A woman cries as she listens to John Hickenlooper, then-governor of Colorado, speak to members and supporters of the Arapaho and Cheyenne Tribes at a 2014 gathering marking the 150th anniversary of the Sand Creek Massacre. During his speech, Hickenlooper apologized on behalf of the state for the massacre of mostly women, children and the elderly by U.S. Army troops. AP FILE

American journalism is rooted in bias and harm

Your Turn
Diamond Hardiman
Guest columnist

The U.S. journalism industry has deep roots in harm and violence that impact how newsrooms interact with both journalists and communities of color today. As newspapers struggle to survive in an increasingly consolidated landscape, the field must abide by its own values of "holding power to account" and investigate how journalism has wielded its influence in ways that have led to policies and violence targeting people of color.

In almost every century, it's possible to find egregious examples of newspapers that incited violence against Black, Asian, and Indigenous communities. The News Voices project's Reparative Journalism video series highlights some of the harms communities have experienced due to editorial decisions.

One of the very first continuously published newspapers in the United States, The Boston Newsletter, was directly involved in the sale and brokering of Black and Indigenous people during the 1700s. Other major papers, such as the Boston Gazette and the Pennsylvania Gazette, published over 1,300 slave ads, resulting in the sale of over 2,300 people. Newspapers didn't just profit from the trafficking of enslaved people: Many ads said "enquire of the printer," meaning that newspaper publishers themselves had a direct role in the business of captivity and enslavement.

In 1864, U.S. cavalry troops slaughtered nearly 200 Cheyenne and Arapaho people in what became known as the Sand Creek Massacre. The Rocky Mountain News framed the massacre as a "military victory" and applauded soldiers for defeating what the newspaper had portrayed as a dangerous Indigenous community. Only later did the truth surface: This was an unprovoked attack that ended in the mass murder of mostly women and children. The editor of The Rocky Mountain News at the time, William Newton Byers, was open about his anti-Indigenous sentiments and used his role at the paper to depict Indigenous people as violent — while portraying the violence of white settlers as justified and heroic.

In the early 1900s, newspapermen William Randolph Hearst and V.S. McClatchy fueled anti-Japanese sentiment in many of their West Coast papers. They used their editorial pages to campaign for the incarceration of Japanese Americans, portrayed them as distrustful, published biased coverage of anti-Japanese protests, and profiled the arrests of Japanese citizens (as well as the arrests of Italian Americans, German Americans, and people who weren't citizens). The derogatory language about Japanese Americans cultivated an environment that justified incarceration.

Once the media portrayed Japanese Americans as a threat, it became acceptable to remove them in the name of safety. Both of these narratives relied on false premises of who constituted a threat — and what provides safety.

Many newspapers have long used dehumanizing rhetoric to describe Black communities within the United States and perfected the practice in other communities of color.

To address journalism's anti-Black foundations, U.S. journalism institutions need to invest in the presence and well-being of Black and BIPOC journalists, use dignified language in their coverage and report accurately about racist misinformation.

Once these repair processes begin, we will be closer to a world where Black voices — and by extension, the voices of all communities of color — have the power and resources to tell stories that seed collective care and inclusion rather than violence.

Diamond Hardiman is the reparative journalism program manager at Free Press, a nonprofit organization seeking to reform the news media. She works there on both the News Voices and Media 2070 teams.