REPARATIVE MEDIA: REVOLUTIONARY STORYTELLING AND ITS ENEMIES IN A STREAMING ERA

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How do we critique a streaming "golden age" characterized by the ceaseless production of expression that repeats and reinforces injustice and inequality? Our media and tech systems prioritize developing stories and platforms to target distinct audiences for profit, but our communities need to cultivate interdependence and solidarity. Healing these injustices, including racism, misogyny, xenophobia, homophobia, classism, ableism, and other forms of hate, requires a specific method of repair: *re-distributing* power more equitably to the historically disempowered.

In the last decade in the U.S., what Aymar Jean Christian terms "reparative media," responding to the social upheaval that political polarization, misinformation, and climate and racial reckoning has burgeoned. Christian writes, "[R]epairing our culture means healing how we make media, how we connect through technology, and how we generate knowledge." This panel analyzes the concept of reparative media, examines case studies, and analyzes counterrevolutionary pushback. Grounded in U.S. experience, the panel is designed to open a conversation more widely, and create terms under which these issues can be engaged elsewhere.

Unlike previous eras, this era's reparative media work is grounded in responses to the realities of a digital culture shaped by mega-platforms. In audio-visual media, streamers

in particular (building upon past example in broadcast and cable) have funded or showcased boldly extractive and exploitative programming, such as much of true crime, reality shows, and unapologetically offensive comedy. Scandals about ethics—whether over Yazidi women protesting invasion of privacy in the documentary *Sabaya*, MENASA filmmakers protesting errors and putting participants at risk in *Jihad Rehab,* or BIPOC filmmakers protesting the all-white, male production crew for a forthcoming film about Tiger Woods (a sports figure for whom race has been defining in his career)—have multiplied. The reparative media movement is also informed, in the U.S., by the growing tide of racial reckoning since 2014. This movement has also been joined by other minoritized voices, including those of people living with disabilities, gender-nonconforming makers, and those experiencing the consequences of lacking appropriate immigration status.

However, the reparative work also builds upon efforts in previous eras in self-styled movements for alternative media, community media, public-service media, and activist media. These movements have also been accompanied by extensive communications research—much of it done in a collaborative way with practitioners—that allows us to understand reparative media in context. These movements have shared common expectations that media produced by and for underheard members of society are essential parts of movements for social change.

The panel provides both theoretical and practice-oriented roads into the discussion, which we expect to be between a third and a half of the time allotted. Panelists also strive to provide examples and illustrations relevant to the conference venue of Philadelphia.

Aymar Jean Christian will address the conceptualization of reparative media and the process of reparative research and development (R&D). Reparative research is work that is not only *about* but *with* reparative media communities, using both quantitative and qualitative research. Reparative story development is about the practice of developing narratives that confront, challenge, and provide alternatives to systemically oppressive storytelling. Reparative platform development is the work of building training, distribution and showcasing alternatives to today's digital mega-platforms. This presentation will use case studies to illustrate the three categories.

Patricia Aufderheide will use a cultural-production analysis to focus upon reparative story development practices, looking closely at a two-year process to create standards for values-driven documentary production. The process, which itself included reparative research, is analyzed for its challenges as well as its conclusions. Reception within the documentary community of the resulting document, a values-based framework for a six-part production process, is discussed, as is engagement by gatekeepers such as streamers, broadcasters and production companies. The presentation then focuses upon the attacks upon public exercise of such values and standards. These attacks, with a veneer of legitimacy from centrist mainstream media, leverage a conservative-media use of the notion of "woke cancel culture," to demonize the assertion of such values in the production process.

Antoine Haywood will address reparative platform development. In the U.S., community media centers, based in cable systems and offering educational, governmental, and public access channels, have their origins in 1970s citizen activism. But CMCs have shown an ability not only to survive but to reinvent themselves both technologically and in terms of community reparative work. The paper focuses on one such example, in Philadelphia, where communities of color have been actively working to address systemic harms and bolster community strength with hyperlocal media. In discussing the work of creating content for such systems, the paper also reveals the infrastructural affordances and limitations mediamakers encounter. Such forces reveal the systemic forces that threaten the evolution of such media.

Jessica Clark, with deep experience in reparative research in the Philadelphia media community and nationally, will infuse their commentary with location-specific references.

PAPER #1:

REPARATIVE MEDIA: CULTIVATING STORIES AND PLATFORMS TO HEAL OUR CULTURE

Abstract

How do we understand media and tech industries' power and impact on the cultural ecosystem? Scholars of media and tech industries study the systems that structure consumption of culture. Like media sociologists Todd Gitlin, Vincent Mosco, more recently Siva Vaidhyanathan, and others, we can locate power in media and tech systems in their control over message *distribution*, how storytellers reach communities (Gitlin 1983; Mosco and Wasko 1988; Vaidhyanathan 2012, 2018). Mosco and Wasko write that this "profit from the sale of commodities" (because they view stories and audiences as products) is a "fundamental source of power in a capitalist society" (Mosco and Wasko 1988, 3). Centralized corporate distribution has been critical to perpetuating racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of hate throughout U.S. history.

Netflix is perhaps the best example of a global story distributor, with over 200 million subscribers in nearly 200 countries. Netflix rose to power by combining what David Craig and Stuart Cunningham call Hollywood's Southern California (SoCal) strategy of developing and owning expensive productions (e.g. HBO, which inspired Netflix early on), with Silicon Valley's NoCal big data strategy of automating content exhibition for audiences as with YouTube (Cunningham and Craig 2019). The rest of Hollywood is following Netflix's quest for fast, digital distribution having already secured significant ownership rights over what they produce, limiting options and diversity for both storytellers and audiences (Christian 2023). In the last year, diverse storytellers and fans have seen shows canceled too soon, as workers suffer from the increasing pace of production.

In this context some have looked optimistically to NoCal open-access platforms as a countervailing force to Hollywood's closed, hierarchical streaming platforms. Though

more open and accessible, social media is still a fully integrated system, anchored by distribution platforms as sites of near-simultaneous content development, production, exhibition and audience engagement (I can have an idea, produce it and deliver it to audiences in seconds), all controlled by a small number of corporations. Where social media platforms offer open and largely free distribution to our cultural environment, compared to Hollywood's closed system, they aggressively curate and censor what can be said and seen as they mine our sociocultural interactions for data. Offering our free or undercompensated labor to these platforms has helped them develop AI and sophisticated marketing technology to make them quite arguably more powerful than their studio peers.

Reparative media argues the way to heal our culture is to cultivate more open systems for distributing culture led by historically disempowered communities, particularly those impacted by multiple systems of oppression (racism, sexism, etc.), or intersectionality. The theory is based on five years of reparative research on an intersectional streaming TV platform, OTV | Open Television (http://weareo.tv), as a community-based research project using a range of methods, including: interviews with storytellers, surveys of community members locally, analysis of quantitative and qualitative social media, and participant observation.

If we consider streaming and tech systems as cultural "operating systems" – to draw from Tara McPherson (2012) and Kara Keeling (2014) –OTV is an experiment in intentionally queering these systems, applying Keeling's notion of "queer OS" [operating system] to the spaces of TV and social media. OTV offers a case study for broader systemic changes that are clear and concrete, if only we can commit as much to repairing systems as we do ourselves. Like all processes for healing great wounds, reparative research & development (is not simple, easy or perfect, but its effects are immediate and backed by data.

Through community-based distribution backed by research, we were able to see the practices necessary for reparative story development in the production of original web TV stories and reparative platform development in the release of those stories online, contrasted with local engagement.

Reparative story development challenges the norms of how films and TV shows are developed in Hollywood's streaming studio system. Disrupting the SoCal business model cultivated more complex, connective, and collective stories. Instead of taking intellectual property, we gave artists ownership of their own stories, and in turn they shared ownership with each other. Instead of locking artists into exclusive contracts, we shared ownership over distribution, cultivating specific online and local experiences that built connections and bonds. Stories that emerged were trauma-informed but not traumatizing.

Reparative platform development harnesses community to counteract the structures of global, big data-driven social media platforms. Curating experiences and conversations locally and in-person offers critical lessons to Silicon Valley as they struggle to moderate social networks of millions of people. The triumphs and challenges of circulating OTV's work on global corporate platforms, alongside the joys and struggles

of connecting people in Chicago, shows how cultivating platforms for community requires a level of time and care that corporations have never attempted despite having enough resources to do so.

Reparative media is complex. Pain and pleasure, scarcity and abundance, can coexist. As with healing, the process is more important than the result, and processes of repair can feel difficult even as we are getting better. It is both necessary and possible to open ourselves to new ways of developing stories, community and data to advance equity and justice in the 21st century. *Reparative Media* shows how, even in our pain, we can develop media (television), create platforms (tech) and organize our data (research) to heal our culture.

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PAPER #2:

IS ANOTHER DOCUMENTARY WORLD POSSIBLE?: WEAPONIZING WOKENESS TO CHALLENGE REPARATIVE MEDIA IN THE STREAMING ERA

Abstract

As digital streaming fiercely drives the commercialization of documentary (Weideman 2023; Galuppo and Kilkenny 2022; Lindahl 2021), ethics scandals have also become

headline news (Kaufman 2022; Arraf and Khaleel 2021; Sharf 2021). At the same time, in the U.S. the racial reckoning has provoked a field-wide conversation about equity and justice, and spurred new organizations around representation, labor issues and equity. This paper analyzes efforts, particularly by minoritized makers, to articulate and assert mission-driven values in documentary filmmaking. It then charts the rise of "cancel culture" claims for such work, and discusses the political drivers of such critiques. The intertwined processes illustrate the opportunities and challenges of building "reparative media" (Christian in press) cultures. In the spirit of cultural studies analysis (Hall and Open University. 1997; Bourdieu 1984), the analysis informs a case study in the structural forces that bring into place norms-setting actions and that challenge their implementation.

This study results from a combination of interview-based and small-group-discussion, research into professional practice, and literature review. The members of DAWG contributed insights throughout.

It first reviews the ways ethics concerns and documentary production have evolved, noting strategic and economic reasons why the field—unlike journalism or professions ranging from pharmacology to funerary management—has never developed explicit ethical standards. Discussed are the economic development of production, including government propaganda investments, corporate advertising and promotional investments; the growth of multiple distribution mechanisms, with an emphasis on streaming's powerful role in increasing both the number and pace of production of documentaries; and the pressures on makers that explain an entrenched, decades-long reluctance to address ethics themselves.

It then focuses on U.S.-based efforts between 2014-2023, coming from makers themselves, to organize and establish community-based standards on a range of issues directly affecting their work lives. These include formation of groups of producers (e.g., editors; producers; directors) not previously organized, to assert standards for the pace of production; the formation of ethnic/cultural identity organizations that can then take action collectively to assert expectations; an organization formed to demand more diversity from U.S. public television; and an organization created to articulate ethical standards for the field, particularly in relation to participants and fellow team members. The paper discusses triggering events precipitating such activities, especially the events building the racial reckoning of the last decade in the U.S. It discusses particular incidents, e.g. the announcement of a production of a Tiger Woods biography that featured only white male makers.

The paper then details the process of creating *From Reflection to Release: An Ethical Framework for Values, Ethics and Accountability in Non-fiction Production,* by the Documentary Accountability Working Group. Notably, the two-year
process involved consultations with a range of organizations, presentations and workshops at industry events such as festivals and conferences, and quiet discussions with various gatekeepers. The learnings from those discussions are discussed, as informing the result. The process aligned with that used to create codes of best practices in fair use with documentary and other creator communities, since 2005. Such

codes have proven robust in guiding professional practice. (Aufderheide and Jaszi 2018).

Next, the paper discusses the public discussion that arose from the release of the Framework. It immediately resulted in widespread discussion, as well as some adoption. Its release occurred at the same time as the premiere of a documentary film about the longterm consequences of participating in a documentary, called *Subject.* It also aligned with a flurry of industry events that addressed what had become a term of art in the field, "non-extractive filmmaking," i.e. filmmaking that does not merely take from an individual or community, but provides value to both in the process of making.

The paper then discusses evidence of resistance to establishing these new norms. One strain is outright attack, as seen in the example of *Jihad Rehab* (now *Redacted*). Upon its release at Sundance Film Festival, the single most important release venue for documentaries in the world, a group of 70+ Muslim filmmakers and allies released a public letter addressed to Sundance, critiquing the curators' decision to showcase it. They described it as insensitive to American Muslim sensibilities, inaccurate and exploitative. The director, with backing from a nonprofit with conservative leanings and advisors who have taken boldly anti-Muslim stances, was able to garner attention from major publications including the New York *Times*. The framing of this coverage was that the director was a victim of "woke cancel culture," a phrase promoted on Fox News and a theme of the *Times* op-ed pages.

Another point of resistance comes from organizations currently using journalistic standards in development or acquisition of documentaries. Journalistic standards are designed out of the experience of daily journalism, and have features that sometimes do not reflect documentary practice. For instance, journalistic standards require no payment for services of interviewees; documentary filmmakers, by contrast, may work with participants for months on end, and some participants have few resources. Refusing to pay for such things as transportation, time off from work, or daycare, for time spent with filmmakers, may be experienced as unethical. Concerns for participants' welfare also do not align with journalism's claim to "afflict the powerful," to conduct investigations that may expose injustice or malfeasance. While some within media companies may be sympathetic to concerns raised by filmmakers working in a non-extractive mode with disenfranchised participants, they face serious hurdles in overcoming longstanding assumptions about best practices drawn from journalism.

These constraints and resistances are some of the emerging challenges to the development of documentary ethics codes. Some forces have political valences, others cultural. The closely-observed process so far demonstrates that ethics codes inevitably are a fiercely political process, which involves conflicting ideologies. The streaming era has accelerated that process and raised the stakes for everyone.

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SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE: AFRICAN AMERICANS ENGAGING IN REPARATIVE MEDIA MAKING AND HYBRID PLATFORM COMMUNICATION AT PHILADELPHIA COMMUNITY ACCESS MEDIA

Community media centers (CMCs) play an essential, yet often-overlooked role in contemporary media ecosystems. Urban-situated versions of CMCs, sustained by funding from cable television infrastructure, have an extensive track record of engaging marginalized communities in neighborhood-level storytelling processes and media-making practices (Crittenden and Haywood 2020). While significant attention has been given to understanding how people of color forge Black cybercultures, grassroots digital activism, and online televisual narratives (Brock 2020; Jackson et al. 2020; Christian 2018), this study analyzes how people of color, particularly Philadelphia-based African Americans, currently use CMC resources to facilitate digital inclusion, platform integration, and collective storytelling. From a reparative media critical perspective (Torres et al. 2020; Christian in press), this paper explains how CMC models, like Philadelphia Community Access Media (PhillyCAM), offer a perch from which communities of color can mitigate systemic harms and participate in collective healing practices.

A steady loss in revenue from cable subscribers who have migrated to streaming video services has raised concerns about the future of community media in the United States. Within this reality, PhillyCAM offers a unique case for understanding how marginalized communities value CMCs for their reparative capabilities. Unfortunately, these

constituent values are in marked contrast with privileged perceptions that see CMCs as unnecessary or even a threat.

This study draws insights from interviews with production volunteers and community-engagement program managers at PhillyCAM. Observations of production practices and community-made programming are also included. Data collected and analyzed in this research build upon existing studies to demonstrate the continued relevance and value of local media centers tied to community television infrastructure (Ali 2017; Rhinesmith 2016; Haywood et al. 2021).

In the U.S., Philadelphia was the last major city that activated its public-access cable channels. PhillyCAM, the nonprofit corporation created and designated to operate Philadelphia's public-access channels, only began cablecasting in 2009. In most urban localities, like Minneapolis, Boston, Chicago, and Atlanta, public access television services were activated in the 1980s and '90s. Legislation that enacted the vision of a public-access media center and channel system in Philadelphia was first approved in 1983. Local politics, however, mired the system's growth and prevented the vision from being realized. Multiple generations of multi-ethnic grassroots coalitions had to deploy novel tactics that maintained pressure to ensure the city's administration made good on its promise (McCollough and Coates 1999; PhillyCAM 2011). This struggle lasted for more than two decades. Finally, in 2008, the City and Comcast agreed to amend Philadelphia's local cable franchise agreement and allocate one-million dollars to establish the public access corporation that would build what is now known as PhillyCAM. This historical perspective of a CMC's development exemplifies how minoritized and unheard community members lead grassroots movements to create reparative media spaces.

When PhillyCAM opened its doors to the public in 2010, there were widespread concerns about how public, educational, and governmental (PEG) access channel operations would remain relevant in the digital age (Waldman 2011; Breitbart et al. 2011). Media localism advocates argued that access television affiliated CMCs like PhillyCAM are important community assets that should not be abandoned because they play a critical role in helping communities forge a sense of place, build social capital, and animate civic participation (Ali 2014; Fuentes-Bautista 2014; Chen et al. 2013; Rhinesmith, 2016). Since the rise of the virtual public sphere and online user-led video creation and distribution (Papacharissi 2002; Bruns 2008), access media operations across the country have gradually adopted internet-based video services like Apple TV, Roku, and YouTube. Making local programming available via their organizational websites has become standard practice, but transitioning to HD channels has been difficult, and streaming services do not yield substantial revenue.

The digital technological pivots in the early 2000s required organizations to lobby for additional capital funds and access to HD channel provisions, which are not mandated by the 1984 Cable Act or existing local franchise agreements. Not all requests for digital upgrades received favorable responses. In Maine, grassroots political organizing was needed to prevent cable companies from arbitrarily relocating and "slamming" community access channels into higher-numbered, difficult-to-search tiers on local cable systems that privilege digital channels (Davies 2020). Despite widespread,

harmful regulatory shifts, funding cuts, and channel reassignments, 1600 community access media entities operate 3000 channels today. CMCs, maintaining reparative media spaces, perpetually struggle to keep pace with technological shifts that become existential threats. Systemic biases and injustices inherent in corporate media logics make it difficult for CMCs to survive and evolve despite their apparent necessity.

Being a late bloomer in the public access media realm benefited PhillyCAM in many ways. It gained a lot of wisdom and ideas from its older peers. In the spirit of traditional public access, PhillyCAM values free speech and enables democratic discourse on its channels. Early proponents of access television argued that access channels serve as valuable "electronic public space" where community self-structuring can occur, thus, strengthening the public sphere. (Aufderheide 1992). PhillyCAM, has also, since its inception, embraced diversity, equity, and inclusion principles that have helped it do more than conservatively maintain what Laura Linder (1999) called an "electronic soapbox." It uses a membership model to provide technical training, production support, and community-building services. Its core curriculum includes production planning, TV studio production, basic field production, video editing in Adobe Premier, live video streaming, audio production, and low-power FM radio broadcasting. PhillyCAM is also hired by state-funded agencies, local nonprofits, neighboring schools, and grassroots community groups to produce local production projects. Student interns from local colleges and universities gain first-hand experience while working on these professional assignments as assistant camera operators and editors. In 2015, PhillyCAM began to develop internal, staff-managed programs that intentionally support youth media makers, community journalists, independent filmmakers, and local podcast/radio producers. These features have made PhillyCAM an exception compared to Wayne's World-style versions of public access television spawned in the late 1980s.

An outstanding characteristic of PhillyCAM is its high level of engagement with African Americans in Philadelphia. Since 2010, PhillyCAM has served as a stepping-stone for African Americans aspiring to be professional production crew members, podcasters, journalists, filmmakers, event planners, and PR consultants. It has also served as a sturdy perch from which African Americans, and other people of color, have used to share community-benefiting narratives and information. Few studies, however, have intentionally focused on understanding the significance of what people of color gain from CMCs like PhillyCAM. Thus, this case study analyzes discernable correlations between reparative media practices and hybrid platform communication led by African American community members at PhillyCAM. *Talking Tech with Wayne* is an interactive educational show for seniors struggling with digital technology use; *We Talk Weekly* is an award-winning multi-platform program on Black enterprise and popular culture; and PhillyCAM Youth Media is a multi-ethnic afterschool program that addresses food insecurity, mental health, and public safety concerns. These programs, among many others, exemplify why CMCs like PhillyCAM persistently carve and maintain reparative media spaces despite pervasive corporatized media threats.

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