁴ Clark 2018

⁵ Prial 1990

⁶ American Alliance of Museums 2021

⁷ Asher 2023

Informed and connected communities

Museums and news organizations both play a part in building a strong democracy. When a nation such as the U.S. depends on its people to deliberate and decide laws through representatives, it is essential that a broad spectrum of its citizens be knowledgeable about their collective history and present so that they can make informed decisions about the direction of their future.

At its best, journalism has an impact on democracy through civic participation, a community's sense of identity, and a reduction of government corruption. This is not surprising considering the American media's longstanding position as the "fourth estate" or unofficial branch of government. Unlike museums, the press is specifically protected in the United States Constitution in the First Amendment. The Constitution is the cornerstone of U.S. democracy, so from its founding, leaders have seen the value of a free press to preserve democracy. For example, the Pew Research Center revealed a compelling connection between frequent voters and local news consumption. The survey found that adults who report that they "always vote" displayed "strikingly stronger local news habits" than those who do not regularly participate in elections.⁸ And even before the worst of layoffs in the news industry, the National Bureau of Economic Research found that robust local journalism had a "substantial and measurable impact on public life." The year after the *Cincinnati Post* closed, researchers observed that fewer voters turned out for local elections, fewer candidates ran for local office, incumbents were more likely to win reelection, and campaign spending fell.⁹ This remained true despite the presence of another local newspaper that temporarily increased staffing to fill the news gap. Without consistent and reliable information about what their government was up to, Cincinnati residents became less engaged. In studying the intersection of journalism and sociology, Lewis Friedland found that communication, a tenet of journalism, is a key part of creating a sense of community, which in turn is essential to a thriving democracy.¹⁰

Museums also have a unique role in strengthening democracy. By nature, they are platforms for cultural expression, reflection, and dialogue. They can even become sites of conflict resolution that extend to larger questions of national identity and history. This is important because democracies stand out from other forms of government precisely because of their ability to resolve the pluralistic society's conflict peacefully without an all-powerful leader. In a nation where people often self-segregate in their housing, school, online and relationship choices along racial, cultural, and economic lines, having common social ground to meet and discuss differences and a shared future is crucial.

At their best, both industries help create a sense of community, but oftentimes with different audiences. By working together, museums and news organizations are in a unique position to combine a museum's ability to provide historical context and slow-paced contemplation and journalism's knack for analyzing present-day changes in a fast-paced world. Museums lend their high levels of community trust, while news organizations bring their real-world impact with in-depth reporting and storytelling. These complementary skill sets can forge new pathways to reaching their respective communities and beyond with the information they need to effectively participate in democracy. More and more, leaders in these industries are attempting to equip their communities to be change agents with

⁸ Barthel 2020

⁹ Schulhofer-Wohl and Garrido 2009

¹⁰ Friedland 2001

information rather than protecting the status quo like their predecessors did. However, it is still not the predominant model of operation. In museum studies, the concept is known as “shared authority” or “participatory museums,” while among news organizations it is called “participatory” or “engaged” journalism. In both models, the institutions invite their communities to be active participants rather than passive consumers of the information presented. For museums, this means meaningfully involving people and cultures featured in their exhibits to plan, design, and solicit feedback rather than relying only on academic expertise.¹¹ Inherently, this can lead to museums being more responsive to community concerns and dialogue. So, rather than plan exhibits years in advance, exhibits could change as quickly as a department store floor changes as advocated by Seattle-based museum professional and former journalist Ron Chew.¹² In journalism, this means creating a continual feedback loop with their audience to learn their information needs from crafting the newsroom’s story priorities, to gathering sources, to disseminating the finished product in ways that those most affected can meaningfully access it.¹³ With these frameworks – built on humility and intentional openness to differing viewpoints – the community is not seen as an “other” and the museum or news organization is no longer positioned as an aloof observer of current events and culture. Together, these advancements build trust and a sense of community ownership and relevance.

Civil wrongs approach

In crafting the Civil Wrongs program and events that would accompany it, I kept these complementary skill sets in mind. In a career writing about the present, it became apparent that most people know little about the past. News cycles are virtually devoid of historical context and then it is on to the next issue. People may be informed about *what* is happening, but not *why* or *how* we got here. Yet, history lessons in a museum setting without explicitly connecting them to our present reality are ineffective in creating meaningful dialogue or change.

In the program’s inaugural academic course, my class focused on the Memphis Massacre of 1866. Though this tragedy had a significant national impact at the time, it is virtually unknown today. A year after the Civil War, white mobs led by police attacked the city’s Black neighborhood killing at least 48 people, injuring 75, raping at least five women, and burning all the recently built Black churches and schools over the course of three days. When news of the massacre reached Washington, D.C., many in Congress doubled down on enshrining equal protection for the formerly enslaved in the U.S. Constitution and officially naming them citizens. This ensured the passage of the 14th Amendment, which is the basis of many of the basic rights U.S. citizens enjoy today. This tragic episode in history is well known to historians. A congressional committee wrote a 400-page report completed with interview transcripts from more than 100 witnesses. But it was not until 2013 that there was a book written on the subject. In 2016, the Memphis NAACP and the National Park Service erected a historical marker for the 150th anniversary – the city’s first modern public acknowledgment of the massacre. A lecture series that year expanded on the historical context of the massacre that was later collected into essays in “Remembering the Memphis Massacre,” edited by Beverly Bond and Susan O’Donovan at the University of Memphis.

¹¹ Simon 2010

¹² Chew 2000

¹³ Wenzel 2020

The Memphis Massacre of 1866 was a prime example of a historical event that had been collecting metaphorical dust in museum archives with little attempt to connect to current events to meet the information needs of the community. It was ripe for a journalistic project to report on the present-day connections to police brutality and sexual violence. My students researched the history of the Memphis Police Department, examined patterns of abuse, and reported on local efforts to increase accountability and prevent more deaths. This research became even more relevant when the police beating death of Tyre Nichols in Memphis made international headlines a few weeks into the semester. Students also compared the justice system's abandonment of rape survivors in 1866 with survivors in Memphis today who are suing the city for neglecting thousands of rape evidence kits used to identify dangerous men. The women of 2023 featured in the podcast who learned about the Memphis Massacre for the first time because of the project saw themselves reflected in the past. The students also probed the question: Why do we not know about this history? To answer, they researched history education standards and efforts to block substantial exposure to America's painful history.

However, for meaningful interaction and dialogue necessary to spark change, I knew we would need more than audio and text. We would need tangible reflections of the lessons this history teaches us. That is when the collaboration with Urevbu Contemporary and the Memphis Museum of Science & History came into play. Ephraim Urevbu, a Nigerian-born visual artist based in Memphis, had been working on a series of paintings entitled "The Naked Truth: An American Story in White, Red, and Blue," which explored the nation's legacy of racial terror. He was also working on a sidewalk tile project that would feature QR codes on artwork with names of historical events embedded into them, encouraging pedestrians to pause and learn more. Because of the closely aligned nature of our work, he offered his art gallery as an event space so that students could share their research alongside the paintings illustrating America's long history of racial terror and violence. An event planning class at the University of Memphis handled the printing, design, and guest experience. At the focal point was a six-foot banner listing the names of known victims of the massacre. The Memphis Museum of Science & History offered their copy of the 1866 Harper's Weekly that includes the only known sketches of the Memphis Massacre. This primary source added credibility to the paintings and storyboards featuring the students' research and brought attendees closer to the actual historical event.

The upstairs portion of the gallery focused on educating attendees about the history of the Memphis Massacre and its national significance. Students were spread out across several stations sharing about the impact of the 14th Amendment and individual stories of survivors and victims of the massacre. Downstairs, guests learned about the present-day connections to police brutality and sexual violence and why so many people do not know about the massacre. This setting and the addition of tangible items to bring the story to life combined the strengths of public history and journalism to create an informative and relevant educational experience.

By the end of the evening, more than 100 people had cycled through the exhibit. At the exhibit's last station, we invited attendees to write reflections and feedback on slips of paper around the question: What can I do? Here is a representative sample of the 18 responses we received:

As a young adult, I plan to take what I've learned today and educate. Push others to know the history and work on a better future that is cognizant of our history to create a better tomorrow.

The intersection of the story and art created a moving experience in revealing Civil Wrongs in Memphis.

I can make a change by firstly diving deeper into the history of my city apart from the general education we receive. Also to spread the knowledge I acquire to my peers. We all need to put ourselves in other's shoes and talk about the uncomfortable things.

This feedback exemplifies the mix of resources that the news organization, art gallery, and museum brought to the event – a full package that none could have brought on their own.

Challenges of making new connections

The biggest challenge to our model was the time constraints of the semester, which is natural working with students. Historical research and analysis to explicitly connect past and present takes time and care that ideally should not be rushed. This could be mitigated when applying this model to a professional setting that is not bound by semesters, but it can be easier to experiment and innovate in a higher education classroom setting where learning from new experiences is valued as the norm, rather than the exception. And while in both settings the consequences of missteps are public, the stakes for learning from mistakes are lower in the classroom than in a professional setting.

The more existential problem when using storytelling as a tool to digest difficult topics such as racial terror and other painful portions of history is the prevalence of news avoidance.¹⁴ Many people actively shut out what they perceive as negative news because it can feel overwhelming. These are valid concerns and should be taken seriously. At the same time, there's not much anyone can do about making important lessons about our shared history upbeat. That is why the exhibit included space for people to reflect on what they can do with the information to make the world more equitable. This approach echoes lessons learned from "solutions journalism" that seeks to go beyond highlighting a community problem and vet potential solutions.¹⁵ The possibility of actionable steps can make the information more accessible and meaningful rather than leaving people directionless, but it is a delicate balance that warrants more fine-tuning to keep people engaged.

Another challenge to exploring these intersections is the lack of familiarity between these two sectors in a way that would foster collaboration. Arts and culture beat at news organizations that naturally would cover museums extensively are rare as staff levels shrink. Museums may occasionally serve as resources for retrieving archival material for newspapers, but as news staff are spread thinner, deep dives with rich historical context are few and far between. In academia, research examining these connections is not common, despite the abundance of similarities that I have come to see being in both worlds. So, in a way that is both exciting and challenging, we are creating a foundation of cooperation that we have not experienced before.

How to continue the discussion

Yet to be seen is if these efforts will translate to more financial support for these industries. Though measured community impact can be leveraged for funding opportunities from

¹⁴ Newman 2022

¹⁵ Solutions Journalism Network 2024

philanthropies and individual donors, it is not guaranteed. More research is needed to see if cross-discipline collaborations can affect the long-term financial sustainability of a news organization or museum. Ultimately, more interdisciplinary research examining the possibilities for connection between journalism and museum studies is needed to find new ways of solving old problems. This kind of public humanities can bridge the gap between academia and how people make meaning of the world around them and how it was formed.

One way to continue that transformation is breaking down barriers between institutions and the audiences they serve. As discussed, both sectors have made significant strides away from a strict teacher-student model to more of a facilitator role that emphasizes community participation and lends more expertise and power to the population it seeks to serve – therefore making these industries more democratic. By remaking themselves into institutions that prioritize community needs and participation, each of these sectors will be better positioned to maintain relevance, funding, and impact.

Conclusion

American democracy is as strong as the people who are informed and empowered to participate in it. Increased social isolation and political polarization threaten the foundation of a free and representative government. As Americans look around them and try to interpret current events, including widening inequities, they have few common spaces to go and understand the historical context in a way that will equip them to make informed decisions about our collective future. In a global context, this is not surprising. Societies throughout the world that have built their wealth on violence against others have, over time, silenced the experiences of those affected so as to shape collective knowledge to benefit or appease those in power. Reaching back to “rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’” then becomes essential to justice and healing as Toni Morrison describes as her aim in her writings.¹⁶ News organizations and museums are well-positioned to create counternarratives of how our shared past has shaped our present by uplifting marginalized voices and experiences. There are opportunities to collaborate and utilize the others’ strengths to create compelling displays of historical context, contemporary analysis, and more equitable futures. The example of the Civil Wrongs “Look Back, Live Ahead” exhibit is one of many potential avenues to combine rigorous research, rich storytelling, contemplative artwork, and tangible reminders of history to make the past come alive and its lessons ones we will not forget. Building an accurate, collective understanding of our shared past is too important for any discipline to tackle alone.

Laura Kebede-Twumasi is a Distinguished Journalist in Residence at the University of Memphis and the Civil Wrongs coordinator for the Institute for Public Service Reporting. Her award-winning podcast, in partnership with WKNO-FM and University of Memphis students, examines forgotten cases of racial terror in the Mid-South and analyzes their connection to the present. Laura is also a Report for America corps member, a former board member of the Lynching Sites Project of Memphis, and is pursuing a museum studies certificate as part of her master’s degree in liberal studies, an interdisciplinary program at the University of Memphis. She previously covered education inequities for Chalkbeat Tennessee and local government and religion for the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

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¹⁶ Morrison 1995

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