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Racism in the Media

Always tell both sides of a story—that's the old journalism axiom. But, too often, that approach gives equal standing to facts and unsupported claims, and that false equivalence creates public confusion about complex issues ranging from climate change to economic inequality to health care. "More than that, there is evidence that blind insistence to 'both-sides' reporting can invalidate marginalized voices, reinforce racist stereotypes and contribute to structural racism in the media," says **Letrell Crittenden, PhD**, assistant professor of communication.

False equivalence in reporting is just one of the challenges Dr. Crittenden explores in his research on how news organizations report about issues affecting communities of color—and how those organizations struggle with diversity in their own newsrooms. He studies situations such as that experienced by *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reporter Alexis Johnson, who was pulled from covering the George Floyd protests in early 2020 because she was viewed as "not objective." Experiences such as Johnson's, Dr. Crittenden says, rob journalists of color of their perspective on issues related to race: "These situations send the message that Black journalists should not offer their knowledge and perspective, even when it's needed most."

At the same time, Dr. Crittenden has been considering the divide that exists between communities of color and longstanding newspaper and television organizations that, in the main, lack diversity in their reporting and editorial staff. He has been exploring ways that the news media's "diversity divide" can be bridged from both ends. "On one end, it is necessary for communities of color to feel engaged in the news gathering and reporting process; and so we are examining the impact of new platforms where news is reported for and by local residents—enabling communities of color to tell news stories in ways that are authentic and representational," Dr. Crittenden explains. On the other end, he is tracking efforts to change newsroom environments, noting, "If newsrooms truly seek to increase diversity within their organizations and improve the range and depth of their coverage, they must find ways to make journalists of color feel they can thrive within their newsroom environments." ∎