

CASES

CASE 6-A

THE KANSAS CITY STAR IN BLACK AND WHITE: A NEWSPAPER APOLOGIZES FOR 140 YEARS OF COVERAGE

LEE WILKINS

University of Missouri

Kansas City is the birthplace of jazz legends. Its barbeque is unsurpassed. President Harry Truman's home and presidential library are housed in the suburb of Independence, and visitors are encouraged to discover the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum downtown. Hallmark is headquartered in Kansas City, and by the time you read this case study, Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes has played in multiple Super Bowls.

Unlike many cities its size, Kansas City (which includes Kansas City, Kansas, as well as Kansas City, Missouri) retains a robust media ecosystem, including a local newspaper, the *Kansas City Star*. The *Star* has won multiple Pulitzer Prizes; its investigative unit is one of the finest in the United States. As of this writing, it has not suffered the economic devastation that has characterized newspaper ownership, particularly beginning in 2010.

So, it was surprising to many in the news business that on Dec. 20, 2020, the *Star* and its staff apologized to contemporary readers for its own work, which it characterized as "a powerful local business that has done wrong."

That conclusion was the culmination of an idea from reporter Mara Rose Williams, who suggested that the *Star* and its staff analyze its coverage of Kansas City's Black community and place that coverage in context. To do so, the staff examined not just what the newspaper itself had reported and published but also court records, congressional testimony, digital databases, and coverage of simultaneous events reported in the Black press of the era.

The result of the *Star's* analysis—what students might know as a case study based in a textual analysis—disturbed and sickened the *Star's* current staff.

In the pages of *The Star*, when Black people were written about, they were cast primarily as the perpetrators or victims of crime, advancing a toxic narrative. Other violence, meantime, was tuned out. *The Star* and

The Times wrote about military action in Europe but not about Black families whose homes were being bombed just down the street.

To provide just two examples, jazz legend Charlie “Bird” Parker was not mentioned in the pages of the *Star* until his death in a story in which his name was misspelled and his birthdate incorrect. Baseball legend Jackie Robinson’s move to the majors, the all-white National League, could be found in the *Star* on page 18. In times of disaster, including a historic 1977 flood, the *Star*’s coverage focused on the white-owned Plaza and the segregated suburbs. The experience of Kansas City’s Black families, who were far more economically and physically devastated by the event, could not be found.

Through what the staff photographed and wrote about—and what it did not—“it disenfranchised, ignored and scorned generations of Black Kansas Citians. It reinforced Jim Crow laws and redlining. Decade after early decade, it robbed an entire community of opportunity, dignity, justice and recognition.” Perhaps most egregiously, it deprived white Kansas Citians a chance to know their neighbors as equal human beings and to make decisions about the political and social community of Kansas City based on that knowledge.

“We are sorry,” the opening piece in the series noted.

That piece also noted that the *Star* had been an all-white and all-male newsroom for decades. When given the opportunity to cover the civil rights movement of the 1950s, the newspaper’s desegregation coverage was “appalling and biased,” according to interviews with current community members and staff. The *Star* began to change in the 1960s, but there were still major mistakes, all of which ignored the experience of Black Kansas Citians, misrepresented it, or downplayed it. Instead, white business owners and community leaders continued to get a “lot of ink.”

Having documented its historic shortcomings, the *Star* staff also vowed to take steps to do better. Among these steps are increasing attention to staff diversity, exploring uncovered or under-covered stories (such as continuing racist language in housing covenants in the city), and a November 2020 three-part series exploring racism in the Kansas City, Missouri, Fire Department. The *Star* partnered with the city’s public library to introduce its work to the public, to seek additional community comment, and to take advice on what the next steps should be. The paper also announced the formation of the *Kansas City Star* Advisory Board, which would meet monthly with newsroom leaders to provide advice and insight on the “issues of the day.”

Kansas City, Missouri, Mayor Quinton Lucas acknowledged the *Star* for the “positive step” forward. However, Lucas, who is Black, said more

was needed by other local media to address the city's past detachment from how Black stories were told.

"Now I hope my friends in the local TV business do the same," he tweeted.

Micro Issues

1. Journalists are taught that they are not the story. Is the *Star's* effort an appropriate exception to that rule?
2. Are there "minority" communities in your hometown that you think may have been subject to the sort of coverage the *Star* described? How about in the town/city where your university is located?
3. Does the ethnicity of the reporter who suggested the series or the editors who supervised it matter? Should it?

Midrange Issues

1. The *Star's* efforts were widely covered as news. Was this appropriate?
2. Evaluate Mayor Lucas's statement. What ethical principles are implied?
3. Examine coverage of Vice President Kamala Harris in your local media. How does this coverage reflect or fail to reflect the patterns in the *Kansas City Star*?

Macro Issues

1. President Harry Truman desegregated the US armed forces in 1948. How do you think the *Star* covered that policy decision? Other newspapers?
2. Evaluate whether you believe the advisory board established by the *Star* will have a negative impact on the paper's independence.
3. How would you design a similar evaluation of news coverage in a major media outlet in your community?
4. Does the penetration of social media into news coverage make the sort of community-wide evaluation of the impact of news coverage on the development of a community impossible? More likely?